

**The psychosocial effects and benefits of oral storytelling in school:  
Developing identity and empathy through narrative**

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## **Introduction:**

Oral storytelling can be understood as an activity that we are arguably hard-wired for, with narrative serving as the 'organising principle' of our experience, understanding and exchanges within the social world (Bruner, 1990). Bruner goes on to suggest there is an innate human 'readiness' to organise experience into narrative form. However, it remains the case that oral storytelling, alongside meaningful engagement with spoken language more generally, is something that has little status or visibility in school (Alexander, 2012). This is the case within the Speaking and Listening element of the literacy curriculum in which oral storytelling naturally resides, as well as elsewhere in the learning goals of the classroom and the wider school (Hibbin, 2016). The impact of oral storytelling upon the speaking, listening and writing ability of young learners has been examined by a handful of empirical studies. Beneficial effects have been documented in relation to vocabulary acquisition, language complexity and communicative competence (Morrow, 1985; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Trostle & Hicks, 1998); comprehension (Isbell *et al*, 2004, Morrow, 1985); and early literacy experiences including engaging reluctant writers (Campbell & Hlusek, 2009), and creating a bridge to writing (Pappas & Pettigrew, 1991). Many of these studies are focused upon reading and writing, and there is little research to show that speaking and listening practice needs to be more meaningfully engaged with in the classroom in a manner that does not simply serve limited literacy-based outcomes (Hibbin, 2016) and narrowly defined academic ends.

A similarly small number of research studies have examined the opportunities for personal growth, cultural transformation and learning (Stierer & Maybin, 1994) that oral storytelling may provide. Certain studies have examined the differences between oral storytelling and story reading and have all generally found the oral form to be a more interactive and personal experience (Malo & Bullard, 2000; Ellis, 1997; Aina, 1999). In the oral storytelling context children are "encouraged to join in repetitive phrases...or suggest variations in certain free-story elements" (Isbell *et al*, 2004; p.158), and such story-telling practice has been described by Roney (1996) as a co-creative, bi-directional form of communication. In a study that directly compares the effects of story reading and storytelling. Myers (1990)

found that the children showed a preference for orally told stories over stories read out loud and attended more to storytelling over story reading.

In two studies examining the impact of oral storytelling on children's self-concept, Mello (2001a, 2001b) found that storytelling exposed children to "long-standing archetypal models" (Mello, 2001b) that engaged the imagination, stimulated sympathetic responses, and helped children to process their social experiences at school. Similarly, a study by Nicolopoulou *et al* (2009) highlighted the transformative power of play in the storytelling context, with noticeably difficult children who "manifested emotional or behavioural issues" showing "an especially intense and persistent interest" (Nicolopoulou *et al*, 2009; p.49). Such children were seen to derive notable benefits from the intervention including markedly less anxiety and unhappiness, and an increased capacity for self-regulation and pro-social behaviours.

The purpose of this paper is to add to this insubstantial body of work by offering an examination of the socio-emotional effects and benefits of oral storytelling in primary school. The aim of the PhD study from which this analysis was drawn, was to examine the ways that creative speaking and listening interventions, such as oral storytelling, are utilised in school, and the benefits associated with oral storytelling as a spoken word art form. The socioemotional benefits of oral storytelling to primary age children have come out of that work as the most outstanding effect of engaging with oral storytelling in school. This paper therefore aims to uncover how and why this may be, through an examination of study participant perspectives, alongside an exploration of the literature base. The resulting analysis will be divided into three categories through which it is suggested that oral storytelling may help to build emotional literacy and impact upon identity formation in children. These are: self-expression; intra-psychological processes; and inter-psychological processes.

