

Embracing the Use of Stories to Improve Student Achievement and Student Character

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Abstract

There seems to be a necessity in many schools these days to find learning strategies that will help improve student achievement. In the mission statement of many schools is also an expression of a desire to form the character of students. In my own journey through the MEd program, I have been looking for strategies to improve student achievement and character. My claim in this paper is that stories are a learning strategy that can help improve student achievement and student character. I claim that stories help build relationships, engage the imagination and emotion of students and build character. I give various examples and reasons for why stories help build relationships, engage the imagination and build character through the literature review. I also make the case, through the literature review, that building positive relationships and engaging students will help improve student achievement. The application of this paper shares my experience as a student where I was able to understand abstract concepts, build relationships and gain interest in a subject through the power of stories. I also share my experiences as a teacher with facilitating story sharing and how this helped build positive and deeper relationships in the classroom. Finally, I share particular examples of stories and their application to various subjects in the Grade 5 curriculum. This paper contributes to the literature about learning strategies that help build relationships, engage students and form character. I hope that curriculum committees see the importance of stories when designing curriculum. More importantly, I hope this paper encourages discussion about learning strategies that build relationships, engage the heart and mind of students and form the character of students.

Chapter One: Introduction

In the introduction, I discuss my developing interest in storytelling and how it relates to learning experiences in the M.Ed. program. I describe the significance of storytelling as a learning strategy in the wider context of teachers and parents that will use it. I present the main argument of this paper which contains my claim and supporting reasons. Finally, I describe the organization of this paper and how it will flow.

Developing Interest In Storytelling

In my elementary studies in an Indian school system, there was an emphasis on memorization and rote learning and I did not feel engaged in the learning. This contrasted sharply with my experience as a university student. I was particularly intrigued when one of my professors narrated personal stories to explain abstract concepts. The stories were related to the abstract concepts that we were covering and they were very interesting. It gave me an appreciation for the topics, stirred my imagination and emotions and they also helped me develop a deeper bond with the professor. It made me curious about the power of stories since I myself was so engaged during the narration of them.

As a teacher, I have had the pleasure of narrating many different stories to my students. Visually, I notice that their heads perk up, their eyes lighten up and many students seem to participate in questions asked about the story. Students then learn to extend the story and write different endings with different characters. I hear them talking about it in other classes and recess. We have done some fun showcases around the stories where students showcase their understanding of the story in a variety of different ways like constructing artifacts, singing, dancing and drawing. I understood as a teacher that stories have an interesting way of engaging students, helping them learn and stirring their imagination and emotions.

I pursued my M.Ed. program with the intention of choosing courses that would help me support the kids I teach better. I wanted to have the expertise, knowledge and skills to better serve the students I teach. There were a number of mandatory courses I took that helped me broaden my horizons about education and leadership like research methods, diversity, curriculum planning, philosophy & history of education, educational leadership. The electives that I choose are the courses that helped me develop the skills to serve the students I teach which include counselling. I learned to be more aware about their needs through the course on assessment in counselling. However, it is the course about inquiry learning that taught me how to plan and structure my units in a way where there is greater engagement and relevance in the learning. It made me curious about learning strategies that could keep students engaged. Through this course I was introduced to various tools to engage students and one of the tools I was introduced to was stories. As I continued to pursue courses in the M.Ed., I began to self-reflect more on some of my biggest desires about education. It was through completing the Philosophy of Education course that I realized that I have a desire to form kids to be virtuous leaders. This made me curious about the power of stories as a learning strategy to shape character and develop virtues in addition to being a learning strategy to engage students for academic achievement.

Significance of Stories

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argue that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. We make sense of our experiences through stories and we like to listen to other people's stories. It is the way we are built and the way we bond with one another.

We all know students that are engaged in learning with their heart and mind are more focused and tend to learn more. So the question is what learning strategy could there be that will

engage students' hearts and minds? Educational stakeholders would be interested in a learning strategy like the use of stories that builds relationships, sparks the imagination and emotions and builds character.

The story form brings out the emotional force in a content and tells us how to feel about certain content (Egan & Judson, 2016). In doing so, the story ties our emotions and intellect with the content. This definitely impacts teachers who decide on how to teach content in various aspects of the curriculum. A story could be tied to many different areas of the curriculum to engage students both emotionally and intellectually.

Presenting the Argument

In this article, I claim that stories, as a learning strategy, improves student achievement and student character development. The primary reason stories are an excellent learning strategy is because stories are relational. Rhodes (2019) shares more about how personal stories can be engaging when he discusses how stories can be powerful tools that, when utilized effectively, help forge and enhance relationships. When students are in a proper relationship with us, teachers can be a powerful force towards helping students build good habits and achieving to the best of their ability. Secondly, relevant story telling keeps students engaged emotionally and intellectually. Egan and Judson (2016) claim that stories “engage human minds by tying up our emotions and imaginations with their content” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p.19). You can see kids' eyes lighten up and you can notice them responding as they are engaged with their intellect and emotions in the storytelling process. Stories have a way to help students make connections to what they know and expand their horizons to new dimensions. Finally, stories can be used as a learning strategy to develop character. James et al. (2015) note that Jesus engaged people's attention through the use of narratives. Jesus and his followers were successful in converting so

many people to Christianity and, in doing so, shaping their character, so we should pay attention to his methods. By using relevant narratives, we can keep students emotionally and intellectually engaged, to achieve to the best of their ability and to hone their character.

