



Learning through creating stories: developing student teachers' understanding of the experiences of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the roles of story in the training of teachers in the field of special education. It describes and evaluates a project that promoted the learning of student teachers both through hearing stories and writing stories themselves. The students combined their existing knowledge of schools and children with newly researched knowledge of an identified special need to create a story about the experiences of a pupil with special needs. The quality of work produced in this course, and the expressed changes in attitude suggest that story not only engages and motivates but also has the power to produce a deep level of understanding and a clear link with practice, with consequent potential for professional development and social action.

It was the last day of term. 150 trainee teachers were attending for the final lecture before the start of the holiday. The lecturer had carefully prepared a Powerpoint presentation using both text and pictures. The lecturer started the session. Many of the students started writing. They were writing Christmas cards that were then passed around and opened by others. Smiles of acknowledgement were given. The lecturer felt separated from the students. She stopped and walked in front of the desk. 'I want to tell you a story,' she said 'about something that happened to me in a school last week.' The students stopped what they were doing. They looked at the lecturer. The silence in the room was intense. At the end of the story the lecturer went back to her 'Powerpoint' slides and the students went back to their Christmas cards.'

Introduction

The story above prompted one of the authors of this paper, Joy Jarvis, to begin an investigation into promoting the learning of student teachers through the use of story. It brought into focus the dissatisfaction that she had been feeling about her teaching. This simple story acted as stories can do by 'stopping the action long enough to theorise about it.' (Akin, 2002, p 67). Joy realised that she frequently used anecdotes or short examples from case studies in her teaching and that students seemed to engage with these, but she had not analysed her own practice in this respect, or reflected on the students' reactions. In the new term Joy was due to lead a course she hadn't taught before and she decided to use these developing insights to change her practice.

The Project – Phase One

The course was for final year trainee teachers and was on identifying and meeting the needs of children with special educational needs in the mainstream classroom. In discussion before the course started the students had noted that they wanted to learn about 'every single special need' so that they could feel confident that they had both knowledge of the range of needs they were likely to come across and strategies that they could use in the classroom. Joy, as an experienced teacher of children with special educational needs, knew not only that this was not possible, but also it was not what she wanted the students to learn. While knowledge of ways to find out about special educational needs was important for a teacher, of more importance was the ability to understand the needs of an individual and to identify how he or she could be supported in a particular context. Of even more significance, she felt, was the development of positive attitudes to inclusion, a belief in celebrating differences, and a determination to use professional practice to promote social justice. Could both the students' and the lecturer's expectations be met? How could 'story' be used to meet these ends?

The Role of Narrative

Joy's aim was to engage the students, something that had been done, if only briefly, by the personal story in the lecture theatre. She wanted the students to become deeply involved in the topic. Evidence from Rath's (2002) project on teacher action research in Ireland suggests that 'narrative may be one way that teachers enter wholeheartedly into the learning' (p.151). She also wanted to engage their 'moral imagination', something that Coles (1989) argues can be undertaken effectively through fiction, giving readers/listeners an opportunity to empathise, particularly when they are in potential positions of power, such as in the doctor/patient relationship that he explores. In relation to teaching, where the teacher is very much in the position of being able to influence the happiness and well-being of the child, the ability to put oneself in the other's shoes could be a significant step towards change. Waterland (2001) reflecting on her own work in storying the experiences of a child starting school suggests: '... it is only by constructing the world the child experiences within our own imaginations that we can make that world better' (p. 138).

The Teaching

There was very little teaching on this course, indeed one of the students referred to it as a 'self-study course', and none of the teaching involved giving information about

special educational needs. In the first session Joy read stories to the students. These were all on the theme of special educational needs, some being extracts from autobiographies while most were fictional stories written from different perspectives, including those of children. Source texts included a novel written from the perspective of a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome (Haddon, 2003), examples from short stories written by children's authors in collaboration with children with special educational needs (Laird, 1996) and a story written by a teacher as an approach to understanding her own practice (Winter, 1989). Egan (1997) notes the 'powerful emotional effect' of images evoked by the words used to tell a story. He also signals the importance of the memorisation function of stories, pointing to their power to, for example, help the students to see facts 'not as disembodied pieces of knowledge or skill but as embedded 'in their proper human contexts in which they initially had affective, as well as purely cognitive, meaning' (p.64).