### **Defining Oral Storytelling**

So what exactly is meant by oral storytelling? It has been loosely defined by the National Council of Teachers (1992) as 'relating a tale to one or more listeners through voice and

gesture'. This apparently simple definition takes into account the inherently social nature of storytelling that requires a listening audience to fulfil its definitional requirements. It also tacitly invokes the oral nature of storytelling whereby the tale is 'related' and not 'read', and the emphasis upon 'voice and gesture' implicitly denies the use of a script. However, such an uncomplicated definition belies the complexity of oral storytelling, and to get a grasp of the type of oral storytelling that is being discussed here, a considerably fuller definition is required. This is important because a narrow and simplistic definition simply does not capture the opportunities for psychosocial interaction and development that oral storytelling can provide. In addition, the NATE (1992) definition does not differentiate between the personal narratives that we all tell on a day-to-day basis, and the performance of the kind of traditional stories in an educational capacity that is the focus of this analysis. Unfortunately, there are no ready definitions to hand, in the scholarly literature or otherwise. Therefore, it becomes necessary to create a definition that captures the complexity of oral storytelling in relation to its social, qualitative and stylistic characteristics. Upon this basis, oral storytelling (as defined by the author) can be understood as a spoken word narrative form that involves relating a non-scripted and non-personal story using the resources of the imagination:

- To an audience of one or more attentive listeners over a sustained period of time, to whom the storyteller is attuned and responsive, in terms of the audience's understanding of, and reception to, the narrative.
- In a manner that is individual and owned in terms of the idiosyncratic stylistic choices of the storyteller; and that is improvised, dynamic and in the moment in terms of the mode of production of the story.
- Through the physical qualities of the spoken word (rhythm, rhyme and repetition, accent, pitch, inflection, tempo), using the vocabulary, syntax and grammar of speech, and also the non-verbal language of the body (glance, gesture, pause and physical expression).

## Locating the research

In addition to definitional concerns about oral storytelling, it is important to define what variety of stories were the focus of this study, as well as how they were told in a pedagogic capacity. The kinds of oral stories that we can tell are many and varied, as well as the ways we encourage children to engage with them in the classroom. For example, the time-honoured practice of children making up their own stories is frequently linked to the pedagogic desire to get children writing. In contrast, the focus of the study reported here was on the use of oral storytelling for its own sake. This was viewed as important due to the heavy emphasis that is given to literacy-based outcomes in the classroom. Such outcomes have the potential to affect both the experiential quality of oral storytelling as well as pedagogic engagement in relation to teaching children to orally tell a story, due to the idea that writing the story down gets in the way of the cognitive assimilation of structural aspects of narrative (Hibbin, 2016).

The type of oral stories that were told in Holly Tree School - the case study school that was the venue for both the oral storytelling intervention and the PhD study - were pre-existing traditional tales. The stories that were told (*Meg Shelton* and *The Leaves That Hung but Never Grew*) were modelled by a more competent adult and retold by children using a number of pedagogic techniques (Bean Bag Telling, Zipping In and Out of Character, Jam Loading, Story Boards, Emotion Graphs) designed to allow the children to achieve familiarity with 'the world of the story' on an oral basis, whilst actively avoiding writing the story down (Hibbin, 2016). Many of these techniques were collaborative, so children were working together in pairs, small groups or as a whole class. For example, during Jam Loading the children paired off and practiced telling the story to each other in a limited amount of time; Bean Bag Telling involved a small group of children passing a beanbag between them with the child holding the beanbag having to carry on the story from where the last child had left off; and Zipping In and Out of Character saw the whole class walking around the classroom pretending to be different story characters in an embodied manner.