Organization of Paper

In this paper I argue that stories as a learning strategy helps improve student achievement and student character development. This paper begins by discussing how stories are relational. Stories are the way we are built and it helps us connect with others better. The connection between relational stories and student achievement is made. Secondly, stories engage the imagination and emotions. This will be demonstrated through the power of the story form, and by demonstrating how stories can be used to make connections to topics in the curriculum. Finally, a case is made about how stories can be used for character development. The next chapter of this paper will look at personal experiences of story as a student and a teacher. I will also discuss particular applications of stories to the Grade 5 curriculum. In my conclusion, I will summarize the key learnings of this paper and the implications of my research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The next chapter will discuss the evidence for the claim that stories improve student achievement and student character. The primary reason identified is that stories help develop positive relationships between the student and the teacher and between students. These positive relationships lead to improved student achievement. The literature about other learning strategies that help improve student achievement is also reviewed. Finally, the literature for other strategies, besides stories, to help improve relationships is also discussed.

The second reason identified is that stories engage the imagination and emotions. Evidence for the link between engagement and student achievement is identified. The literature for other forms of engagement besides stories is reviewed. The evidence for the relationship between engagement and student achievement is also identified.

The third reason has more to do with how stories help with character development. Evidence for how stories help instill certain values and build empathy is discussed. Finally, the literature for other learning strategies to be used to build character is also discussed.

Stories are Relational

Before I can discuss how stories can help deepen relationships, I have to discuss how stories are a natural part of how we organize and make sense of life experiences. Next, the evidence for stories deepening relationships is reviewed. The evidence for the link between positive relationships and student achievement is reviewed. Finally, the evidence for other learning strategies, besides stories, to build relationships is reviewed.

Leading Storied Lives

The way we as individuals organize our life experiences as stories and draw meaning from them, can be a great way to build relationships between students and the teacher. Stories are

the form through which we organize and make sense of our life experiences (Rhodes, 2019). It is important that these stories be heard in the classroom. A teacher should facilitate a positive and safe environment so that students have an opportunity to share stories and the teacher also has the opportunity to share stories. Rhodes (2019) discusses how he has seen and heard the power of stories by participating in circles where personal stories are shared. By hearing students' unique and powerful stories, teachers and other students can get an understanding of students' culture, neighborhood and hence teachers can get a better sense of how students are making meaning of their world (Rhodes, 2019). Such sharing helps build peer to peer relationships and teacher to student relationships (Rhodes, 2019).

Deepening Classroom Relationships

Stories provide a way for teachers to build connection, rapport and deepen relationships. For classes, where teachers have a strong pedagogical knowledge but they want to create a classroom climate where students are receptive to learning, they should consider telling stories to connect with students better (Rhodes, 2019). Fleming (2001) discusses how this is common in the business world as a leadership strategy, as where CEO's of fortune 500 companies use narration as a strategy to motivate and increase work productivity. Using this knowledge as a background, Rhodes (2019) concludes that stories provide a way for voices to be heard and experiences to be shared. When students' voices are heard, they feel like they belong, a deeper connection is established and they feel loved and cared for, which is a great climate to learn better.

Studies have shown the difference between oral storytelling and story reading. Oral storytelling refers to the relation of a story using elements like pitch, inflection and also non-verbal language like gesture, pause, physical expression. The storyteller is attuned and responsive to the audience (Hibbin, 2016). The oral form has been found to be a more interactive

and personal experience (Aina, 1999; Ellis, 1997; Malo & Bullard, 2000). For example, students realize that characters in stories have certain consistent characteristics and they might be more drawn or connected to certain characters in a story based on their personal experience (Malo & Bullard, 2000).

Positive Relationships and Achievement

In a study involving undergraduate tourism and hospitality students, studies have shown that positive affectivity and student engagement has improved student achievement (Uludag, 2016). Positive affectivity “reflects the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert” (Watson et al., 1988, p. 1063). These feelings of enthusiasm, activeness and alertness seem to happen in the climate of a deep and positive relationship. Hence, we can make the case that positive relationships lead to positive feelings which improve student achievement. Besides positive relationships, achievement is also related to instructional elements like social interaction, meaningful learning, presentation quality, attendance, self-regulation, academic goal setting, time and study management and peer learning (Schneider & Preckel, 2017). Another study reviewed saw the relationship between positive teacher student relationship and an improvement in Math achievement. This was primarily due to the positive relationship between the teacher and student having an effect on reducing Math anxiety and hence improving achievement in Math (Semeraro et al., 2020).

Other Learning Strategies to Build Relationships

Besides stories, another learning strategy that could be used to build relationships in primary students is art therapy. The specific aspects of art therapy that were considered include art therapy being a safe place, learning coping strategies, expressing thinking and talking in art, making art and the art being social and fun (McDonald & Holtum, 2020). In a book about the

different responsibilities of a teacher, Hedges & Ohio State University (2000) discusses the need to design activities that are motivational to build teacher and student relationships. This would include activities that allow students to release suppressed energy and emotions and activities that allow students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of different ways (Hedges et. al, 2000). Further strategies to develop teacher student relationships include involving students in the lesson through the use of discussions, discovery approaches, individual assignments and group planning (Hedges et. al, 2000).

Stories Engage Imagination and Emotions

In the section below evidence is provided about why stories engage the imagination and emotions. This includes the power of the story form and how stories help make connections. The relationship between engagement and student achievement is discussed. Finally, the evidence for other ways to engage students besides stories, is also discussed.

