YOUNG PEOPLE, LEARNING AND STORYTELLING

—

Emma Parfitt

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Emma Parfitt

Young People, Learning and Storytelling

Emma Parfitt
Edinburgh, UK

For Morgan. Thank you darling for supporting my dreams.

Foreword

I am delighted to write this foreword, because I believe deeply in the powerful educative value of storytelling, especially in a democratic society. This excellent book provides a template for teachers and others to engage with story as a way of knowing the world and in doing so to make their way in an increasingly unknowable future.

I'd like to start this foreword by telling you a story which, in turn, was told to me by the Educational Philosopher Robert Witkin. The story concerns his little boy, who, at the time of the story, was about five. This particular morning Witkin was driving his son to school and it was pouring with rain. The little boy suddenly said, 'Daddy, I think Mummy's mad.' 'Oh,' said his dad, 'Why's that?' 'Well it's raining this morning isn't it?' 'Yes,' said his dad as the windscreen wipers struggled to cope with the downpour. 'Well this morning, when Mummy looked out of the window she said, "Isn't it a lovely day?"' So Witkin had, as often happens with children, three minutes between that and arriving at the school gate to introduce the concept of irony. 'Well,' he said, 'sometimes grown ups say one thing and they mean the exact opposite of that thing and they think that's funny.' The little boy didn't reply but got out of the car and went into school. His father had completely forgotten about the conversation, but when he got home at about six o'clock the little boy was waiting for him with a very serious expression on his face. 'Daddy, will you come up to my bedroom please?' he said. Puzzled, his dad went with him and found

that he had deliberately made a mess of his bedroom: the duvet was pulled off the bed, a box of toys emptied onto the floor and a poster dislodged from the wall. Looking at his dad with a quizzical eye he said 'Nice tidy bedroom, eh Dad?' At this point Witkin remembered the conversation in the morning and was able to say, 'That's right, you've got it!'

Witkin, of course is pointing out that children often need to test abstract notions in concrete terms. Transferring the concept of irony across contexts and testing it in action allows the boy to know that he has understood something. The act of devising the test for this is the creative act and it is played for a sympathetic and carefully selected audience. The story form illuminates a range of understandings that are difficult to engage with empirically and more easily grasped through the sharing of an experiential narrative. In stories events seem to yield their own meaning. The point of Witkin's story is not asserted by an authoritative narrator, nor is it authorised by the presentation of theory and evidence in conformity with an accepted logic of enquiry. Rather the way in which events unfold to reveal insights that seem lodged in the events of the story itself and the little boy is free to create his own experiment in learning.

There are vivid messages in this excellent publication, not only for education but for any community with a serious interest in transforming education to meet the real challenges of the twenty first century.

University of South Wales   Hamish Fyfe
Cardiff, UK

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks goes to the young people who volunteered to take part in this research. If I were to list all the people that made this work possible I would need a bigger boat. So instead I send out a humble thank you to those who know they were there: those that shared the storytelling, the conference trips, the often confusing textbooks; those that laughed with me and cried with me, and attended barbecues in the rain; that found respite in the common room between paragraphs; that lent me camping equipment when my ride cancelled on me for a storytelling event; those that invited me into their lives in Minneapolis; that offered me a place in their homes and hearts. This book would be lines of mad gibberish without you.

I think this quote sums up the process of start to finish well:

> Some humans would do anything to see if it was possible to do it. If you put a large switch in some cave somewhere, with a sign on it saying 'End-of-the-World Switch. PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH', the paint wouldn't even have time to dry. (Terry Pratchett, Thief of Time)

Words cannot express my gratitude to Prof. Mick Carpenter and Prof. Sarah Moss, for their continuous support. To Sarah, who took a chance on storytelling and opened my eyes to the contradictions of literature studies along the way, and to Mick for introducing me to sociology and

Praise for *Young People, Learning and Storytelling*

"Emma Parfitt's new book, *Young People, Learning and Storytelling*, is an exceptional study of how storytelling cannot only help us understand children's experiences under difficult conditions, but also how children use storytelling to cope with problems facing them in their daily lives. Dr. Parfitt has a firm grasp of the art of oral storytelling and interdisciplinary methods, and develops keen insights into the emotional behaviour of children as they tell and listen to stories. Her book is a significant contribution to the fields of childhood studies and folklore and will interest anyone concerned with improving relations with children in schools and at home."