The initial reaction to the session, from both the students and the lecturer, was not in relation to what was said but in relation to the quality of the silence in the room while the stories were being read. The students suggested that this was because you feel relaxed when listening to stories, they are not considered 'work'; you know what the expectations are because the experience of listening to stories is familiar. One student noted: 'You get a sense of achievement, you absorb it, you understand it and you could retell it – that's different from how you'd feel in a lecture.' The ease of access to stories relates to the notion of narrative structure as a human cognitive tool (Egan, 1997) and that we learn about the social world most easily through narrative (Bruner, 1986). The students were interested and motivated but did not see how listening to stories related to their need for facts about types of special need. Could the facts and narrative be linked to

involve engagement with the topic, promote deep learning and subsequent practice development? Most of the students' energy would go into the course assignment so it was important that this embraced the perceived needs of the students and the lecturer.

Designing the assignment

The students were then asked to choose an identified special need, such as deafness or autism, and to research the 'facts', using books, articles and websites. They subsequently shared the information in groups, thus satisfying some of the expressed need for knowing about all special needs. This aspect of the assignment was written in traditional essay form. The lecturer, however, had no information about how fully the students had understood the facts in relation to classroom implications, the extent to which these had affected the attitudes of the students to pupils with special needs or their understanding of their role in promoting social justice in relation to these pupils. The students were then asked to combine their existing knowledge of schools and children with their new knowledge of an identified special need to create a story about the experiences of a pupil with special needs. Anderson-Patton & Bass (2002) argue that writing narratives encourages both 'imaginative identification and personal voice, two ingredients we believe are necessary for transformative learning' (p.102).

To help them with their story the students had a session with an English tutor, who talked with them about using words to make impact and ways of developing a framework for their story. A session with an artist in residence explored the role of

colour and line in conveying emotion and mood. Having completed their story, the students were asked to use it with the intended audience such as children, students or teachers to obtain feedback. Subsequently all 42 students completed a questionnaire about the impact of the course and five were interviewed by a researcher.

Outcomes

The engagement of the students in the project was evident from their participation in the sessions and the outstanding quality of the presentation of the books, poems and images produced. The quality of these was so good that an exhibition was set up, which over 100 students and local teachers attended. The reaction to the exhibition suggested that the students had been able to present, effectively, the experiences of children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms. Visitors to the exhibition reported that they had learnt about particular special educational needs and also that they had been emotionally affected and that this led to a change in attitude; 'I'm going to go back to the school I support in and look at the classroom from his (child with special educational needs) eyes.' This relates powerfully to Gerrig's (1993, p.198) point that 'real world judgements can be affected by fictions.'

The students had produced effective pieces of work but what had they learnt? A senior colleague of the lecturer who visited the exhibition wrote on her comment card: 'This is some of the most interesting and insightful students' work that I have ever read...students working at the deeper structures of learning.' While the intuition of staff, based on years of teaching experience, was that the students had learnt a great deal, how could we identify this and where could we find the evidence? Conle (2003 p11) identifies five potential outcomes of narrative curricula: 'advances in understanding; increased interpretive competence; richer practical repertoires, changes in life and visions gained.' Could we find evidence of these in the students work or in the subsequent questionnaires and interviews?

Evidence of advances in understanding of the effects of special educational needs on children was clearly evidenced in the stories and images. Other adults and children engaging with the narratives could identify these features and this was recorded in the students' data on feedback they'd been asked to collect on their work. Appropriate classroom strategies were also portrayed in a number of narratives. One for example, called 'Red Class, Yellow Class', illustrated poor practice in one scenario and good practice in another. One could infer that having identified this understanding the author would go on to use a 'richer practical repertoire' in her own teaching. Another wrote a poem about the isolation of a child in the classroom, an isolation compounded by having a support helper with him all the time. Again one could infer that the poet being aware of this possibility would not allow this to happen in her own context. In relation to changes in their professional lives there was some evidence in the interviews and questionnaires that there had indeed been changes. One student wrote: 'Children are very powerful educators of each other and teachers must give them the potential to understand other children's special needs and celebrate their qualities.' While another stated: 'I would like to be a teacher who includes all children in my classroom.' One could argue that this could lead to a vision of all children being included in schools and in wider society.

It was decided that in order to improve understanding of how this project could impact on students, and if indeed it could be repeated as successfully with another group, the course would be taught the following year to a new group of students, with some changes designed to support and record learning.

Project – Phase Two

The project was undertaken as before with the following changes. Another tutor, an art specialist, would work with Joy with the aim of developing the image aspect of the work. In order to meet a range of student strengths it was seen as important to look more carefully at how images and not just words could support learning. As Greene (2001 p11) notes, improved listening and looking and the ‘wide awakesness brought about by aesthetic education’ can lead to new understandings or to ‘reframing’ (Schon, 1991). This can then lead to practice change. We wanted our students to reframe their understanding of children with special educational needs and one way of doing this could be to increase their visual literacy.