The Power of the Story Form

We now turn to how stories are formed to engage the imagination and emotions. Egan & Judson (2016) have written a book called “Imagination and the Engaged Learner Cognitive tools for the classroom” and one of the tools mentioned are stories. Stories are “forms of language that tell us how to feel about their content” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 19). Through the use of stories and related questions, teachers can direct and control how students feel about certain content. The authors go on to say that the story form “brings about the emotional meaning of the elements it contains” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 20). Teachers now have a powerful way to bring out meaning in content, especially if a concept is abstract and it needs some context. A teacher can start their planning of a topic by asking themselves “What is the story on this topic?” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 20). By asking this question, teachers can think of meaningful questions and

activities that shape topics that uniquely bring out their emotional meaning. Stories are different from an instructional text that would convey or describe information. By adding a story around an instructional text, they shape their content so that we feel good or bad, joyful or sorrowful as we receive the information (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 20).

Stories are something that are part of the human experience. We narrate different experiences in our lives as stories. We see our careers as stories. We listen to news events and documentaries as stories (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 21). They essentially represent a basic way of organizing the human experience (Snyder, 2007, p. 67). Paradise (2020) in an article about the power of re-telling the salvation story discusses how listening and telling a story has a lot of power. Paradise (2020) discusses how we are influenced by other people's stories. As children, when we hear a story from an adult, we grow in understanding of our own self-worth and identity. We learn that we are worth spending time for (Paradise, 2020). At the end of a lesson, where the teacher has intentionally begun the lesson planning process by identifying the story on the topic, the student should feel something about that topic (Egan & Judson, 2016). Egan and Judson (2016) also offer a bright perspective for educators when he discusses how "thinking about lessons and units of study as good stories to tell, rather than simply as sets of objectives to attain, can help bring some extra energy and interest into teaching and learning" (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 25).

Storytelling and Making Connections

Literature invites a reaction and response. Schulz & North Dakota Univ. (1992) in his work about reading stories and making connections across the curriculum discusses the importance of inviting a response to literature and making connections between stories read and the curriculum. Schultz et. al (1992) gives an example of a teacher who used properly

constructed questions, together with activities, to make connections to different areas of the curriculum. Though the findings of this study are not presented, Schulz et al. (1992) presents many examples of how a story can be connected to other areas of the curriculum. Literature is not purely to be taught for comprehension, reading skills, to understand plot and the summary of a story (Schulz et al., 1992). By inviting this reaction and response, students bring and take meaning from stories (Schulz et al., 1992). In what Schulz et al. (1992) refer to as “aesthetic reading” of a story, as opposed to reading just for comprehension, readers “select out ideas, sensations, feelings, and images from their past linguistic, literary, and life experiences and synthesize them into a new experience” (Schulz et al., 1992, p. 2). In order to invite deeper thinking and make connections, teachers need to ask questions about interesting facts or details about a text, feelings that were aroused, or any connections to other life experiences or other stories. By sharing this in a class discussion, students can learn from the perspectives of others and reflect on their own responses to the story (Schulz et al., 1992). The authors also suggest an order to the meaningful reading of stories, where the first stage is reading, then interpretation and then criticism (Schulz et al., 1992). Students can then demonstrate what they understand about a story through the use of art, drama and poetry. Paley(2001) spent her career demonstrating the power of story as a teaching tool. In her work she discussed how by acting and interacting with a story, students showed engagement in the pedagogy of the classroom (Paley, 2001). Through artistic expression, students can convey their meaning and feelings about a particular story (Schulz et al., 1992). Teachers can also look for ways that a story is related to other parts of the curriculum. Schulz et al. (1992) discusses an example of how a teacher does this for a story about a girl suffering and dying from the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, Japan. The teacher brings in connections to Science where students study the effects of radiation and about cancer.

Students learn to make origami in art. They learn about sumo wrestling in PE. They learn about mapping skills and the location of different cities in Japan in Socials. In Math students can learn to graph the populations and living space in Japan to learn about the differences between Japan and their own country. The interconnectedness of different subjects through the same story can bring in a lot of interest and meaning for the students as they discover the interconnectedness of life (Schulz et al., 1992).

Overall, we can see that teachers should use stories to invite a response and not just teach stories for comprehension. Stories have meaning when we discuss their interpretation and also open them up for criticism. The demonstration of what students understand in a story can find meaningful expression in a variety of forms which might include art, poetry or drama. Finally, teachers can bring in aspects of a story to many different subjects in the curriculum so that students can see the interconnectedness of various subjects in the curriculum.

Engagement and student achievement

Reviewing the literature for this, a book by City(2009), which primarily talks about a model for teacher collaboration and sharing, the authors shows how “student engagement is vital to ensuring student learning and achievement” (City, 2009). During this collaboration and sharing, they observe, discuss and analyze learning and teaching. One of the observations they make is about how student engagement is vital to student achievement. Another more recent study reviewed expresses the relationship between student engagement and achievement more directly by expressing that student engagement is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Mendoza, 2020). The authors of this study primarily discussed how student engagement is contagious and if some students are engaged this could positively impact other students and hence improve their achievement.

Other Forms of Engagement

Besides stories, it is important to look at what the literature says are other forms of engagement for students. The literature shows that inquiry based activities and hands on activities, particularly that lead to mastery of a subject show greater levels of engagement, particularly in Science classes (Uçar & Sangar, 2017). Other studies concur with this and show that active learning strategies lead to higher levels of engagement in students (Jahnke et al., 2020). In this case active learning strategies refer to activities where students are actively involved in the learning as opposed to teacher centric activities.