—Jack Zipes, *Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota, USA*

"For all those teachers (and storytellers) who observe something exciting happening, but can't put their finger on how it happened, Emma Parfitt's book has insights to frame some explanations. She has a profound knowledge and love of fairy tales, allied to an incisive critical approach. Her book is a series of reflections on the ways in which young people aged 12–14 (from three schools in the Midlands) responded to hearing fairy tales told over a period of weeks. She vividly demonstrates how stories offer an ambiguous social space that is there to be explored. Negotiated meanings evolve dynamically as a process of social exchange related to the context of young people's lives. Dr. Parfitt's interests lie in how the children themselves create and negotiate meanings during story discussion. Beautifully written, with imaginative metaphors from the stories themselves, she offers really accessible theory and vivid compelling accounts infused with the real voices and personalities of the young people themselves. This is not a manual, but something more precious, a guide to reflective practice to inspire teachers and storytellers practically in the classroom."

—Nicola Grove, *Founder of OpenStoryTellers*

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Setting the Stage

The curtains open … the journey begins.

The Guid Crack Club

On the last Friday of every month for 25 years, people flocked to a particular pub in Edinburgh, The Waverley, to listen to stories—their new meeting place since 2016 has been The Circus Cafe. A guest speaker is announced for these storytelling evenings, yet anyone can share stories along a common theme. You might know that the Scottish term *guid crack* means 'an entertaining story' which could take many forms; sometimes storytellers bring instruments such as the fiddle, harmonica or didgeridoo, they might also sing a song or recite a poem. One evening a man with a South African accent told a story which I still carry with me. Unfortunately, I was unable to trace the origins of the tale: it may be from the oral tradition, it may be an urban myth. As I have been unable to trace a written or oral version I offer a brief summary of what I can remember. If you know the origins of this tale I would love to hear from you.

On Robben Island, off the coast of South Africa, every prisoner that arrived heard the words, "This is the Island. This is where you will die". It was an all men's prison. Everyone at the prison was referred to by number instead of their name. At night the men slept on the floor of small cells with a bucket for a toilet. By day they did hard labour in a quarry. Their one escape from this brutal work was exercise time when football was played in the prison courtyard. When Prisoner 46664 arrived another man threw a football at him and spat in his face. This became a daily ritual. Prisoner 46664 never responded with violence or anger. He looked the other man in the eyes each time this occurred, then walked away. The other man did not know what to think of this. One day this man was knocked down by some other inmates. Prisoner 46664 helped him to his feet and stood beside him ready to fight. The others backed away. 'Why did you help me?' the man asked. 'Because we are the same,' Prisoner 46664 replied.

As the story unfolded, I glanced around the pub. People stood, sat and leant forward, drinks forgotten. I noted the absorption of the faces surrounding me as emotions flickered across their faces. As the storyteller reached the end of his account his voice cracked. The storyteller ended his tale with the following words, '46664 was the number assigned to the great man himself, Nelson Mandela'. Without another word needing to be spoken there was a moment of shared silence. Tears prickled my eyes.

As I reflected on the social space the performance created it generated a number of thoughts. First, what a powerful medium story can be to evoke the emotions of listeners. Perhaps you have experienced this yourself; and if you have not, the presence of a full house, month after month in Edinburgh, indicates that storytelling is a tradition that speaks to people and brings them together. Second, storytelling creates a social space where personal stories are shared alongside tales of heroic quests or magical porridge pots.

Throughout this book we will explore the value of *once upon a time* through some research conducted by others, but mostly through research I organised with storytelling in secondary schools in the UK. Research which has wider global implications for understanding what story does to a room of people, such as how young people form spontaneous connections with story, particularly fairy tales, and how this connection to

story informs connections with others in a shared storytelling space. Storytelling and fairy tales materialise in many guises: movies, music, plays, literature, live action role-playing games (LARPing), storytelling nights and TV series. My research narrows in on what you may think of as spoken, oral or traditional storytelling; that is, stories spoken from one person to an audience from memory. In true trickster style, what I mention specifically in connection to oral storytelling touches on many other forms of tale telling, television is just one narrative genre that makes use of fairy tales for inspiration. Take for example the TV series, *Castle* (2012),

