

# Developing science concepts through story-telling

Fiona Banister and Charly Ryan

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Story-telling is an exciting way to develop children's science ideas and to use their emotions, feelings and attitudes to make their science learning more memorable

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*Finding out the ideas is the easy and fascinating part, but what is the next step? If the ideas are unscientific how are they replaced by the scientific view? If they are consistent with the scientific view but limited, how do researchers take them further and how far should they go? These are important questions to which convincing answers are still being sought.*

(Harlen, 1998: 29)

This article explores how children's science concepts can be developed using story-telling. Recent developments in science teaching have initiated an interest in this topic, with some suggestions that we move away from using practical experience as the dominant means of developing science concepts (e.g. Osborne, 1997). The context is learning about the water-cycle in a primary classroom. We will describe the approach and the benefits of the approach, show how story-telling might be used in lower secondary schooling, and so encourage sharing of good practice between primary and secondary teachers. In turn, this will contribute to developing continuity and progression across different phases of education.

## ABSTRACT

There is a growing concern to widen the ways in which we teach science to children. This article reports on the use of story-telling to develop children's ideas about the water-cycle. The outcomes show that, in the long term, the children remember more abstract science ideas better when taught in a story format. They can also distinguish the real from the anthropomorphic.

Effective science teaching was seen to be based on 'carefully selected practical experiments to build up the children's knowledge' (DES, 1989: 29), with the teacher as a facilitator who values children's ideas and provides opportunities for science investigations. However, practical experience may not always be the best way to introduce a new idea. The most effective teachers utilise a wide variety of teaching styles and this in turn leads to better learning (Osborne, 1997).

Story-telling in the classroom has the capacity to capture children's attention and imagination, which suggested it might be a powerful teaching strategy in science. A story is the web of characters and their relationships, the transformation of characters and situations, and a flow of events in a way that is true to the setting. It is a story's ability to convey a sequence of events and represent symbolic meaning that can help children to order, process and present their work (Egan, 1989). In story-reading, both listener and reader concentrate on text and there is occasional eye contact. Story-telling, however, involves a greater level of communication between the audience and the teller:

*The interaction is creative, as both teller and listener create the story. Words are used to create mental pictures of the story. The storyteller's face, voice, body and personality help to convey meaning and mood.*

(Mullan, 1991: 5)

Story-telling can be challenging, stimulating imaginative powers, and so teach content more engagingly and meaningfully (Egan, 1989). Through the exchange of stories, teachers and children can access a powerful way to make meaning, to engage their

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