Stories Develop Character

Another reason stories are a useful learning strategy, particularly in the elementary classroom is because they help form and shape character. In this section, the literature for how stories can be used to develop values will be reviewed. The literature will also be reviewed for how stories help develop empathy. Finally, the literature will be reviewed for other strategies, besides stories to help shape character.

Developing Values and Virtues

There are many values that could be developed through the use of stories. One particular research study showed how teachers can provide opportunities for students to develop a set of core values by using carefully selected books and providing a safe environment for value related discussions (Mariano, 1996). In this particular study, students were exposed to stories that showed what virtues looked like and how they are practiced. The results of this study showed that students were able to assimilate virtues by reading moral literature (Mariano, 1996). According to another study, students self-evaluated the power of short stories in improving their cognitive and affective abilities. In the cognitive domain, the students' feedback on this study

noted that they enjoyed a lesson more and were more attentive to a lesson after a short story was read (Kasapoglu, 2015). In the affective domain, the students felt that the short stories that they read helped them mature more and contributed to their development, prepared them for life and taught them about life (Kasapoglu, 2015). Shaw (1999) pointed out that stories can “touch, challenge and change learners on cognitive, affective and behavioral levels” (p. x) because they touch the human psyche. In a project called the MelArete project, the authors claim that one of the methods to develop virtues among children is to use narratives. The authors claim that “by reading and writing stories about virtues involving people in ethical dilemmas, learners become more able to face them” (Mortari & Ubbiali, p. 274). Montari and Ubbiali (2017) claim that from a preliminary analysis of running this project, the children were able to understand the concepts of virtue, when they in most cases previously ignored it. The Wisconsin department of instruction echoes the power of stories to help students learn about positive character traits by saying that “since the first reading texts were introduced in schools, they have included fables, myths and biographies that help students learn about positive character traits and the Golden Rule” (Wisconsin State Dept. of Public Instruction, 2001).

Stories Help Develop Empathy

Empathy may be defined as “the ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions” (Vaughan-Lee, 2019, p. 25). Vaughan-Lee (2019) speaks about the power of documentary films to transport a person to another place and “create an awareness of global cultures from the inside out through feeling and empathy” (Vaughan-Lee, 2019, p. 25). Vaughan-Lee gives the example of the documentary film of an aboriginal woman who painstakingly creates a dictionary from English to her own native language. She does this so that her language cannot be lost and forgotten. The students that watched the documentary start

asking questions to the author of the movie that show that they are filled with compassion and genuine interest (Vaughan-Lee, 2019, p. 25). Greene (1995) discussed how “imagination makes empathy possible” and that stories help us to “look in some manner through stranger’s eyes and hear through their ears” (p.3). In a discussion about children's books that develop character and empathy, the authors suggest that stories that help build empathy have characters in stories that are well developed and conflicts that are relatable (Cain, 2015).

Learning Influences for Character Development

In this section, I will discuss some of the leading influences of character development besides stories. One particular research article that I looked at showed the possibility of using games and scenario based exercises to develop character. These games and exercises would teach students the moral reasoning skills that they could apply to different circumstances in their life (Shapiro, 1999). In another more recent case study, the authors looked at using different strategies to promote respect in a school setting where students had difficulty co-existing because students had a lack of respect with their peers (Corzo & Castañeda, 2017). The study included using guided social activities and games which included bingo, lotteries, word search, puzzles, game, animal behavior and others that helped generate connection between meaningful learning, good team work and human relations (Corzo & Castañeda, 2017). The findings showed an improvement in language used between classmates (Corzo & Castañeda, 2017). The students showed an attitude of respect and there was an atmosphere of cordiality and due treatment after the guided social activities were conducted (Corzo & Castañeda, 2017).

Summary

In this literature review, I went through a lot of evidence for why stories help improve student achievement and improve student character. Here is a recap of the reasons and related

evidence. The first reason suggested is that stories help build positive relationships in the classroom. In the evidence, we saw how we organize our life experiences through stories and draw meaning from them (Rhodes, 2019). Relationships in the classroom are deepened since stories provide a way for voices to be heard and experiences to be shared (Rhodes, 2019). Evidence in the literature showed that positive affectivity and engagement improved student learning (Uludag, 2016). Hence, some of the positive emotions that you would receive from positive relationships would help improve student achievement. Besides stories, some of the other strategies suggested to build relationships include art therapy due to its social and fun nature (McDonald & Holttum, 2020). The evidence also suggests involving students in discussions, discovery approaches, individual assignments and group planning to build relationships with students (Hedges et. al, 2000).

Next, we look at how stories help engage the imagination and emotions. Evidence showed that stories are “forms of language that tell us how to feel about their content” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 19). Schultz et. al(1992) discusses how it is important that teachers teach stories to invite a reaction and response and not just for comprehension. Students should be invited to share their connections and meaning from the story. The evidence shows that engagement is vital to student achievement (City, 2009). However, other forms of engagement discussed include inquiry learning (Uçar & Sangar, 2017) and active learning strategies (Jahnke et al., 2020).

In the next section, we looked at the evidence for stories to build character. Shaw (1999) summarizes this and the other sections well by noting how stories touch the human psyche and affect learners in the cognitive, affective and behavioral levels. Stories also help students develop empathy. Greene (1995) summarizes this best by discussing how “imagination makes empathy

possible” and that stories help us to “look in some manner through stranger’s eyes and hear through their ears” (p.3).