The second change was in the assignment. The story/image had been accompanied by a written assignment on an identified special need, which had not given the lecturer a great deal of insight into the student’s learning. As LaBosky (2002, p34) had noted about her own research in relation to student teachers writing observational accounts of practice: ‘What I .. realized was that to achieve these narrative goals, I had been trying to use an assignment that was constructed primarily in the paradigmatic mode.’ Having come to the same realisation about the written assignment Joy and her colleagues decided to replace the written account with a progress log. As the students progressed through the course and as they developed their story/image, they were asked to record their progress through story, images, factual writing, descriptions of the development of ideas and reflections on the process and on their learning. It was hoped that this would not only provide evidence of learning in relation to Conle’s five outcomes but would also support the students’ ability to reflect, an important strategy for practice development (Schon, 1991).

A third change from the original project was that colleagues observed and kept notes on teaching sessions and the questionnaires and interviews undertaken at the end of the course were more focused on issues of process and outcome. The aim was to try to tease out aspects of the process that enhanced student learning and to provide clearer evidence of outcomes.

Outcomes

Joy’s art lecturer colleague likened opening the box containing the students’ assignments to ‘opening a box of sweets’. This highlighted our expectations, but sweets can sometimes be a disappointment. These had colourful and exciting wrappers, but what did they have inside? The stories, poems and images were just as insightful as they had been the previous year. The progress logs were goldmines of evidence regarding learning. Both types of work were used to identify evidence of Conle’s five potential outcomes.

Analysing the data

We used Conle's (2003) model of the outcomes of narrative curricula as the basis for analysing and interpreting the data. We viewed the 'Five Outcomes' she identifies as being hierarchical, moving from lower to higher order impact on the students' understanding and practice. We found that there are issues in trying to represent what is happening at higher levels in students' learning. Gains in knowledge and understanding are relatively straightforward to recognise. However, when you move into the more personal, visionary dimensions there is no accepted language for representing such learning in an academic context. Conle recognises the importance of identifying and representing such learning.

The interviews with the students, the stories and our reading of their reflective Logs were the sources of evidence for making our judgements on impact. For all the students the writing of the stories and the underlying research which informed them had led to advances in their understanding of special needs in general and, in a deeper sense, of the specific special need selected as the focus for their stories. As Conle describes, the 'narrative encounters' had prompted questions which had led the students 'to a deeper comprehension of particular issues or phenomena' (p11).

Conle's second outcome, 'increased interpretive competence' was also strongly evident. She draws on the work of Barone and Eisner (1997) in describing a function of narrative as helping us 'notice what had not been seen before' and 'to know what to neglect in our efforts of interpretation,' (p11). For the students, the process of putting their research into story form, putting factual information into a different mode was, necessarily, an interpretive process. A key aspect of this process was to draw on their previous knowledge and understanding both of children's development and children's literature and integrate these understandings with their newly researched knowledge about special educational needs to create a story. They were making choices about what to include and what to leave out, 'what to neglect', and why. Some were consciously choosing a positive voice to promote a positive response towards the disability portrayed in their stories.

We found that the first two outcomes led to the third – the development of 'richer practical repertoires'. Interviews and journal accounts highlighted examples of ways in which the students were able to draw on the knowledge and understanding which had become internalised, in our view, by virtue of being heard as stories, and was now available to be drawn on in a range of practical situations. The stories themselves have added to their resources for teaching and for dialogue with other professionals – extending and enriching their practical repertoires. It is clear that understanding is a prerequisite for being able to internalise and draw on the enriched practical repertoire.

The fourth outcome – 'Changes in life' - refers to the way in which engagement with the narrative process, creating your own story, results in what Clandinin and Connelly describe as 'new stories' being 'told and lived,' (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). The impact is seen in changes in our personal and professional lives. Conle sees this evidenced in the way actions are made 'more socially informed and ecologically sound,' (p11). This description seems to blur the boundary between this category and the fifth and final outcome, 'Visions Gained'.

The journey which takes someone from the fourth to the fifth outcome seems to us to be the shift from seeing and doing things differently as a result of heightened

awareness, improved knowledge and understanding, in the milieu of one's own school or classroom, to an understanding of the wider implications. This involves seeing what needs to be changed in order for things to be different – not just for *this* child in *this* school but for *all* children. The narrative experience may be the catalyst that moves the practitioner from the personal to the global perspective. This is evidence of the capacity or power of narrative to bring out our consciousness of 'what can be and also what should not be.' (Conle, p11) It is the challenging, emancipatory aspect of educational research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), the raising of one's consciousness to the political dimension, highlighting the causes of problems and recognising that the solutions may require political action. In some cases the students' Log entries show a growing awareness of the social justice dimension of special needs provision, particularly in relation to equality of access for all children.