Castle: Someone's a Brothers Grimm fan
Beckett: They didn't sugar coat it, they understood that fairy tales are
            pretty much horror stories
Castle: Exactly, which is why we all need them to grapple with the
            unknown, which is why they tap into our primal fears like …
            being lost alone in the woods, or getting eaten by monsters
Esposito: They're not horror stories they're life lessons. If you do the right
            thing you get to live happily for ever
Beckett: But only in fairy tales

I chose this example because an American comedy crime series, was not first show I thought of when listing the common appearance of fairy tales on television e.g. *Grimm, Once Upon A Time*, *Supernatural,* and so on. The variety of narrative genres that touch on fairy tales and storytelling illustrate the pervasive social aspects of story. The psychoanalytic analysis of fairy tales, particularly Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, focuses on our unconscious by utilising fairy tales to understand structures of the psyche: the human mind and the self. For instance, Von Frantz stated that,

In myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural material. But in fairy tales there is much less specific conscious material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly (1995, p. 1)

Bettelheim believed in the therapeutic use of stories. He proposed that children can figure out how to act based on mental experimentation through fantasy, 'If our fear of being devoured takes the tangible form of a witch,' argued Bettelheim (1991, p. 120), 'it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven!' Amusing as Bettelheim's words are, and while I agree there are benefits to using story in therapeutic settings, I do not agree there are stable universal meanings to fairy tale elements just as there are no scientifically proven shared meanings to dream interpretation (despite what dream interpretation books would have you believe). This is because as humans we have unique experiences which shape our perspective of the world around us, including our interpretations of story. My research, which took traditional storytelling into schools to observe group discussion, illustrates this through the unpredictable way young people form connections to their own lives and other narrative forms. I observed that while we can form collective meanings in groups, not everyone sees or takes the same things from a story. Yes, sometimes we do, and … here comes the trickster again tripping us up … sometimes unexpected connections are made. This is just one of the reasons why researching and working with story is multifaceted, tricky, and wonderful.

This chapter sets the stage for discussing the social, emotional, behavioural and ultimately the educational aspects of storytelling throughout this book by defining the term 'storytelling' and positioning storytelling research within the global storytelling climate; summarising the key research that has been undertaken so far; and the current challenges facing storytelling such as commodification (for profit). This book aims to paint a picture, or more accurately a tale, of how young people relate their own lives and experiences to story; you can decide for yourselves whether it is a tall tale or not.

What Is Storytelling?

I took three storytellers into three schools to observe young people's discussions following oral storytelling. I will explain my method in more detail in Chap. 2 (see The Storytelling Space). Despite the use of 'storytelling' as a term for multiple modes of narrative, traditional oral

storytelling remains distinct owing to its immediate collective, lived experience. Defining storytelling is important to separate this book from a number of others which use "storytelling" in their titles such as *The Storytelling Animal* (Gottschall 2013) and *Pixar Storytelling* (Movshovitz 2017). These books are arguably more about narrative than stories told from memory. Narrative simply means, story. Any story you can think of. A tale like *Little Red Riding Hood* exists in various forms as a fairy tale, a poem, a film or music. Some researchers propose that narrative and story should be clearly separated. One way to think of this is that narrative is a way of structuring a story. As Wade Rawlins, the journalist said, 'Narrative is the dirt path that leads us through the impenetrable forest, so we move forward and don't feel lost.' Storytelling then, involves a spoken way of structuring words when telling a story. Once upon a time … is the signal that the story has begun.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote an essay called *The Storyteller*. The essay is about writing but captures storytelling well if we imagine generations of people telling stories connected by narrative threads like a spider's web.

> One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop. (2006, p. 371)

In *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade wove stories within stories every night to trick the king into sparing her life. By connecting storytelling to written literature, Benjamin illustrates there are different ways of communicating stories. At the same time Benjamin's definition evokes the traditional use of the word storytelling: one that is romanticised and inspiring. In addition, Benjamin wrote that excellent writers—and the same could be applied to storytellers—capture the sensory aspects of life, and such stories are instructive about life. Thus written and told stories craft instructions for living around human experience. Or at least some stories do like fairy tales, and it is the oral telling of fairy tales that we are interested in here.