Finally, evidence was discussed for other leading strategies of character development. This included the use of games and guided social activities to teach different values, particularly the value of respect. Overall, as the evidence as shown, stories can be a powerful tool to improve student achievement and to improve student character.

Chapter Three: Application to my Professional Life

Now that I have presented the main reasons and supporting evidence for why stories can improve student achievement and student character, it will be clear how it has applied to my life as a student and how it has and will apply to my life as a teacher. I will also include a plan for how particular stories fit into all subjects in the Grade 5 curriculum.

Applications as a Student

As a student I struggled with understanding abstract concepts in courses such as Philosophy. In classes where I would not understand the material, I would easily tune out and it would feel meaningless to me. However, my Philosophy professor made things very interesting when he would narrate personal stories to explain abstract concepts. Stories are “forms of language that tell us how to feel about their content” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 19). The stories that my Philosophy Professor would narrate would be packed with meaning, emotion and feeling. He would narrate them very enthusiastically and with a lot of drama and energy. I often felt intrigued and fascinated by his stories. It would not only help me understand the concept, but the story would also convey how I would feel about the concept. His stories would spark my imagination and help me make connections to experiences in my own life. My professor would also narrate stories about the saints or from movies that would be interesting. The stories kept us all engaged. It made me curious and excited about the subject. The stories made me ask questions about philosophy and they helped me make connections to my own life.

Through my Philosophy professor’s stories, I was also a recipient of the power of oral storytelling. Oral storytelling refers to the relation of a story using elements like pitch, inflection and also non-verbal language like gesture, pause, physical expression. The storyteller is attuned and responsive to the audience (Hibbin, 2016). My professor would vary his pitch, tone, and use

gestures to make the story very interesting. He would also pay attention to us in the class and sometimes ask questions and put us into the story he was narrating to keep things more interesting. I found the stories that he told us orally so much more interesting than the stories that he would read from a book. He seemed more attuned to the audience and I was much more focused, interested and engaged in his oral stories.

It has also been my experience, as a student that stories help deepen relationships. Through the many stories that the teachers would narrate to me as a student, I felt more closely connected to the teacher telling the story. It made it easier for me to approach them and ask them questions. Rhodes (2019) discusses how stories provide a way for voices to be heard and experiences to be shared. In classes where teachers would open up the floor to more personal discussions, we would sit in a circle, share and listen to each other's stories, I felt more closely connected to other students. We learned more about each other's backgrounds, likes and dislikes. I empathized more with those that were struggling and admired those that worked hard to overcome their difficulties. I learned more about how to interact with people that are different from me and I developed some solid and lasting friendships with some of my peers after we shared personal stories.

Lastly, as a student I have learned how to improve in character and virtue by reading many different stories. I learn from the characters that I read, morals of the stories, fables, documentaries, movies, etc. Sometimes stories have characters whose positive character traits I admire or they could have negative character traits that I want to avoid. Sometimes I learn from the consequences of people's choices in stories. As mentioned in the literature review, short stories can have an impact on both the cognitive and affective domain. In the affective domain, the students that self-evaluated short stories said that it helped them mature more, contributed to

their development, prepared them for life and taught them about life (Kasapoglu, 2015). It has certainly been my experience that some of the positive character traits I have adopted have come from interesting stories that I have read in the past. These could be from characters in stories that I have admired or morals of the stories that I have read. It could also be from negative character traits of characters that I do not want to adopt. Learning about the problems that people face in a story has prepared me for life, formed my character and shaped me to be a better person.

Applications as a Teacher

Through my seven years as a teacher I have had the opportunity to share various stories and also conduct classes where I have facilitated student sharing. It has consistently been my experience that when I have facilitated circles where students share personal stories, that my classes developed a very positive atmosphere. Rhodes (2019) discusses how it is important for teachers to share stories to improve the classroom atmosphere and create an environment that is more receptive to learning. Students open up in classes where they share more about themselves. They share and participate more, they are more respectful and they enjoy learning. When they see that they have a teacher that genuinely cares about them and is interested in their story, they become more receptive to learning in the classroom.

I try to ask students to share stories regularly about various topics. Some of the topics that I have asked students to share stories about include Halloween, Christmas, Easter, holidays and injuries. I have noticed how some students that are shy about sharing start to share more and more about themselves once they see that others are there to respect them, care for them, like them as they are, admire their differences and are genuinely interested and curious about them.

It is important that I as a teacher create this safe environment first. In the beginning it takes some work, but with the creation of a safe space where students' voices can be heard,

classes can be so much more receptive to learning and growing. Sexton (2020) discusses how at the Dr. Michael Conti School in Jersey City, New Jersey, the school put into practice a program that gave students a voice, empowered them to make a difference through project based learning and acknowledged that their input is worthwhile. Sexton (2020) noted how students felt more confident once they realized that their opinions matter too.

In my teaching practice, it has also been my experience that stories can help spark the imagination and engage students' emotions. I usually follow up stories with questions. Questions about students' feelings about a story, what they found interesting or about connections they could make from a story to their personal life, usually almost always generate very interesting responses from students. Another approach I have tried with students is to ask students to draw pictures related to a story, sketch a scene and then have a discussion about this. Schulz (1992) discusses how drawing could be the basis for students to learn about different perspectives and also reflect on their own initial responses to a story. Artistic expression could also be a way for students to express their emotion and meaning from a story (Schulz, 1992). Paley (2001) concurs with this by expressing how by acting and interacting with a story, students showed engagement with the pedagogy of the classroom.

