

Tales From the Other Side

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An account of children from a special and a mainstream school, sharing personal anecdotes, and the impact this had on their language and social skills, and attitude towards disability.

Let me share a story with you. It's a true story, about eight days I spent in two schools. One is a primary special school for children with severe learning disabilities, and the other is a mainstream primary school for children aged between four and 12 years of age. Both are in the outer-London borough of Harrow. The schools are co-located: the special school was literally built onto the side of the primary school. The main characters in this story are seven children, who are pupils from both schools, and me.

But before we start we ought to agree what a story is, and understand what type of story this one is. A story is an account of experience, fictional or real, which is told to one or more people. A story is always told for a social purpose, such as entertainment, moral instruction, shock, sympathy, or persuasion. A story is not the same as a report or an account. A story has a strong emotional component, and often reflects a personal point of view. There are two broad categories of story: fictional (traditional tales or authored written tales), and personal (anecdotal accounts shared in conversation). Personal stories, or anecdotes, are often told collaboratively, with the audience joining in or following on with stories of their own. You could call the process *storysharing*, to distinguish it from *storytelling*.

This is a personal story, reflecting my point of view. It is about a project that tried to bring children in two schools together, by sharing their own personal stories, in the hope that this would influence the way that the adults teach them.

Dr. Nicola Grove, a specialist in using storytelling to develop communication in children and adults, had completed a piece of action research in two co-located schools in Somerset. Along with members of 'The Unlimited Company of Storytellers', a training project in community storytelling for people with learning disabilities, Nicola had been investigating the possibility that if children with and without learning disabilities shared stories with each other, perhaps this could build a better understanding of each other, and forge friendships. Working together on a project like this had also supported the process of collaboration between the staffs of both schools.

The head of Woodlands, the special school in Harrow, and the acting head of its co-located primary school, Little Stanmore First & Middle School, were keen to develop a project to bring the children and staff of both schools closer together. The co-ordinator of Senjit at the Institute of Education, University of London, contacted Nicola Grove, and suggested she replicate her work from Somerset in the Harrow schools. After some preliminary work with both sets of school staff, Nicola contacted me, and asked me to lead the project. I readily agreed, as I have a background in Speech and Language Therapy, teaching in mainstream and special schools, and at the time was working as a professional storyteller.

The children from both schools are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and the majority are from families where English is the second language. Little Stanmore is a well-established school, though the school population has changed significantly

in the past 20 years, reflecting the change in local population that now includes many more families from many different countries. Woodlands had been built within the past few years, and at the time our project took place the staff in both schools were still in the process of learning to work effectively together.

Nicola Grove had already led a joint training day for the staff from both schools, discussing oral storytelling and outlining the aims and *modus operandi* of the project. Small groups of children from Years 5, 6 and 7 in Little Stanmore were chosen to work with children of similar ages from Woodlands, with the idea that pairs of children would swap stories with each other. These sessions would last about 30 minutes, and would then be followed by larger groups of children from Little Stanmore sharing a story experience (led by me) with a whole class from Woodlands. Later in each day I would visit the classes in Little Stanmore, and encourage the children to share their own personal stories. A special area for sharing stories in groups, with a decorated gazebo, rugs, small chairs and cushions was set up in the Woodlands foyer.

So far, so good. Now this is where my story really takes off, so to speak. I had assumed that the children from Woodlands, most of whom had either no verbal communication or very limited expressive language, would be supported by as many aids as we could find: pictures, information technology, PowerPoint etc. What I hadn't fully grasped was that Nicola was very insistent that the children were to use as few props and aids as possible when telling their stories. In fact props were to be avoided whenever possible. This I had not been expecting! How were the children to communicate with each other? How was I going to facilitate effective communication? Suddenly I didn't feel quite so confident. In fact I felt very anxious.

But I needn't have worried. Why? Because a few weeks previously, Ros, one of the Teaching Assistants at Woodlands, had fallen in the local swimming pool, in front of the children, with all her clothes on, and had to be rescued by a lifeguard. Then on the way back from the pool the bus broke down a few metres from the school gate, and the children had to walk into school. These events, (which incidentally had been staged by the school staff and the bus driver) had had a major impact on the children who were involved in them. Such was the impact of these shared experiences that the children wanted to hear about and re-enact them again, and again, and again.

And this was our entry point and our foundation for working together: the children now had stories that they were able share with each other, supported by the adults. They had shared powerful experiences that meant something to them and had gripped them emotionally. Surely they must have felt shocked by seeing their Teaching Assistant slip and fall in the swimming pool? Or did they secretly feel it was hilarious? I couldn't imagine what it must have felt like. I wished I had been there! So when they met the children from Little Stanmore, they had an exciting story to share.