The phrase 'Once upon a time' is a familiar one, and not just to European ears. 'Once upon a time … or once there was' has been used in spoken English at least before the fourteenth-century. Many versions exist all over the world in oral and written traditions. For example, some Indian tales begin 'Once upon a time there was a Rájá' or 'In a country there lived a king'.

There are two key debates in the study of storytelling: 'What is the relationship between oral storytelling and written text?' and, 'Should a modern definition of storytelling encompass different narrative forms?' Folk and fairy tales have a mixture of oral and written origins. Historical interactions between oral storytelling and written texts remain unclear because there are no records of the interactions between written and oral stories over time. The first literary texts provide clues that stories were orally recited for thousands of years. *Cupid and Psyche, written in AD 200*, is often quoted as the first literary fairy tale, or myth (Zipes 1999, p. 13). Elements of the story exist in other tales: Cinderella is aided by birds to remove lentils and peas from ash, in a similar way that Psyche is aided by ants to sort grains and legumes (Levin 1992; Apuleius 2004). The tale *Cupid* is also framed as part of a larger story from the perspective of a storyteller.

Cupid is linked to many animal bridegroom tales such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Warner 1995, p. 295). However, Egyptian stories such as *The Tale of Two Brothers* precede *Cupid* (Green 2011; British Museum 2015). Oral traditions further predate Egyptian records. *Gilgamesh*, an epic Middle-Eastern poem, was first written around 2150–1400 BC and presumably people memorised and recited the poem orally before this (George 2000). Researchers Graça da Silva and Tehrani (2016) suggest a folktale called *The Smith and the Devil* has oral origins around 3200–300 BC. However, as their methods were based on folk and fairy tale texts the results suggest relationships about writing, rather than orality (Parfitt 2016). On the other hand written versions of tales provide the earliest available information when we are interested in how such tales have spread and changed over time.

Literary fairy tales, Egyptian folklore and epic poems indicate that oral forms interact with text. The Italian journalist Italo Calvino (1980) defined folk tales as stories 'from the oral tradition' and fairy tales 'a

refined version' orally inspired and modified by the writing process. What is classified as an oral or literary tale is not as simple as these definitions, because of complex interactions between orality and literature, fairy tale and folk tale. The author Katherine Langrish (2016, p. 4) captured this complexity when she described tales as a 'wild meadow. The flowers and grasses seed everywhere; boundaries are impossible to maintain.' Take for example, *Arabian Nights*. Different renditions indicate that translators created new stories. *Aladdin*, one of the most famous stories, was a later addition to the tales recited by Hanna Diab (Warner 1995, p. 24, 2012, pp. 7–26, 76). More recently, three Norwegian-Sámi and two Norwegian versions of *Aladdin* have arisen in southern Norway (Helene and Skjelbred 2001).

I hoped to demonstrate through the examples above that the history of storytelling remains unclear. What is known about storytelling has been patched together through collections, historical and oral records, archived recordings, biographies, paintings and current storytelling practices. Think of all the ways people come into contact with fairy tales in their day to day lives: manga, literature, film, television, the internet, video games, radio, music, education and theatre, and so forth. Such examples demonstrate the difficulties of separating orality from literature, and storytelling from other forms of narrative.

So we come to a modern definition of storytelling that must encompass the way in which storytelling has adapted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This definition acknowledges the complex historical interactions between oral and other narrative forms; changing technology and various social, economic and political contexts. Basically, technology has changed our lives including how we communicate stories which in turn influences how storytelling happens. Digital storytelling, for example.

Researching the Storytelling Animal

Storytelling is especially important in the lives of young people. It is present in their lives in many ways. In educational settings, stories—in the form of plays, novels, poems and films—provide reference points to form

an understanding of the connections between texts. In a therapeutic setting, story provides a "safe" framework for young people to understand themselves and their circumstances. In personal settings, young people constantly consume and exchange different forms of stories in film, TV, social media sites, and so on.