In Math class, students are able to absorb concepts when I weave a story problem around computation and Math operations. In Science, when teaching about the human body and the different systems, I asked students to write a fictional story about swallowing a little person and their journey around the different systems of the body. The interest and excitement level in the class grew significantly when students could use their imagination and emotions. They came up with various different stories while also displaying their understanding of the human body. In Religion class, students get very excited and creative when I ask them to perform skits or

complete comic strips around Bible stories. Finally, in English Language Arts, I encourage the reading of a variety of different stories. I also teach students the skills in writing a good story. Students' imagination and emotions are evident in any subject in the context of a story.

Finally, as an elementary school teacher I have used stories several times as a way to form students' character. Kasapoglu (2015) makes this point clear that in the affective domain, students felt that the short stories that they read helped them mature more and contributed to their development, prepared them for life and taught them about life. In the school I currently work at, we have a program called “Read and Feed”. The teacher reads stories to students as they eat their lunch. The students eat in silence listening to the story. I often ask questions related to the moral choices of different characters in the story. I also ask questions about the consequences of their choices. Students can see how consequences are related to the choices people make in life. In the literature review above I note how several authors discuss how stories make empathy possible, particularly with the use of stories that spark the imagination, characters that are well developed and conflicts that are relatable (Greene, 1995; Cain, 2015). As a teacher, I have utilized the power of questions to direct the conversation about empathy. During the course of the story, I ask questions about character traits, conflicts, experiences in the story. I ask these questions with the goal of helping students build connections and grow in empathy. It has been my experience that teachers have a lot of say through the use of questions in how they shape the character of students.

Another program in my school is a buddy reading program. The primary grades have bigger buddies in the intermediate grades. This is a reading and leadership program where the bigger buddies read stories to their little buddies. I have seen how a deeper bond and connection is established between buddies through story sharing and story reading. I have also seen the little

buddies be very engaged in the story reading especially if the bigger buddy is an excellent story reader, is more dramatic about the story and asks questions about a story. I know that these strong connections are developed because I can see more open sharing between the buddies. I also notice them playing with each other and talking to each other during other times of the day like recess and after school. The buddy reading program is a great application to the power of stories to build strong relationships and character through the use of something that is engaging and relatable.

Applications to Grade 5 Curriculum

In this section, I will describe how particular stories apply to topics in the Grade 5 curriculum. I will be applying this to the settings of teaching ELA, Socials, Science and Christian Education in Grade 5. I will also describe how these stories could be used to deepen relationships, keep students engaged and I will connect this application to the argument of this paper which is that stories help improve student achievement and student character.

Stories have a lot of connections to the big ideas in English Language Arts 5 (ELA 5). The big ideas in ELA 5 include language and text being a source of creativity and joy, making connections to others and the world through exploring stories, understanding different perspectives through texts, using language in creative and playful ways, questioning what we hear, view and see, which helps us be educated and engaged citizens in the world. In summary ELA 5 is about having fun with language and using it to dialogue effectively with others in the world (British Columbia, 2020).

I can cover most of the ELA 5 big ideas through a novel study of the Breadwinner series of novels. The series includes four novels. The first novel narrates the difficult circumstances that an eleven-year-old girl, named Parvana, faces under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. She has to

make difficult choices as the breadwinner of the family after her father is taken away by the Taliban. In the second book of the series, Parvana sets out on a difficult journey to be united to the rest of her family. This is in the backdrop of Western forces that try to oust the Taliban. The third book narrates the story of Parvana's best friend Shauzia who escapes Afghanistan in the hopes of going to France but is stuck in a refugee camp in Pakistan. She escapes the refugee camp and lives a dangerous life on the streets of Pakistan. The final book in the series returns to the story of Parvana, who is now fifteen years old. She faces the difficulties of the post Taliban regime when her country is still in war. She has to show a lot of bravery and resilience in the face of these difficult circumstances.

Part of my claim in this paper is that stories help build character. The Breadwinner book series is great for character building in grade 5. Students empathize with the main character's difficult circumstances. It is a series that encourages students to be brave, loyal, hardworking, family oriented, hopeful and determined. The friendship that Parvana and Shauzia share is something special and grade 5 students can make lots of connections to the difficulties in friendships, the little arguments, the hopes and dreams shared, promises and fears and the devastating losses. The discussions around these topics is an opportunity to share personal and meaningful stories. Students will get to hear each other's voices and stories. They will learn about each other's dreams and fears. It will open up opportunities for deeper sharing and more meaningful relationships.

Finally, the topic of war is something that matters to everyone. Not only was the war in Afghanistan real, but so are many wars around the world today. Students will be engaged and fascinated, but also disgusted and horrified as they learn about the devastations and restrictions that war puts on others. They will learn about poverty, displacement, hunger and violence.

Students can express their emotions and imagination on these topics through various showcases that might include dramatic presentations, art work, songs, poems and the re-creation of scenes from the book.

There have been many positive responses that have come from reading the Breadwinner series stories. There has been an increase in the participation in class discussions. Many student groups have shown the desire to express their understanding of the story in more ways than was required, like the creation of artifacts from the novel and coming up skits to represent different events from the book, all of which were optional. There has been a positive spirit of inclusiveness and acceptance in the classroom. Students have displayed in their writing an empathy for the main character as they realize how similar they are to her in their desires and needs yet how different their lifestyles are. Students have demonstrated in their actions towards each other qualities that the main character in the book displays which include bravery, selflessness, loyalty, determination and hopefulness.

