



The Storias Project: Developing Young Children's Literacy and Language Skills

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Abstract

The article is a study based on the European Storias project, developed under the Erasmus program, KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices and KA220 - Collaborative partnerships in school education. Five institutions (schools and non-governmental organizations working in the field of education) from Belgium, Greece, Poland, Italy, and Romania are carrying out the initiative. The Storias project's main objective is to help children between the ages of 5 and 10 acquire fundamental reading skills by utilizing writing, storytelling, and creativity in an innovative and inclusive approach. To this end, the project provides teachers with pedagogical resources as well as practical tools centred on literacy, storytelling and inclusion. The article outlines the objectives, methodology and outputs of the project. The project's methodology proposes activities ranging from participatory stories to story boxes that involve multiple experiences of multisensory storytelling, which will allow children to learn through visual, kinesthetic and auditory practices. The article also emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a means of communication and a vital tool in the development of young children's literacy skills in their mother tongue or foreign languages.

Keywords: literacy, inclusion, children, storytelling, participatory stories, story boxes

1. Introduction

In today's world, searching for information, selecting, digesting, evaluating and using it is essential. Literacy includes reading, writing, and reading comprehension skills and is crucial to early academic achievement and later success in life. That is why mastering literacy skills has become so vital for children. On the other hand, mastering literacy skills depends on how effective the teaching of literacy skills is in children's first school years. Teaching literacy requires inclusive pedagogical approaches based on thorough knowledge and understanding of students' diverse needs. In this respect, there is not enough material and training for teachers of children with learning disabilities whose intelligence sometimes helps them find strategies to make their problems detectable only later in life.

2. The Storias project

The Storias project, an Erasmus+ project co-financed by the European Commission, aims to promote an innovative way of teaching which will open the doors to literacy to children through storytelling, creativity and inclusive practices. The Storias project is developed within a partnership of schools and educational institutions from Belgium, France, Italy and Romania. The project addresses children in preschool and primary education (5 - 10 years) and their teachers. It aims to produce creative pedagogical resources enabling teachers to develop children's basic literacy skills and engage them in a wide range of experiences of multisensory storytelling, which allow children to learn through visual, kinesthetic and auditory practices. The main results are storyboxes, participatory stories, a pedagogical guide, a creation manual and an implementation guide.



2.1 Storyboxes

The Storyboxes section comprises ready-to-use kits designed to engage and fire children's imagination and creativity in partners' languages in an inclusive format. The method is innovative for reasons including the use of storytelling to teach specific literacy skills and the development of story boxes with guidelines for teachers on inclusive practices. Storytelling is something the children are used to, so it makes them feel secure. The strategy helps teachers fulfil the needs of the students with learning disabilities by offering inclusive strategies. It also increases children's confidence in their skills to engage in the activities [1,2].

The Storiaskits contain a selection of 24 tales that not only represent the traditions of the contributing nations but also those of "all European countries." The partners agreed on 12 common European tales, including 12 national tales centred on historical figures and 12 myths, legends, and fables. Three categories (including eight stories each and corresponding to age ranges and, thus, learning challenges) represent the 24 Storias kits. These stories are told using a variety of storytelling techniques, including puppet shows, silent book theatre and kamishibai, depending on the age of the children.

Every Storiaskit comes with a basic kit that is the same for everyone: the Activity book with the selected story, handwriting "exercises" for the child and writing techniques for the teacher to help all children feel more confident in their writing skills and support students with learning disabilities. The Activity Book is the foundation for connecting writing, reading and storytelling. Along with the stories, the Storiaskits include a variety of tools to help teachers engage their children. Among the tools are puppets, dolls, story cut-outs, story cards, story muppets, story tapestry, music and video tools, a story basket with useful material (soft toys, farm zoo animals, lego figures, etc.), interactive games, quizzes, puzzles, and links to sound generators.

A storybox's main goal is to give children interactive literacy experiences so they can learn new things, develop new ideas, and comprehend the world around them better. The storybox invites children to explore the narrative while also letting them interact with letters, words, cutouts and images so they can add to the narrative or come up with their own. Children explore the storybox by engaging in a variety of inclusive activities focusing on reading, writing, sketching, and using manual abilities, which promotes brain activity. They gain knowledge of how things link and give words meaning thanks to the practical experiences; for all children, learning to read and write, literacy, originates from practical experiences.

Young children experience the story and use the story box through a series of workshops. This type of workshop has a stimulating effect for children's manual dexterity (the child has to cut out, glue, etc) and memory processes of storing and retrieving information.