Psychology and Theatre in Education research in participation in the arts and theatre demonstrates that life skills like self-confidence and relating to others are built through creative subjects, and correlate to higher academic performance and community-building (Turner 2010; Wernick et al. 2014; Wooster 2016; Romanelli et al. 2017). Drama has been recognised in arts education as a valuable and enjoyable means to support learning and enhance life skills, compared to those learnt through continuous assessment such as reading, maths and science. In addition, through the lens of creative enterprise arts subjects, such as storytelling, are viewed as a tool to develop creative and critical thinking skills and a passion for lifelong learning which addresses economic concerns, as it is hoped that creativity breeds entrepreneurs who will create products and businesses, which in turn creates jobs.

The pervasiveness of storytelling in various social spaces makes it appealing for interdisciplinary study. We now begin a journey through some select research which supports the value of storytelling in relation to student learning. Heinemeyer and Durham write about secondary school pupils' experiences of story:

> Our research demonstrates the kinds of learning that are endangered when the storytelling voice is sidelined in education and when storyknowing is not recognized as knowledge. Opportunities for pupils to learn from teachers' and each other's experience, to build shared and contextualized understandings of complex themes, to claim and develop their own narrative voice and to enter empathetically into the worlds of different times and places, become scarce. (2017, p. 50)

In education there is a long history of telling stories to improve literacy skills. Education focuses on a number of areas, such as literacy (Kelly 2011; Carter-Black 2013), maths or science engagement (Balakrishnan 2008, p. 258; Casey et al. 2008; Dahlstrom 2014), special needs (Grove

2015; Preece and Zhao 2015) and applied storytelling, which works with learning targets, or focuses on intervening in a social problem through applied storytelling techniques. Drama-based education involves young people as critical, social actors adopting fictional roles to explore social issues, for instance in the field of Theatre in Education (Neelands 2000; Hull and Readman 2007; Wooster 2016).

There is evidence to support that through stories children acquire language, develop vocabulary and communication skills (Isbell et al. 2004); improve knowledge skills (like the science and literacy examples cited in the above paragraph); that a lack of exposure to story in childhood can seriously obstruct literacy (Engel 1995); that story enables adults to address children's thoughts and concerns in a non-invasive way (McNamee 2005); and story is linked to identity formation—as shown by Ahn and Filipenko's (2007) study, on how children's narratives affect the way children perceive themselves and construct an understanding of the world. This last point, about the link between story and identity formation, makes sense when we consider how stories, including fairy tales, are a part of our social lives, and rather than being solely used for entertainment purposes stories are educational and therapeutic.

The use of storytelling in therapeutic situations is well-documented (Lawley and Tompkins 2000; Thomas and Killick 2007; Crogan et al. 2008; Dent-Brown and Wang 2006; Banks 2012). Storytelling is used practically in education and healthcare. For example, in a health-care context, Banks-Wallace (2002) discovered that the health concerns of African Americans indicated that previous and coexisting social and political conditions framed their health narratives: one participant said, 'I want to leave the United States for I find it a psychologically unsafe place to live.' The Banks-Wallace (2002) study, however, utilised life history narratives rather than fictional ones.

This brings us to the next point, which is the use of oral storytelling has been neglected in empirical research studies; particularly when considering individual's stories as social performances in relation to small- and large-scale social contexts (Banks-Wallace 2002; Polletta et al. 2011). However, how to even approach researching this provides challenges. There have been some attempts. Storytelling is associated with learning social skills, whether emotional or behavioural. Studies into these aspects

have successfully been framed as emotional or behavioural interventions. Curenton and Craig (2011) compared shared-reading to storytelling with 33 mother-child pairings in the US. Mothers were asked to read the same story, *Peter's Chair,* about a boy struggling with a sibling's arrival. Mothers then told a personal experience about getting in trouble for doing something. Conversations with children aged 3–5 were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The results showed that as prosocial behaviours, such as cooperation, self-control and responsibility, increased in oral storytelling, antisocial behaviours, such as not listening or hitting, decreased. Previous work by Bird and Reese (2006) also found that explaining negative emotions increased children's prosocial skills in dealing with those emotions. The research I found on the subject of storytelling tends to be adult- rather than child-led, with adults making meaning of children's behaviour rather than young people informing us about how they perceive the same situation themselves.