The oral storytelling in Holly Tree School was part of a Creative Partnerships (1) intervention that took place in 2011 designed to teach children to orally tell traditional tales. This

creative intervention was observed over a full half-term. In addition, to get a sense of the pedagogic use of oral storytelling in school, semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews were based around questions designed to understand the benefits of oral storytelling in school, as well as to ascertain the position and status of speaking and listening in the curriculum in relation to literacy. A range of participants with experience of teaching speaking and listening and literacy in primary school and/or experience of the kind of orally grounded storytelling that was the focus of the study, were interviewed. These included:

- Oral Storytellers who had experience delivering oral storytelling in school as well as in a professional performative capacity (Dominic Kelly and Ben Haggarty)
- Creative Agents working within the Creative Partnerships organisation facilitating creative interventions including the delivery of oral storytelling in schools (Jacqueline Harris and Julia Barden)
- Class Teachers in both Holly Tree School where the storytelling took place (Roland Morris, Sarah White: pseudonyms used), and in Lakeside School that also had experience of working with storytelling through Dominic Kelly's orally grounded approach (Jane Smith)

Overall, this research is based in the qualitative paradigm, utilising an interpretive methodology organized around "a transactional and subjectivist" epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 1994; p.111), with an associated co-construction of meaning between participants and researcher. Due to the difficulty finding examples of orally grounded practice that was of interest to the study, theoretical sampling (Patton, 1990) was utilised to select participants who were viewed as having experience of the kind of oral storytelling that has been described here. A case study school where an oral storytelling intervention was being undertaken was identified on this basis. A constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) approach was taken in relation to data collection and analysis with an iterative relationship between data collection and subsequent analysis. All participant and case study location names have been anonymised (2).

*Footnotes:*

1. *Creative Partnerships was the Labour government's flagship initiative that was established in 2002 as a direct result of recommendations made by All Our Futures (1999). It was funded by the Arts Council England, and was designed to develop children's creativity and imagination across the curriculum, through the facilitation of long term links between schools and creative professionals from diverse creative fields.*
2. *All names are anonymised, apart from those of the two storytellers – Dominic Kelly and Ben Haggarty – to reflect their professional identities as Oral Storytellers. In addition, Jacqueline Harris's name also appears non-anonymised to reflect her current professional identity as a storytelling performance artist.*

## **The socio-emotional effects and benefits of Oral Storytelling**

Within this study, the perceptions of the Oral Storytellers, Creative Agents and Class Teachers in relation to the socioemotional benefits of oral storytelling were the strongest finding in relation to the effects and benefits of oral storytelling more generally, even surpassing communicative competence and vocabulary-based effects. Overall, the findings in relation to socio-emotional effects and benefits can be divided into five conceptual areas relating to how oral storytelling can enable children to:

- become more self-confident
- represent and understand themselves
- understand others through intra-psychological processes
- understand others through inter-psychological processes
- work collaboratively with others

As already suggested these effects can cumulatively be understood in relation to the “social structure of personality” (Vygotsky: In Valsiner, 1987; p.67) and the centrality of social interaction to learning and development. While the effects in relation to self-confidence and children working collaboratively are important and worthy of examination, the focus of this paper will be upon effects and benefits in relation to how children represent and understand themselves (self-expression), and intra- and inter-psychological processes.

## **Self-expression, emotional literacy and identity: How children understand and represent themselves**

The perspectives forwarded by participants in relation to oral storytelling affecting self-expression, emotional literacy and identity are closely aligned to the school of thought that proposes narrative play therapy as a therapeutic tool. Self-expression is fostered by oral storytelling through the responsibility that is inherent in the shaping of stories that are re-told: children are free to re-tell a story using different verbal language, body language, expression and even to change the narrative so that the story unfolds in a slightly different way. Dominic Kelly, the Oral Storyteller that taught the children to tell the stories in Holly Tree School, describes the “exposing” nature of oral storytelling that involves “identifying parts of the characters with parts of yourself”. Dominic’s perceptions here seem to centre on the idea that oral storytelling challenges children on a socio-emotional level, and he goes on to describe the way that oral storytelling affects him personally:

*“...it’s quite a personal journey...there’s often times when I tell a story and I don’t feel that comfortable, when you feel quite uncomfortable inside...you know, you’re coming to some quite core difficulties for yourself in different ways.”*

Similarly, Ben Haggarty, another Oral Storyteller who was interviewed as part of the study, describes the metaphorical nature of oral stories and their impact upon understanding of self. He goes on to describe the capacity of oral storytelling to promote emotional literacy through identification with story characters:

