

Storytelling: Port of Entry for Developing Reading Skills

By: Jim Woodard

My experience as a storyteller has revealed the amazing power of stories in helping kids develop into superior readers and students. It can be the key factor in directing them toward a life of exceptional achievement.

Let me tell you about Steve, a fifth grader. This is a 10-year-old who attended my Storytelling Club sessions in our local community. The club was comprised of a group of youngsters, ages 8 to 12, who met every week at the Ventura Boys and Girls Club. I told stories, the kids told stories, and we all participated in a variety of story-related activities.

There were always a few kids in the group, like Steve, who really loved and got excited about stories – those they heard and those they helped to compose. The storytelling experience inspired them to draw from their very fertile imaginations in making up and telling their own stories.

At first, Steve was reluctant to attend our Storytelling Club sessions. Stories were just for real little kids, he thought. And besides, he wasn't good at this kind of thing. He was a very poor reader at school and got low grades in most classes and assignments. The Storytelling Club would probably turn out to be another source of embarrassment for him, he reasoned.

His mom tried to help Steve improve in his school performance. But she was a single mother with a full-time job plus a household to manage. Little time was available to work with each of her kids. She was sure Steve had the potential for outstanding achievement, but he seemed to lack interest and motivation.

When Steve was persuaded by a friend to attend our Storytelling Club sessions, he became excited about storytelling after attending for a few weeks. Then something very interesting happened. He wasn't satisfied just to hear stories. He wanted more. He responded to that thirst for stories by seeking them out in books and reading them on his own.

Suddenly his reading skills vastly improved, his mother reported. This, in turn, expanded his vocabulary and enhanced his spelling capabilities. He began to take pride in his newly found capabilities. He practiced it in all his school assignments, greatly improving his performance and grades. His teachers were amazed at his progress.

Steve's interest in stories first caught fire when he became fascinated with science fiction tales. He then expanded his interest to other types of adventure stories and biographical glimpses into the lives of the world's great achievers. This further motivated him to reach out and accept new challenges.

Looking ahead, when Steve (now a teenager) is thinking about career possibilities, his sharpened reading skills will give him the capability to research fields intensely. This will make it more likely that he will focus-in on a career field in which he will excel and enjoy. When preparing for and moving up the ladder in his selected career, he will have an edge on others because of his well-developed reading and learning skills. He will have a particularly good chance to become an outstanding achiever himself.

The turnaround in Steve's life was at age 10 when he was turned on by stories – hearing, telling and reading them. Everything else fell into place on that foundation. Hopefully, the reviving art of storytelling will turn many other young lives around. It can start with a good story told by a teacher, librarian or parent.

Storyteller Laura Simms put it this way: "All children need the chance to be drawn into a story, for words are alive and transforming and can give them the desire to read, to inquire, to write and to communicate. Otherwise, words will remain merely black marks on a page, like dead insects with pins stuck through them."

Another well-known storyteller, Harlynn Geisler, offered this perspective on the value of storytelling as a teaching tool: "If children hear exciting stories from books beyond their reading level, they will want to

learn to read better so they can read such fascinating volumes. Storytellers, as purveyors of literature, are role models of readers.”

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