2.1 Participatory stories

Participatory stories combine storytelling, reading and performances to allow children to create their own stories in time. This process also helps children develop their literacy skills in a fun storytelling environment, which is the best way to boost motivation [3]. The partnership decided to produce 24 Participatory Stories (tales, myths, legends and stories about historical figures) to foster language development and written literacy in a narrative setting. The pre-primary and primary instructors can use this output to help the children improve their written literacy abilities.

This approach enables all children to participate fully in the storytelling activities, even those with learning disabilities. The idea of "telling stories" is often used in teaching and learning but it typically has to do with improving students' listening abilities or helping them understand morals and arguments. The term "participatory storytelling" refers to a more interactive, student-centred method of delivering stories in which children take on the role of active players rather than passive listeners as they "develop" the story over time.

The stories, divided according to three age groups, cover many technical and stylistic aspects of literacy, including vocabulary (adjectives, nouns, prepositions, etc.), grammar (conjugations, tenses, pronouns, etc.), spelling, punctuation, sentence structure (simple, compound, complex), and type (affirmative, interrogative, negative, imperative, exclamatory), as well as story elements (setting, plot, conflict, resolution). A recording of each participation narrative in the partnership languages is included with the written text of the stories so that children may listen to them at home.

The participatory stories can serve as a guide for parents and teachers to increase the level of participation in the Storiakit: after reading or listening to the story once (through the Storiakit), adults



and children can retell it together by acting out one episode of the story each, turning the story into a play in which every child plays a part, or adapting the story into a Muppet show (having every child

controlling a muppet). Setting the scene with background music, having students role-play (wear costumes/change their voices), allowing all students to have their voices heard to determine the course of a story, and adding elements to the stories can make the participatory stories more inclusive to all members of the target group.

Children's involvement in the participatory stories is unparalleled. Children have to alter the ending, offer a different resolution or conclusion, update character names, decide which characters are good or bad, modify personality traits or abilities, introduce new characters to the story, and use alternative plotlines using the "what if..." storytelling technique. That is why participatory stories have fixed elements for the children to follow and flexible elements for the children to complete or create. Thus, all stories comprise an introduction and the main body text but they also contain elements left at the children's choice: an unclear ending to the story, no clear-cut approach for the characters to handle things, one of the events in the story is missing, etc. Children's creativity is fully exploited by choosing which words are appropriate when summarising the story, deciding how and where to put the elements from the Storyskits in the story they are working on, and determining the evolution and outcome of each story.

Children are encouraged to "rewrite" the story through participation stories by recreating the characters and the plot in their own unique and personal ways. This occurs as the story develops through co-creation or enriching activities. Participatory stories help children further develop their literacy skills. Tasks get more complex depending on the children's age. Thus, by adding adjectives that describe the people or the settings, colours and feelings, young children can expand the basic text and make it more complex until they construct a full story. Participatory stories designed for older students (ages 9–10) target more advanced writing skills and can therefore include exercises such as identifying synonyms and antonyms, using various types of adjectives, verbs and adverbs, adding various other story elements so the children can expand their vocabulary, diversify sentence structure and have more freedom to modify the story as they see fit.

2.1 Further development

The future development of the project focuses on providing teachers with suitable materials and training them to develop children's literacy. Thus, the pedagogical guide trains teachers to adapt their lessons and use the new method based on creativity and storytelling in their classes. The guide covers topics from storytelling to literacy, pedagogical practices and comes with a comprehensive booklet on teaching literacy based on inclusive principles. The Manual provides teachers with useful instructions on how to develop their own story boxes, engage children in participatory stories and look for or create resources tailored to their children's needs. The implementation guide provides teachers with best practice examples to follow and testimonials of teachers who participated in the piloting of the produced learning materials. All the project's outputs will be piloted in schools and modified to meet the needs of teachers and children.

3. Conclusions

The project's goal is to create innovative teaching tools that will help teachers improve their students' fundamental literacy abilities and involve them in a variety of multisensory storytelling activities. The method's use of storytelling to teach particular literacy skills and the creation of story boxes with instructions on inclusive teaching techniques for educators are innovative. The method relies on a hands-on self-created approach to literacy, which enhances creativity and imagination and is key to children's cognitive development, especially for those with special needs.

The feedback we got was positive. The teachers we interviewed appreciated the activities as "innovative and fun". They also supported the use of stories that "usually contribute to children's moral development" to help them with their reading and writing skills. The new usage of storytelling creates a whole new setup and experience and has a great potential for helping children tune their manual dexterity. The Activity Book offers beneficial support for students to start thinking about the story, concentrate on the story and the upcoming task and stay engaged. The Activity book encourages children to practice and improve their manual skills, which are important while doing later stages of participatory storytelling with storyboxes. This then gives children the confidence to act and start using their abilities.



References

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