

Case Study: Laura Bennett, Primary School Librarian, Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service

Wiggy Storytimes at Seven Mills Primary School

Laura Bennett works for Tower Hamlets Schools Library Services who offer primary schools access to a professional librarian on a part-time basis. Laura works in five primary schools a week including Seven Mills. Her aim was not so much a project with a specific goal in mind, rather a general feeling.

Seven Mills is her heaviest day; she sees all eight classes (including Nursery) for a half hour storytime and book swap. This comes to 25 stories, at least, per year, per year group, which sounds fine until you start your second year at the school. And then a third. Laura is now finishing her fourth year at Seven Mills, by which point she will have told her Y6 class at least 100 stories since she first started as their librarian. More really, if you consider that when they were in KS1 she could usually squeeze in two stories per session. Add in another four schools on top of Seven Mills and you will understand why Laura's best friend is the Excel spreadsheet – how else would she ever keep track of what she's read or told to whom?!

So, with all these schools and children how does she keep herself from going mad and, more importantly, with so many stories to tell and children to see, how does she stop library sessions, particularly at Seven Mills, falling into a dull routine? How does she keep up the momentum, keep the children guessing, keep them interested in the library, stories and information when the temptation with so many storytimes to plan is to fall back on the nice, safe but ultimately repetitive favourite of just reading aloud from a book?

Another point Laura was keen to address was diversity. To her surprise, for children born into such a multicultural and diverse city as London, the children at Seven Mills had surprisingly narrow views of the world. She heard children make sweeping racial and religious statements, and express utter astonishment that a white person is anything other than Christian or that a mixed race child isn't Asian even though *'she's brown'*.

The look on one class's faces when their formerly normal 'White British' librarian suddenly broke out into German gobbledegook and explained that was where her family actually came from was a quick lesson in how narrowly categorised the children's views were. Laura wondered if she could use storytelling to open up the children's views a little bit (as well as stop herself becoming an object of curiosity!).

So, this was the project: keep library sessions from being repetitive, from being passive, make them creative and new, whilst also exposing the children to new cultures and stories they'd never encountered before. And so a long and occasionally painful exploration of performance storytelling was begun.

Alongside new information skills sessions to help the children get more out of their library, Laura researched, planned and designed new and exciting storytimes. She learnt new techniques for oral storytelling and started acting out the story in front of the children, using the computer to give sound effects, and adding props and hand actions for colour. She's now done this for every class from Nursery all the way up to Year 6 and, although has had several damp squibs, is very pleased to say that she now gets children looking excited rather than bemused. She has told stories from Norse legends, the Arabian Nights, Irish legends, German and even Japanese fairy tales - with nothing more than the odd prop but more often than not with just her hands - and all of them linked back to a book or books the children can borrow from the library. She is very pleased to say that she's yet to tell a story which has not had at least one child asking her where they can read more. The storytimes that have gone down the best though, that are still begged and pleaded for and talked about even several years later, are her Wiggy storytimes.

Taking inspiration from a storytelling session at the British Museum with the Crick Crack Club, Laura started getting the children to act out a story as she told it, decking them out in long hairy wigs and silly apron outfits, and

she's not exaggerating when she says the children ADORE it. One particularly memorable story was the story of How Thor Lost his Hammer, which saw 4 children in long wigs acting out Loki's treacherous bargains and Thor's dressing as a lady to get his beloved hammer back. If you're unfamiliar with the story it does at one point involve Thor and a heavily enamoured Frost Giant almost having to kiss, which made the two boys in question rather worried but sent their class, TA and teacher into gales of laughter! The film footage of this story is now apparently very closely guarded on the school's servers and the class in question has been notably fond of Norse myths ever since.

The result of all of these oral storytimes is that library sessions are not only livelier than they were before but children are far more likely to be engaged in the sessions themselves. They'll approach Laura whenever they see her about anything book-related and are now even starting to suggest stories for her to tell! Borrowing figures have not changed but what has changed is that children are more likely to read the books they're taking out and are quicker to ask their librarian for anything new that they can think of. They're also more likely to try a book they never would have considered before, such as a book about Norse Myths, simply because their classmates have acted it out in front of them. It's not just the children who are more engaged with the library either. Through more creative storytelling Laura has become more than just a part-time member of staff, often overlooked – teachers and TAs will stop and talk to her, and it's been made very clear that she is considered a full staff member. Staff will make more complicated and regular requests of the library and are frequently happy to engage in joint projects with Laura. It's amazing the difference a few stories can make but the difference at Seven Mills has been profound. It's not been about changing reading ability but about changing reading attitude and in this case it's worked better than Laura anticipated or could have imagined, and she is now practicing this in her other four schools as well.

Tips:

- The biggest piece of advice is that not all stories will work. Read widely across lots of different cultures and find the stories that work best for you to tell yourself. You'll find your storytelling style along the way.
- You will get it wrong, sorry! Stories become easier to tell with practice, which means the first few tellings will involve a fair bit of working out what doesn't work. The rewarding bit though is looking back a year later and realising how many stories you now have under your belt that you can just pull out when you need to.
- Watch others. Laura learnt a lot about storytelling just by watching professionals on YouTube or at cultural institutions. Working in London she was lucky enough to see the Crick Crack Club live at the British Museum on a number of occasions and although the stories were not suitable for her classes she learnt a lot about storytelling just by watching their amazing storytellers and the different techniques they use.
- And a fourth one – you know it's going well when the children want to know more about the stories you've just told. Tell them the history of the story, the origins, and always but always make sure you have a few books from that culture for them to take home. You will definitely be asked about them so make sure there's something for the children to take home and explore whilst the story time is fresh in their memory.