*“I think this thing about emotional literacy is huge, in terms of the wonder tales - the fairy tales, the once upon a time stories - they’re all about emotional literacy, they’re metaphorical. All the characters in them – the kings, the queens, the princesses, the helpers, the beggars, the monsters, the giants, the giant’s wives...I tend to go along with the Jungian approach that they all represent aspects of our inner family, they’re all aspects of self.”*

As noted by Alexander *et al.* (2001) in their study examining emergent literacy and socio-emotional learning through dialogic reading, mothers report that their children are “drawn



to stories that display parallels with their own experience [which] provide a basis upon which the child can personalize the story, identify with the characters and use the story to help manage emotional concerns” (Alexander, *et al.*, 2001; p.387). This exploration of identity, through the mapping of personal experiences of self onto those of the story characters, is evident within the suggestion made by Jane Smith, one of the Class Teachers at Lakeside School, that oral storytelling allows children to utilise an ‘averted gaze’ to address emotional issues:

*“...because it’s not them talking...they’re the tiger or the child or the angry Arthur or whoever they are...it’s their voice about how they’re feeling.”*

This averted gaze enables children to give voice to their emotions whilst taking on the persona of a story character, allowing children to explore their emotional landscape in a manner that is indirect, and therefore potentially less threatening. Alexander *et al.* (2001) suggest that such an approach enables children to overcome emotional dissonance in their lives and make “emotional sense of themselves and others” (p.376). In addition to confronting ‘core difficulties’, Dominic Kelly goes on to describe the way that oral storytelling provides children with important opportunities for self-expression:

*“...when they’re doing oral storytelling, that there is no right way, there’s just your way of telling the story...it’s a really powerful experience for them, and they do definitely carry a greater sense of their entitlement to express themselves...which is a little bit less tied to expressing themselves in the way that adults are happy to hear.”*

Similarly, Jacqueline Harris, a Creative Agent for Creative Partnerships interviewed as part of the study, describes the way that teaching children to tell stories orally can be understood as giving children the tools they need to ‘re-narrativise’ their lives:

*“...So I think that if you have that sort of background, and you have the storytelling, then you are in a position to then re-narrativise your life, because you can take an active part in it.”*

The construction of identity throughout childhood has been emphasised by Warin (2010), who examines the nature and purpose of identity focusing upon the socially situated nature of the self (Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1981). It is within Warin's (2010) treatment of the self that Jacqueline Harris's emphasis upon children's ability to 're-narrativise' their lives gains a foothold. Warin (2010) suggests that "it is the capacity for self-narration" (p.178) that is advantageous, and that such a capacity bestows upon the individual "a kind of 'identity capital'" (p.178) from which they can draw at times of vulnerability. A value for self-awareness and the need for a strong sense of self as the basis for mental health and psychological wellbeing, was established as a key element of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme established under the New Labour government (DfES, 2007). Such interventions are invariably based upon unchanging entity conceptions of self (Dweck, 2000). In contrast, Warin (2010) stresses temporal aspects suggesting that "it is important to look at how self-construction occurs over time as this concerns a person's capacity to change, to learn or fail to learn, to be open or resistant to new influences" (p.37). To these ends, the image of the storyteller is invoked as a means by which individuals construct and tell changing 'stories of self' (Warin, 2010) over time. This conception of identity construction has important implications for policy and practice in relation to identity and self-awareness. Sharing similarities with Baumeister's (2003) recommendation for strengthening self-esteem through learning and improvement rather than passively praising children "just for being themselves" (p.39) which has the potential to devalue praise and confuse young people as to what the legitimate standards are, Warin (2010) suggests that:

*"Interventions in identity construction should not be aimed at strengthening the self. They should be aimed instead at strengthening a person's capacity to create self, their capacity to expand and differentiate identity into a sophisticated, nuanced story..."* (p.178)

Such an approach has been adopted by Woolf (2012) who suggests that the five strands of the SEAL programme, self-awareness, empathy, motivation, managing feelings and social skills, are better achieved through engagement with opportunities for non-directive play and social interaction than through being directly taught or 'strengthened'. Oral storytelling can be understood as such an opportunity, where the self-expression and representation

that is inherent in the performance of a story, as well as identification with the story characters, enables children to engage with narrative in ways that may impact directly upon their understanding of self, and also their ability to create a nuanced story of self.