In addition, storytelling studies without reading or drama elements were rare in the literature. One exception was the comparison of storytelling to film at a summer camp with 135 young people. Crain et al. (1983) and his colleagues compared watching cartoons (*Popeye*), or a trivial story (*Bullet Bob*), to performing the Grimm Brothers' *Juniper Tree* or *Goose Girl.* Six-to-11-year-olds exposed to *Popeye* or *Bullet Bob* were more eager to return to active play than those who listened to a fairy story. Those subjected to fairy tales were observed being more reflective and preferring to play alone. Crain concluded this was because 'these stories touched on their inner concerns'.

A gap exists in storytelling research because the majority of storytelling work is situated within educational settings and is adult-led with a mixture of reading, drama, and oral-based storytelling practices rather than storytelling on its own. This is because storytelling works well in combination with other methods, which is worth considering when using it in the classroom. As storytelling works well in combination with other methods the study of orality has been overlooked while life history, reading, writing and drama-based research has thrived. Some exceptions are the work of Paley (1990), Egan (1995, 1997), Wilson (1997), Mello (2001), Kelly (2011), Lewis (2011) and Ingram and Dahmes (2014).

I will describe three of the most relevant storytelling studies in relation to working with storytelling in the classroom. First, Mello (2001) introduced storytelling sessions in a US classroom with 11 young people aged 10–12. Sessions included multicultural myths, folk and fairy tales, epics, legends and fables, and occurred twice a month over one school year. The students related the stories to their own experiences and other narratives such as films, video games and TV. However, protocol questions set by the researcher/storyteller controlled sessions; they were not student-led. If young people lack the opportunity to contribute to their own processes of meaning-making, can such spaces inform us about their interactions with story outside the research space? We need to move away from adult-led story interpretation (at least in a research situation), yet this does not exclude teachers picking a topic for discussion and allowing the students to run with it during classroom discussion.

The students in Mello's class linked the images and settings of stories to different social perceptions and theories; so where stories told contrasting viewpoints young people's dialogue adjusted to reflect separate perspectives over time. Mello referred to this as a change 'in social consciousness'. Melo's work built on previous studies on the perceptions of gender roles in Brothers Grimm tales. One question Mello asked was, 'Can women exercise power and still be nice?' Mello concluded group discussion surrounding tales indicated that there was a gender difference. The gender of the listener, and character, affected the story's interpretation and meaning. Male characters were perceived to hold authority through being male. Females experienced a number of relationships and caretaking roles. Overall, students perceived heroes to be strong, while heroines demonstrated physical endurance, problem-solving, effort and kindness.

Second, some critical thinking and knowledge-based aspects of storytelling have been tested through the Neighborhood Bridges Program (from this point referred to as Bridges). Bridges involves over 40 teachers and teaching artists in schools across Minneapolis. Highly trained teaching artists work with a teacher and groups of approximately 20–30 young people, aged 8–13, in their classroom from autumn to spring. Throughout the year, students' individual and group storytelling and drama skills are encouraged, including the students' ability to question story from their

own experiences. From 2010 to 2015, 67 classrooms were assessed though the Bridges programme. The results indicate there were statistically significant increases in the level of the following skills from the autumn to the spring term: creative writing; knowledge of theatre vocabulary; meaning-making; and the ability to use acting/writing to transform stories (Lewis et al. 2010; Ingram 2011; Ingram and Dahmes 2014; Ingram and Streit 2015). The breadth of Bridges' work is impressive, it is worth noting that its methods incorporate adult-student collaboration, largely adult-led.

Third, a study on teachers' perception of stories in Swedish classrooms, found that despite new technological advances teachers believed storytelling was a valuable practice to maintain in the classroom. The study did not interview children directly but focused on the teachers. Teachers recognised benefits in the classroom in terms of language development, such as introducing new words, concepts and working on language structure. Interacting with storytelling appeared to provide children with a source of ideas and creative/critical thinking, which involved narrative interpretation but also the social aspects of story, such as learning how to communicate with others and considering contrasting points of view (Gnjatovic 2015).

The majority of storytelling work is situated within educational and adult-led studies. In most educational/therapeutic contexts, young people are guided to certain concepts rather than empowered to explore their own process of making-meaning, and there is a lack of separation from reading, writing and drama. My criticism of studies in this area is that research has included orality in the form of personal experience and alongside other art forms, art, poetry, reading literature, yet purely oral storytelling studies are noticeably absent. Storytelling or orality is seen as a foundation for literacy: reading, writing and critical thinking. But there is also a body of research that has looked at how storytelling empowers emotional coping mechanisms and behavioural strategies which aim to encourage socially acceptable behaviours to help young people communicate/play with others (Preece and Zhao 2015).