Next, I will discuss how stories can also be applied to teach some of the big ideas in Social Studies 5. One of the big ideas in Social Studies 5 is about the treatment of minority peoples in Canada and how they have both positive and negative legacies (P, 2020). One of the books that can be used in this context is a story called “Railroad of Courage”. The authors, Daniel and Nancy, tell the story of slavery from a 12-year-old girls point of view. The story narrates the girls’ difficulty as she journeys from the southern United States to live a free life in Canada.

Through this story, students will not only get to learn about how some black people came to Canada, but they will learn about the difficult circumstances that many immigrants had to brave to come to this country. It is the hope that by looking at events through the eyes of a

12-year-old girl, that many students will be able to empathize with her situation. They will aspire to be brave, determined, hopeful and fight for freedom. Through this story and other testimonies of black people, students will learn about the difficulties and racism that existed towards many minority people in Canada.

Another book that can be used for this big idea is the book “Children of the Kootenays”. This book narrates the story of children as they moved through many mining towns in the Kootenays. People who moved to these mining towns lived through harsh circumstances, but also lived very joyful lives. Through the perspective of children, students will learn about some of the positive legacies of Canada.

Through these stories, I hope to open up discussions about facing difficult circumstances. Students in the class who are immigrants will be given an opportunity to voice their stories. Rhodes (2019) notes that teachers who open up the floor in a classroom for stories to be shared foster positive relationships between peers and between the teacher and the students. As an immigrant myself to Canada, I will narrate my story of coming to Canada, some of the hardships I faced, together with the opportunities of coming to a new land. Students will get to develop deeper relationships with each other when they hear about each other's backgrounds and stories.

The topics of poverty, racism, inclusion are all topics that matter to students. The stories from “Railroad of Courage” and “Children of the Kootneys” are both narrated by children so this should be relatable and engaging to students. Paley (2001) discusses that by acting and interacting with a story, students show engagement with the pedagogy of the classroom. As a follow up to reading these stories, students can express their responses to the stories through poster presentations, dramatization of scenes from the story and presentations on solutions to topics like poverty and racism.

To support students in improving in Science and to foster character development, Science fiction stories can be introduced. Some of the big ideas in Science 5 include systems in the human body, solutions, forces and energy, natural resources (P, 2020). In application of Science fiction stories, it is important to front load students with terms and concepts first before they venture into a story. Good science fiction stories and even documentaries enable students to be curious and to wonder. They will treat different topics in Science as mysteries that they would be eager to investigate. Science fiction stories can be followed up with experiments and hands-on activities to help students explore further. During the course of hands-on activities students are interacting with each other, developing deeper relationships, engaging in material through experiments. Working in teams and collaborating during an experiment also helps build character where students learn skills in communication, cooperation and teamwork.

Since I teach in a Catholic school, I have to bring in the application of stories to Christian Education. Christian Education lends itself very well to the use of stories since Jesus told stories. Hultgren (2000) & Snodgrass (2008) note that striking features that make Jesus' narrative parables so captivating is its directness to the audience, everyday subject matter, simplicity and symmetry, a focus on human characters and unexpected behavior or endings. Teachers can plan activities like bible skits, artwork around parables that allow students to express their feelings and meaning around a parable. Teachers can direct the discussions and reflections so that students can pull out the lessons learned from a parable. Students can make everyday connections and resolutions based on Bible stories. The implications of these applications are that students are engaged. Bible stories, especially through the various responses help to foster deeper relationships. Finally, there is no doubt that Bible stories help shape and form students' character through the many lessons and morals students can draw from them.

Summary

As a student, I learned very early on about the power of stories in improving my achievement and shaping my character. Stories helped me understand complex concepts, they bonded me into a closer relationship with the storyteller and there were so many lessons I could learn from hearing other people's stories. Hearing other people's stories would illuminate my own story and hence I would be so drawn to their story.

As a teacher, I had the opportunity to apply the power of stories to the students I taught. I witnessed the power of personal story sharing in circles to create a more positive atmosphere in the classroom. As a teacher, I have had the opportunity to engage students in a story by planning how they will respond to a story. I have also had the opportunity to form students' characters through the use of stories.

Next, I discussed the use of particular stories to the Grade 5 curriculum. I discussed the use of the Breadwinner series as a novel study to engage students in the life of an eleven-year-old girl in Afghanistan. In Social Studies, students can use stories like "Railroad of Courage" and "Children of the Kootneys" to learn more about the treatment of minority people in Canada. In Science, students will be exposed to many science fiction stories so that students develop curiosity and wonder about science concepts. Finally, Christian education lends itself nicely to the use of stories since students can respond to many different bible stories thus developing deeper relationships and drawing many morals from each bible story.

The next section will summarize my thoughts from chapters one to three. I will summarize how I have supported the claim that stories improve student achievement and student character. I will also discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my paper.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will restate my argument, summarize the introduction, literature review and application chapters. Through this summarization, I will explain how the three chapters are connected and my paper has been successful in demonstrating my argument. I will explain the implications of my paper and ideas of my paper. Finally, I will note some of the changes in the world I hope to see happen because of my paper.

Summary

Student achievement and student character can be improved through stories since stories help deepen relationships, engage the imagination and emotions and have morals which help shape our character. Stories are a powerful tool to create and deepen relationships (Rhodes, 2019). Stories have a way of connecting the imagination and emotions with the content (Egan & Judson, 2016). Stories have a way of honing our character since we can learn from the characters in the story, the choices they made and empathize with them. The outcome of stories could also be teaching us lessons that we could learn.