### **Emotional literacy through intra-psychological processes: How children come to understand others**

Processes of identity formation and understanding of self are closely tied to the effects of oral storytelling on emotional literacy and children's 'double minded' (Baron-Cohen, 2011) understanding of self and others. The observation that psychotic individuals can display a cognitive ability to take the perspective of others without actually empathizing with them reinforces the idea that "empathy includes an emotional experiential component that is not a part of perspective taking" (Russ & Niec, 2011; p.28). This notion of double-mindedness has recently been strengthened by neuro-imaging studies that have found two separate brain areas for emotional empathy and cognitive empathy (Shamay-Tsoory *et al*, 2009). The simultaneous awareness of self and others to which the concept of 'double-mindedness' refers, is reflected in participant responses in relation to the effect of oral storytelling upon emotional literacy and empathy. Ben Haggarty suggests that emotional literacy is fostered by oral storytelling through "empathy with the characters, identification" and having "to perceive the story through the eyes of all the different protagonists". Similarly, Roland Morris, a Class Teacher in Holly Tree school, describes the way that oral storytelling involves children retelling stories in ways that "gets inside the character and how the character feels" as well as "understanding the reasons for their actions". These perspectives are reinforced by Jane Smith who suggests that oral storytelling enables children to explore emotions and "talk about the good and the bad of those people" within the story.

Clearly, the rich story narratives and the variety of story characters that are available during oral storytelling, provide children with intrinsically engaging opportunities to look beyond themselves so that they can explore and develop their comprehension of different personality types, emotions, and behaviours. As previously suggested, the psychological affordances of narrative have been noted by Alexander *et al* (2001), who suggest that:

*“...it is often the aesthetic properties of the story - the oral and visual rhythmic patterns, the characters who invite identification and empathy - that inspires [the child’s] emotional attachment to the story.” (p.377)*

In addition, different story interpretations during oral story re-telling, offer children the opportunity to experience the same story told by different people in different ways. The idea that there is “no right or wrong way to tell a story” was central to Dominic Kelly’s pedagogic approach. Jacqueline Harris suggests that the tolerance for alternative responses that is fostered through an emphasis upon different versions of a story that is re-told, is more likely to be lacking when children have been educated with strong delimitations about the way things should be done:

*“...but if you’ve been brought up to believe there’s a right and wrong to everything, and a tick or a cross to everything, you’re not going to have that tolerance...”*

This acceptance of difference has important implications for children’s theory of mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), which involves children developing a cognitive understanding that other people have separate minds, thoughts and ideas. Relatedly, Jane Smith describes the way that due to the cycles of deprivation that result in poor parenting skills, many of the children at Lakeside School are “not looked at, a lot of them don’t speak, they don’t contextualise that ‘my mums smiling at me, she must be happy’”. She goes on to describe the way that oral storytelling can benefit such children:

*“...our children don’t have a lot of emotion, so by storytelling we can take that out of the story and give them the emotions that perhaps they haven’t felt before...and our children will talk in that character... when they’re that character or when they’re in that storytelling world, they can feel and think about things that perhaps they’re shut down to in their lives.”*

While Jane Smith’s suggestion that the children at Lakeside ‘don’t have a lot of emotion’ is clearly problematic, the sentiment behind her assertion is compelling and demands further consideration. Indices of social disadvantage indicate that Lakeside School resides in an area

of entrenched socioeconomic deprivation, with the percentage of free school meals standing at 61.2% in 2012, well above the national average of 26.2% (Ofsted, 2012). With this in mind, it is suggested that it is the qualitative nature of children's emotional experiences rather than a lack of emotions that may be the real issue behind Jane Smith's statement, with social factors and constraints resulting in core difficulties that impact upon children's ability to understand and positively express their emotional lives.