I outline, in this book, an oral storytelling method (the storytelling space) which embraces student-led dialogue. I wanted to tackle the social space which storytelling created, an unexpected outcome was creating a

guideline of the storytelling space for teachers' use. Before proceeding I should clarify that I am a firm believer in storytelling for all ages. Ideally I would have conducted research with groups of people of different ages and abilities. Conducting an ambitious storytelling project of that kind was restricted by access, funds and time. Instead I took three storytellers into three secondary schools and observed the conversations of young people of 12–14 years following an oral storytelling performance (for more detail see The Storytelling Space in Chap. 2).

A Mouse in a Teacup History of Storytelling in British Classrooms

Storytelling is more than an entertaining space restricted to festivals and storytelling cafes; it remains an entertaining way to enhance a broad range of young people's skills within the classroom, including students who dislike to read or have English as a second language. In the UK, storytelling's love affair with education has a turbulent history. From the 1960s–1980s progressive education placed an emphasis on discussion and collaborative meaning-making, which storytelling fit right into. Literature to help teachers to become storytellers was popular during this period. On the drama side, a lot of effort transpired to bring theatre into schools through The Theatre in Education movement (Wooster 2016). With the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1987, education became focused more on standard goals and outcomes (Lowe 2007, p. 104). Below are five examples of the pros and cons of the education structure; of course this is a narrowed down list, and some items could appear under both pros and cons.

National Curriculum Pros

- Provides a teaching framework so that teachers understand what needs to be taught
- Focuses on observable behaviours, tangible objects and objective results
- A focus on providing all students with the same basic skills

- Provides for equality of educational opportunity as students acquire similar knowledge
- Easier to transfer between schools

National Curriculum Cons

- Student achievement is based solely on external tests
- Emphasis on goals, objectives and exams (on memorization and basic comprehension) instead of critical thinking, problem solving, creative skills
- Narrow scope
- Loss of teachable moments and student-teacher interaction
- Usually has a subject matter focus rather than personalised learning for each student

From 1987–1993 the National Oracy Project ran as part of the National Curriculum with an emphasis on talking and listening. As this project aimed, in part, to develop the teaching of oral skills storytelling advice was provided for teachers (Howe and Johnson 1992; Grugeon et al. 2012). If you are interested in this aspect Vivian Paley, James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Andrew Wilkinson and Harold Rosen were instrumental in placing spoken language, play and English skills at the centre of children's learning. It was thanks to their work that speaking and listening are such an integral part of learning to read and write today.

The National Literacy Strategy introduced Literacy Hour into primary schools in the late 1990s (DfEE/QCA 1999). This hour, as part of the English curriculum, required students to work independently in groups. During this period teachers recorded and analysed students speaking and listening, in primary and secondary classrooms. For example Grugeon et al. (2012, p. 10) observed 11 year olds discussing poetry, and also consider *The Articulate Classroom* by Prue Goodwin (2001). Corden (2000, p. 97) advised that:

> For successful group learning to occur, teachers need to consider the relationship between the social, communicative and cognitive aspects of talking and learning and to structure tasks carefully in terms of social interdependence and cognitive demand.

In the 2000s to present, Parker (2015) notes that a generation of teachers are now compliant with a system of ticking off boxes and facts leaving little room for storytelling, and yet creativity remains important. Governmental commitments discuss a focus on creativity throughout all education policy (DCMS 2001). While the post-2000 'creativity' agenda supports creativity, recent educational reforms leave the arts with an uncertain future.

Theresa May has made bold claims that education will meet the needs of all students:

> […] if you live in the Midlands or the north, you have less chance of attending a good school than children in the south. This simply cannot go on. That's why Justine Greening and I have set out a new package of reforms, building on Michael Gove's success, to increase the number of good school places across the country … so there's not just a school place for every child, but a good school place for every child. A school place that suits the skills, interests and abilities of every single pupil. (Conservative Campaign Headquarters 2016)

The Creative Industries Federation (CIF) is a UK-wide organisation representing the arts, creative industries and cultural education. CIFs latest report, *Social Mobility and the Skills Gap: Creative Education Agenda 2016*, warns, 'Far from encouraging the Prime Minister's aims of social mobility, education policy is cutting the life chances of the country's young people as well as narrowing the diversity of the future workforce.' Basically, their worry is that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will be severely affected by a focus on traditional subjects (maths, science) to the exclusion of the creative ones (English, arts, drama).