Two of the stories and reflective logs have been chosen to exemplify the five curricula outcomes.

Anna decided to focus on Asperger's Syndrome, writing a story, 'My friend Joey', which uses the familiar children's story format of animals who exhibit human characteristics and behaviour traits. She uses each example to link with the behaviour of Joey, a child with Asperger's Syndrome, explaining the reasons for his actions:

"Quite often at school we play pretend games, but my friend Joey doesn't join in, he is not being rude. He does like to play on his own quite a lot, but I love it when he chases me or lets me collect things like stones or leaves with him.

Do you sometimes like playing on your own?

Do you sometimes not understand the game others are playing?"

(extract from 'My Friend Joey' by Anna)

Anna uses her Log to tell the story behind the story. There is a sense of urgency in her writing expressed in the example below:

"12/01/04: First entry in Log Book (burst out of me, like it or not!). An emotional day, having to face the thought of looking through the eyes of a child with special educational needs, viewing a sometimes strange and hostile world."

There is a strong link here with Conle's view that 'There is a certain amount of content that *wants* to be told' (p6) (our emphasis). For two authors of this paper Helen Burchell and Janet Dyson, there is a resonance with their own experience of writing about their professional learning (Burchell and Dyson, 2002). For them this was strongly evoked by Schlink's (1997) discussion of how he came to write the story of his novel, 'The Reader' where he says, 'the guarantee that the written one (story) is the right one lies in the fact that I wrote it and not the other versions. The written version wanted to be written, the many others did not,' (p214).

Anna's story is well informed by her research. Her interpretative competence has enabled her to apply her knowledge and understanding to form a strong underpinning for the narrative. (Outcomes 1 and 2). Her evaluations of her work suggest a richer

repertoire and personal and professional changes, hinting at a wider vision: '.....knowing and understanding so much more, I believe will enhance my teaching for all children.'

In her Log and reflections on the process she touches on the 'visions gained' outcome of narrative curricula, showing a desire to bring about social justice:

'Special educational needs for me comes with a thirst for inclusion, a passion for children not to feel uncomfortably different, and the knowledge that however much you love this child they are different, but NO less valuable as a person who in turn will take their place in society and have equal potential in influencing others'

The social/political dimension is strongly evident in Beth's story which is presented from the perspective of a deaf teenager. She found that carrying out the research and writing her story increased her awareness of 'everyday situations that a hearing person would take for granted, for example, a cancelled train, a changed platform, an emergency siren, a fire alarm. 'I thought about situations I hadn't really considered.....one realises the inequality that deaf people face.' As a result of her raised awareness (vision gained) she decided to include a scenario in her story

Extract from 'Deaf People Don't Dance' by Beth

I got on the train at Hatch End Station but after two stops the train just stopped and the doors stayed open for ages. I was all on my own.

Eventually a man came along in a British Rail Uniform and put his head into the carriage and said something, I couldn't tell what he had said but I saw him mouth "Get off." Now there was no one on the platform, no train and no information on the announcement boards.

"Where has everybody gone?" I thought to myself. I give up, I'm not asking, there's no point, I might as well walk from here.'

Beth records in her Log that she drew on the course input on using images, for example, using a blue tone for the photo of the girl on the station to convey the sense of isolation. Her choice of words and images convey the isolation felt by the deaf girl: "After two stops the train just stopped."..... "I give up, I'm not asking, there's no point, I might as well walk from here."

Extract from Beth's Log: 'Yes, it certainly makes me think and it makes me want to be more considerate towards other people, whatever their disability.' The experience of writing the story has given her a vision that things need to be better, 'how it might be', (Conle, 2003) this, in turn, makes her own actions more socially informed, bringing about a change in her personal life. She uses her story as a vehicle for conveying this to others, widening its impact, sharing her vision.

Like Anna, Beth describes the sense of urgency she experienced in needing to tell her story. She uses this as a basis for reflecting on her own learning about story writing and linking this to the way children write stories. Her evaluations show evidence of the first and third of Conle's outcomes. There is also evidence of the fourth outcome –

a change in her view of writing and, finally, the fifth outcome, vision gained into how things will be in her classroom in the future.