The process of retelling a story from the perspective of different protagonists involves an element of role-play that enables children to experience emotional content themselves, and as Jane Smith suggests "give[s] them the emotions that perhaps they haven't felt before". Experience of emotions that may be unfamiliar to children is crucial if they are to achieve emotional literacy and gain a sense of empathy. A direct link between role-playing and empathy has been demonstrated by Staub (1971) who observed pro-social empathic behaviour that persisted over time in children who enacted a situation where another child needed help. In contrast children who inductively had the positive consequences of helping and sharing pointed out to them did not exhibit the same pro-social behaviour. As already suggested, while the application of theory of mind known as 'perspective taking' is a prerequisite for empathic ability, empathy includes an emotional, experiential component that is not a part of perspective taking (Szalavitz and Perry, 2010 ; Russ and Niec, 2011). This observation reinforces the idea that pro-social skills are 'caught not taught' (Woolf, 2012) and the importance of experiential learning to the development of emotional literacy and empathy.

Overall therefore, intra-psychological processes during oral storytelling can be understood as double-mindedness through identification with story characters, tolerance of difference through idiosyncratic story retellings, and experiential learning that in combination may positively help to foster empathy and understanding of self and others.

## **The listener, the audience and the group: Emotional literacy through inter-psychological processes**

Theories of identity tend to either foreground the changeability of self in relation to the dynamic and infinitely complex flux of different social contexts, or the continuity of self as a construct that enables individuals to take control, manage experiences and maintain a coherent sense of self and psychological well-being. A more helpful distinction suggests that we need to think in less absolute terms and develop more nuanced understandings of “individual *and* group” as “the two permanent poles of all social processes” (Asch, 1952; p.285). Ben Haggarty suggests that the collectivism of oral storytelling with its “‘crick crack’, this sort of call and response...and a lot of interrogative ‘what do you think happened?’” is what ‘reaffirms participation’ and sets oral storytelling apart from other performing arts. Ben emphasizes that with oral storytelling there is “a dialogue possible all the time” and that “kids feel they can question and interrogate the story”. He goes on to elucidate how this might work in practice, emphasizing the expertise of the storyteller in enabling this type of oral storytelling exchange:

*“...if it’s a good storyteller the kid can ask a question and the storyteller, if they’re in control of what they’re doing, can stop the story exactly, digress and deal with the question, and maybe even tell another story in response, and then come back to the original story.”*

This quality of call and response has been addressed in Myers’s (1990) study of the effects of oral storytelling as compared to story reading. Myers (1990) found more collaborative behaviour between storyteller and listener, such as questions and comments to clarify meanings, during oral storytelling than during story reading. When Dominic Kelly told oral stories to the children at Holly Tree School the children were observed to interject with questions about elements of a story they didn’t understand for example, one child asked what a ‘bridle’ was. Similarly, the Oral Storyteller was able to more easily assess children’s understanding throughout each story in a manner that was responsive to the children’s ongoing levels of comprehension.

At the heart of dialogic teaching methods (Alexander, 2008a, 2008b) is a commitment to interactions that encourage students to question teaching material, and teachers to ask questions that are not wholly based around simple recall. The Bristol study of language development that followed a sample of 32 children from home to their first school (Wells, 1986) found that “not only did children almost cease to ask ‘real’ questions at school but teachers also rarely invited them to express and explain their beliefs and opinions – at least with respect to the official curriculum” (Davies & Sinclair, 2014; p.24). The increased questioning and dialogic interactions observed by Myers (1990) can therefore be taken as an indication that oral storytelling is aligned with social constructivist perspectives of learning, as well as the concept of dialogic teaching. Such perspectives emphasise the inherently social character of learning along with the key principles of collectivity, reciprocity, cumulation, support and purposefulness (Alexander, 2008a, 2008b) of classroom talk.