Now let's introduce the children who will feature in this story. From Woodlands they were Ashraf, Sumeet, Dilip and Leila. Ashraf communicated verbally, though found it helpful to use MAKATON signing, as her speech could seem unclear to unfamiliar listeners. Sumeet had some expressive language, but was very difficult to understand, though in our third session Sumeet began to use a communication aid that greatly increased his ability to express himself. Dilip used mainly MAKATON to communicate, and Leila had no effective verbal communication, and found it very difficult to concentrate during our initial sessions. From Little Stanmore we had Gabriela, Amina, and Richard. When Gabriela had arrived with her family from Romania three years previously she had no English, but was now a fluent English and Romanian speaker. Amina's family are from Somalia, but Amina was born in

Italy. She was fluent in Somali and English, and could remember some Italian. Richard's family are from the UK, and he speaks only English.

Prior to the children working together, I had done some preparation. I had spoken to Gabriela, Amina and Richard about the type of stories they might like to tell, and how they could tell them. Perhaps a story about an accident they had had? We talked about how they might want to use gesture or a few basic MAKATON signs while telling their stories. And we discussed how we could help the Woodlands children tell their stories: perhaps by asking some simple questions, like 'What happened next?' or 'How did you feel?' I also spoke to the Woodlands staff who were going to support their pupils tell their stories: helping them by rehearsing the story about when Ros fell in the swimming pool.

And then we were off. The first session was inevitably a little 'staged', as the adults felt inclined to give the children a lot of support and verbal prompts. We helped Sumeet, Dilip and Ashraf tell their swimming pool story, and encouraged Leila to sit still, and supported them to listen to Richard, Amina and Gabriela recount their stories. However from the beginning there was something happening that you can't really quantify, but looking back on it you might describe as a certain 'chemistry' developing between the children. Each group was fascinated by the other. The Woodlands children clearly enjoyed just sitting with children from Little Stanmore, and the Little Stanmore children spoke afterwards in great detail about the children they had been paired with: whether they were good listeners, how they had responded to the stories, and what they could do to improve their telling next time.

During the following weeks the sessions became more and more animated. I still continued to prepare the Little Stanmore children, but this preparation often took only a few minutes: checking that they actually had prepared a story, and introducing a few signs. I reminded them about being responsive listeners by looking at the child telling the story, and asking key questions. But that really was the extent of my involvement. By the third session Richard, Amina and Gabriela were confident enough to interact with the Woodlands children, and we adults were confident enough to back off and allow the children to communicate with each other. Then Sumeet got his communication aid. And then the incident with the dog happened.

Sumeet's life as a communicator changed dramatically when he began to use an electronic communication aid. With adult support he was able to choose picture symbols from a range of word banks. When he touched a picture on the screen, a synthesised voice would say the word. This coincided with a visit to the school by Leila's dog, Charlie. The class went down to the library one morning and were very surprised when they heard a dog barking behind a screen. When the screen was pulled back out came Charlie, along with Leila's mum. This incident quickly became a story that all the children could share: within the class and during our shared story sessions. In our session immediately after the dog incident, it was very noticeable that Leila was much more relaxed, and particularly when she was able to show some photos of Charlie. She was, after all, the expert when it came to knowing about her family's dog. Sumeet was able to give a sequenced account of what happened (including 'woof woof' noises), and Dilip used the signs for 'dog' and 'scared' repeatedly. Ashraf was able to respond to Gabriela's question about how she felt: "I was so scared. My hands was shaking."

The dog in the library incident gave Richard the opportunity to respond with the story he had been practicing all week: about when his pet rabbit escaped and he found it behind the shed. He had decided to bring along a cardboard box as a prop (props were occasionally allowed.) So convincing was Richard's story that Dilip actually believed that there was a rabbit inside the box!

There is a lot more that could be told about this story: how the various class teachers responded, what influence participating in the project has had on their teaching, and how Ashraf came to have such a large cut on her nose.

But we ought to finish with some thoughts from the children from Little Stanmore Middle School:

We communicated with children with disabilities and it makes them feel normal. They understand what we do in real life. They are part of us. They are not different from us. People shouldn't judge them. They are in wheelchairs and some of them can't talk. Inside (themselves) they probably want to play.

(Next time) we will take more control. They look at Michael, but they pay more attention to us.

And as Ashraf once said, after a particularly detailed telling of the tale about when she fell over in the playground: "That's my story. I'm finished now"

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The storysharing project based in two Harrow schools was co-funded by Senjit, Institute of Education, University of London.

For a detailed account of this project, see:

Peacey, L (2009) *A storytelling project in two sets of co-located mainstream and special schools in Country and City*. Published by Senjit, Institute of Education, University of London.

'The Big Book of Storysharing' by Nicola Grove, is also published by Senjit.