Their concern is reinforced by a decline of creative subjects being studied by young people at GSCE level. In the UK, there has been a 23% drop in students taking GCSE Drama since 2003, and an 8% fall in drama teachers in schools since 2010. Drama—related to storytelling due to its performance aspects—is under threat in the UK from a curriculum that emphasises attainment over creativity. When we begin to look at the current role of drama and the arts in education there is an obvious paradox in global education practices. In the current UK education system it

has become normalised to focus on assessment and exams as a measure of ability and intelligence: a practice which creates less space for creativity in schools across the country. It is distressing to see drama losing ground as a standalone subject to become part of an already stretched English curriculum. At the same time countries like China and Japan are focusing on the arts as a way of increasing creativity in their schools. In 2014 Chinese schools added supplemental theatre programs to their curriculum. Regularly scoring in the top three countries worldwide for reading, science and maths education why would schools in China want to invest in creative subjects such as drama?

In brief, longstanding critical debates within education include the value of arts and drama to enhance life skills compared to those learnt through continuous assessment. The head teacher of Nanjing Foreign Language School, in China, said that their incorporation of drama was aimed at building self-confidence indicating there is more to education than scoring the highest exam results. Historically, creative practices within the UK have contributed to the country's success in terms of creative thinking, from film and fiction to engineering and enterprise: an economics model called creative enterprise. The UK is under threat of losing its creative edge, although currently second in the world in terms of its creative economy when compared to Asian trading and exporting countries like China (UNESCO and EYGM 2015). Tension exists between time provided for young people's creativity against performance targets worldwide. Yet, by reducing the importance of drama and the arts in schools are we in danger of failing young people by failing to prepare them for creative-based jobs? Even scientists require creative thinking in order to design experiments outside the box and communicate their work. The danger of our contemporary exam culture is that reducing knowledge to a tick list of requirements to get into university does not seem compatible with inspiring engaged and curious students. Higher education teachers are noticing how much students are used to memorising and regurgitating information, and are having to go through a difficult process of relearning to think for themselves when reaching university.

The current state of affairs seems toxic. An exam-based culture which is memorisation-focused is toxic to young people because it does not instil a love of exploration, and does not provide the essential social skills

needed to participate in society. This book has global and transnational relevance as it discusses young people's experiences to make a case for the right of all children to encounter storytelling at, but not restricted to, secondary school level.

Challenging the Current Storytelling Landscape

Contemporary storytelling emerges in many physical and geographical locations: botanical gardens, cafes, castles, libraries, pubs, schools, business organisations, websites, storytelling festivals, youth clubs and various community spaces worldwide. Storytelling is used in a variety of ways: by performers for entertainment; by parents reading to children; in therapeutic settings (Mehl-Madrona 2010; Grove 2015) and educational contexts (Paley 1990; Zipes 1995; Kelly 2011). In addition storytelling involves numerous forms (performance, internet, digital) to a wide age range (youngsters to adults).

In this section I will focus on one main challenge for storytelling today; that is, its commodification by the culture and entertainment industry while young people lack access to storytelling in the classroom. A concept which will be returned to in Chap. 3. Oral performance has survived cuts in the education system and the influx of technology into our lives by commodifying itself. The brand of "the storyteller" has emerged through storytelling festivals and special events. Performers such as Ben Haggarty, Clare Muireann Murphy and Cat Weatherill are regular performers at storytelling and book festivals such as Beyond the Boarder. These storytellers arguably market themselves as *a brand*. A storyteller with a brand has an online presence, and connects themselves to the wider world through words such as 'internationally renowned' or 'respected'. Many are also authors and run storytelling workshops or act as consultants for radio and television.

The greatest downside of branding is not necessarily related to performance but marketing and digital agency trends, the global market, the quest for profit. Advertising and marketing companies have latched on to