Reinforcing the idea of participation Julia Barden, a Creative Agent for Creative Partnerships interviewed as part of the study, contrasts oral storytelling and story reading emphasizing the physical differences between them. She describes the former as “direct”, and the latter as “static”, as well as invoking an image of the book as a barrier between teller and listener:

*“...if somebody is reading often their head is in a book and then they’re showing the book, whereas if they’re telling the story they’re there, they’re constantly engaging – that face to face dynamic relationship, so physically I think it’s a different experience...”*

This perspective is aligned with the immediate, personal, active and direct qualities of oral storytelling that have been demonstrated by research. The available evidence reinforces the idea that the ‘crick-crack’ of oral storytelling functions as a co-creative and bi-directional form of communication (Roney, 1996). For example, the observation that there is increased use of eye contact and de-focus on story book illustrations during oral storytelling (Malo & Bullard, 2000); that participation during story reading generally involves discussion of book illustrations (Aina, 1998); and that oral storytelling invites significantly more audience participation (Isbell, 2004). Such research serves to set oral storytelling apart from story reading as an activity that has specific socio-emotional effects that hinge upon its inter-

relational quality and the fact that it is freed from the constraints of text-based reproduction.

An aspect of oral storytelling that all of the participants with direct experience of it were clear about is the extent to which the storyteller reads the audience that they are storytelling to. Dominic Kelly emphasises this feature in his description of inter-relational aspects of oral storytelling where the storyteller is “responding to how the audience is”. Dominic goes on to contrast oral storytelling and reading aloud in terms of how the storyteller can tailor an orally told story to suit the audience, as it is being told:

*“...whatever it is you do it’s in direct relation to the audience, how the audience seem to be, and the energy in the room, and the looks on people’s faces and the rest of it. So you are directly relating through the story with the audience, in a way that with a book you’re just not...so if you can feel that your audience is absolutely in the story then you can afford to relax more and you can slow the story down, you can tell more, you can put more detail into the story.”*

The fact that oral stories can be altered and changed to suit the unique composition of an audience and how the story is being received along with the requirement to pick up on non-verbal cues from the audience as an implicit part of this process, has important implications for emotional literacy. In her study examining the behavioural differences between storytelling and story reading, Myers (1990) describes the way that younger children listening to an orally told story showed “by the expression on their faces and a ‘kind of leaning back’ movement in their bodies” (p.826) that they were not quite understanding the gist of a story. Such ‘mind-reading’ ability is clearly not telepathy but rather “observation of certain components within the complex of others’ behaviour patterns together with their environmental context” due to the fact that “that’s all we can see” (Whiten, 1996; p.277). Whiten (1996) goes on to suggest that this makes a simple contrast between mind-reading and behaviour-reading difficult.

Inter-psychological processes during oral storytelling can therefore be understood as the way that children are able to enhance their understanding of self and others through



watching and listening to others tell stories. Through co-creative and bi-directional communication (Roney, 1996), behaviour reading (Whiten, 1996), body language, expression and gesture, children can gain an understanding of the link between internal emotional states and external markers of non-verbal communication, through watching others tell stories orally.