Extract from Beth's Log:

'When I had gathered sufficient information.....I felt ready to write my story. I think it's interesting that I wrote it really quickly and also how messy my handwriting was. For me the creativity of writing the story came in a rush. I just had to get it down on paper. I learnt something really important about my learning and also how children write stories. It seems wrong that we should ask children to write really neatly in story books. Their drafts can be really messy, as long as it's readable, especially by them'..... 'There must be a variety of approaches in my classroom.'

This is a model of a process of researching her own practice that she can carry on with indeed she says in her evaluation that she intends to do this. She also says she intends to use a story approach again to explore special needs. Her final reflection gives a range of examples of how the module has influenced her practice as a teacher.

Discussion

What roles can story have in the education of teachers in the field of special educational needs? A number of issues need to be discussed with colleagues working in this field. Firstly, is the approach successful for all students? A key student perspective is the grade gained for the assignment. In both years of the project the grades were above average overall and no student failed to achieve degree level work, indicating that course objectives had been achieved. All students were able to undertake appropriate research, could explain the implications of an identified need and identify strategies that could be used to support the child. They all showed advances in understanding in the field and knowledge of richer practical repertoires.

All students were able to present their material in a child's voice, and for many that was significant 'reframing', that has the potential to lead to practical change. A typical comment was: 'I know it's a really silly thing to say, but I've never thought about the classroom from a child's perspective before.' Also the students did not present stereotypical pictures of children with special educational needs. Joy had been concerned that a medical rather than a social model of special needs would be presented (Ohna, 2004) and this would have been detrimental to the students' development of understanding of inclusion and the roles of teachers, schools and societies in effecting change. It is not clear why stereotyping didn't happen. One possibility was that it was addressed in the session with the English tutor looking at the impact of words. In this session he asked the students to identify stereotypical words connected with the special need they were researching so that these were 'out in the open' for discussion and were not hidden. Most information texts present a deficit model of special educational needs, so this could reinforce stereotypes, but students went beyond this type of data in their research. They looked at autobiographies, magazine articles by parents of children with different conditions, web sites where adults with a range of needs expressed their opinions. Many students interviewed children or adults with special needs to gain different perspectives. Also the task, that required the student to 'get into the skin' of the child and to present his or her voice, perhaps led to the avoidance of stereotypical views.

The best student work came from those who showed the ability to reflect. They could reflect on the stories they wrote about sessions, on their reading, on the process of their learning and they could identify their insights and the implications of these. Some students were weak in this area. They could story an event when requested to do so, for example an event on their recent teaching placement in school, but had limited ability to reflect on the story. One student noted in her Log: 'From the very first session where we had to share a story from [teaching] placement I learnt how important talk is when learning. It was not until I talked to my peers about what the experience from placement had taught me, that I realised it myself.' As reflection is a key aspect in practice development (Schon 1991) and as narrative is currently being used more often as a tool to support reflective practice (McEwan & Egan 1995) it would be useful to undertake more work on the reflection aspect of this course and perhaps, to take insights gained from this course into other parts of the teaching degree.

Another issue that could be explored is the role of poetry to develop insights. This emerged as a theme from this project due to the significant number of students using poetry in their progress Logs or choosing the medium to portray their chosen special need. In particular this seemed to be when they were exploring feelings and emotions, their own, and those of others, getting behind the feelings of the child, or parent, for example. They were, perhaps, using 'fresh language to describe the indescribable emotional and intellectual experiences in and beyond classrooms' (Cahnmann 2003, p35).

While as Cahnmann (2003 p 30) notes: 'Poetry is a risky business', it can help us to explore alternative ways of looking at practice, as can metaphor (Chambers 2003). How can students be supported in creative and risky processes, which could help them to gain visions of what professional practice could be? Significantly, also, how can we convince others working in similar contexts of the validity of this approach?

Hull (2004) argues that a key difficulty for teachers working with children with special educational needs is not related to teaching approaches but to the problem that teachers have of seeing the world from a very different viewpoint. 'It involves having insight into a different human world, a world in which the nature of knowledge, what is taken to be knowledge, what is regarded as being important or unimportant knowledge, may be different from the one in which the teacher lives.' (Hull, 2004 p105). He argues that teachers need to use their imaginations to do this. Storying could be one way of doing this.

The quality of work produced in this course, and the expressed changes in attitude suggest that story can not only engage the students but can also produce a deep level of understanding and a clear link with practice, with consequent potential for professional development. If, as Nair (2003) suggests, narrative is the way that 'memes', or cultural understandings are shared within a community, then we would want to use this process to share and develop understandings of social justice within education. We would aim to develop teachers as 'trans-world professionals' (Hull, 2004 p 106) who can enter into the worlds of children in order to meet their needs.

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