### **Conclusion:**

The benefits of oral storytelling to children's socio-emotional development are considerable and arrived at through a complex of processes tied to self-expression, identification, empathic understanding of self and others, and bi-directional communication. Oral storytelling can be understood as providing important opportunities for self-representation through the development of narrative ability and an emotional vocabulary - two prerequisites for telling 'stories of self' (Warin, 2010). Such an ability can enable children to 're-narrativise' their lived experiences, providing "a kind of 'identity capital'" (Warin, 2010; p.178) from which children can draw. As suggested by Ben Haggarty, the empowerment to be gained through opportunities for self-expression through the idiosyncratic retelling of stories, is a compelling feature of oral storytelling:

*"...just to feel you've been heard is an amazing thing. To feel that you've made people laugh or moved them is an even greater thing, that 'I did something and I've changed their emotional state'. So that empowers kids."*

In addition, oral narratives provide children with increased scope for understanding of self through identification with, and understanding of, story characters. This enables children to confront core concerns, overcome emotional dissonance and make "emotional sense of themselves and others" (Alexander *et al.*, 2001; p.376).

Closely tied to such effects are the intra-psychological processes that define children's 'double minded' (Baron-Cohen, 2011) and empathic understanding of self and others, again through identification with, and understanding of, story characters. Further socio-emotional

effects, including acceptance of difference and tolerance of alternative ideas and responses, are arrived at through exposure to idiosyncratic story retellings, and this has important implications for children's 'theory of mind' (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Similarly, the experiential nature of oral storytelling gives children the opportunity to engage with different and potentially unfamiliar emotional states, thereby providing routes into emotional literacy and empathy that may not be achievable through perspective-taking alone (Szalavitz and Perry, 2010; Russ and Niec, 2011).

Inter-psychological processes promote the kind of bi-directional communication and behaviour-reading (Roney, 1991; Whiten, 1996) that takes place between teller and listening audience during the 'crick-crack' of oral storytelling, which is less evident within other story forms such as when stories are read aloud (Myers, 1990; Aina, 1998; Malo & Bullard, 2000; Isbell, 2004). The inherently social and pedagogically dialogic (Alexander, 2008a, 2008b) character of oral storytelling is therefore foregrounded, where it is the "individual *and* group" that can be understood as "the two permanent poles of all social processes" (Asch, 1952; p.285).

One of the teachers at Holly Tree School stated that she was "completely shocked" that one child in particular would be "capable" of oral storytelling, going on to describe the way that storytelling had allowed this child to be "a completely different character" (Sarah White). This is suggestive of both shifts in learner identity and also teacher perceptions of ability (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968) that are so central to providing a level playing-field for children in school. Similarly, another teacher described "the quietest child in the school" for whom oral storytelling was "a break-through" due to the fact that "she hardly speaks to me at all...or anybody" (Roland Morris) during her more typical social interactions. Clearly, oral storytelling provided these children with important opportunities to change the way they engaged with spoken language, and enabled others to witness this change. This is a shift that could easily serve as a springboard from which future engagement with both learning and the social milieu of school could stem.

Overall, it is the experiential nature of oral storytelling that strongly reinforces the idea that "social skills are not taught, but rather absorbed" and "learned through relationship"

(Woolf, 2012; p.37). The beneficial effects upon psychosocial development that oral storytelling affords is strongly suggestive of the idea that we need to provide more opportunities for experiential and non-instrumental (Hibbin, 2016) language practice of this nature in school. Such opportunities need to be viewed not as a compensatory strategy for the limited engagement in the curriculum with oral storytelling, or indeed non-instrumental forms of Speaking and Listening more generally (Hibbin, 2016). Rather they need to be viewed as practice that raises the status of Speaking and Listening in general education as a whole, and that celebrates the benefits of talk for talk's sake on multiple levels, including the psychosocial wellbeing and development of young children. The brief sojourn into meaningful forms of Speaking and Listening that was embodied by the National Oracy Project (1987–1993) has – unfortunately - long since past. During this time, playful and dialogic forms of talk in which pupils were personally invested, were afforded (for a short time) a much higher status in the curriculum. It is suggested that the oral retelling of pre-existing stories offers children a parsimonious yet psycho-socially complex form of Speaking and Listening practice which is (ironically) as rare within the classroom as it is native to human thought and interaction. It is upon this basis that its use within education needs to be viewed, in direct relation to the importance of talk to learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978) - educationally, psychosocially and collectively.