In Chapter One of this paper, I describe my developing interest in stories together with the significance of stories. My developing interest in stories began when I contrasted my university experience to my elementary school experience. In university, I felt drawn to the stories that my Philosophy Professor would narrate and it would help me understand abstract concepts in Philosophy. During the M.Ed. program I was progressively looking for ways to support and engage the students I teach. In courses such as Inquiry Education I got an opportunity to explore many cognitive tools, and stories, were one of the cognitive tools. Getting

acquainted with stories again reignited my interest in stories that I developed earlier during my Philosophy degree.

The significance of stories is that we are all impacted by them. We all organize the experiences of our lives as stories. Hearing other people's stories illuminates our own story. Stories provide a way to engage with content with our minds and our hearts (Egan & Judson, 2016). Hence stories are a very significant learning strategy to be used by educational stakeholders.

In Chapter Two, I go into more detail about the reasons and evidence for why stories improve student achievement and student character. First, stories help create and deepen relationships. As mentioned before, we naturally organize our life experiences as stories and we draw meaning from them (Rhodes, 2019). Teachers who listen to student stories and provide a safe space for student stories to be shared create an environment that is more receptive to learning (Rhodes, 2019). There are studies that show that the positive affectivity that would arise from positive relationships has contributed to improved student achievement (Uludag, 2016). Other strategies that contribute to building relationships include art therapy and strategies where students are included in the lesson like discussions, discovery approaches and group planning.

By shaping a story around some content, the story tells us how to feel about that content (Egan & Judson, 2016). Stories bring extra energy and interest into teaching and learning (Egan & Judson, 2016). Stories also invite a response from the reader. Teachers can use this opportunity to learn about students' feelings about a story, any connections they made and what they found interesting in the story. Teachers that have collaborated and shared the results of student engagement note how engagement is vital to ensure student learning and achievement (City, 2009). Besides stories, studies show that other learning strategies like inquiry based

activities (Uçar & Sangar, 2017) and active learning (Jahnke et. al, 2020) are engaging for students, but this could be used together with stories.

Not only are stories an excellent learning strategy to improve student achievement, but they also help with developing student character. The use of carefully selected books and a safe environment for value related discussions contributed to students developing a set of core values (Mariano, 1996). Other studies showed that short stories affected students positively in that they helped them mature, contributed to their development, prepared and taught them about life (Kasapoglu, 2015). Stories, particularly that have characters that are well developed and conflicts that are relatable, help build empathy (Cain, 2015).

To further strengthen my argument, I discussed how stories impacted me as a student, and as a teacher. I gave specific examples of stories that could apply to the Grade 5 curriculum. As a student, I was drawn to the dramatic storytelling that my Philosophy Professor would narrate as it would help me understand very abstract philosophical concepts. As a teacher, I started to facilitate students' circles where students would share their personal stories. I also would open up the floor to the sharing of stories around various occasions so that students were given a voice and this made learning more receptive and created a positive atmosphere in the class.

In ELA 5, I have introduced the Breadwinner series of novels. I have encouraged many responses to these stories which include projects like book jackets, recreation of scenes in the novel through the use of drama and art. Students have expressed their feelings about the novel in a variety of ways and they have drawn a lot of meaning from the books. It has certainly been a stage to forge and enhance relationships in the classroom.

In Socials 5 I hope to use the stories “Railroad to Courage” and “Children of the Kootneys” to help build empathy and help students learn from the positive character traits in these novels. In Science 5 I hope to introduce some science fiction novels to help build interest in Science and spark their imagination and emotions. Finally, for Religion class, I hope to use Bible stories as a way to nourish relationships and build character as Bible stories contain many moral lessons that students can draw from.

Implications

The bigger conversation to which my paper contributes is about successful learning strategies. A question that the reader of this paper might be wondering is about learning strategies that will help cultivate deeper relationships and engage students' hearts and minds. This paper could also shed light on the purpose of learning strategies. There are many different opinions on the goals of learning and learning strategies will accordingly differ based on the goals of learning. My paper contributes to this topic by suggesting that stories is a learning strategy that will cultivate people that care about relationships. Students that both read and write stories will be able to communicate with others in a manner that is intriguing, engaging and relatable.

The other topic that is raised by this paper is about character building strategies. The character of a person is made up of values that are important for them to develop. The development of values like honesty, patience, kindness and tolerance are important in many schools. The use of values is common in the mission statement of almost every school. The search for learning strategies that can help form character according to values will no doubt be an important conversation that many people in education will be concerned about. This paper contributes to this conversation by suggesting that stories help with the building of character

according to various values. Stories have many morals to draw from and they can be used to shape students' character and thus help students develop many notable values.

I want to explain the implications of my paper in practical settings. I hope to see curriculum committees consider the importance of stories when designing curriculum and suggesting curriculum resources. I hope this paper shifts perspectives of curriculum designers to bring in a rationale for the introduction of stories in curriculum. I hope that curriculum designers can suggest different stories at all grade levels from K-12 and with all subjects.

Beyond this, I hope this paper assists others in thinking about learning strategies that will help deepen relationships and help students engage with content with their hearts and minds. I hope this paper will shed light on the importance of having deep relationships. Teaching and learning is so much about having quality relationships. We help students to have quality and deep relationships with others when we take the trouble to have deep relationships with them. I also hope that readers can see the importance of engaging students with their hearts and minds. Both students and teachers gain so much when students are engaged in a lesson and I hope this paper provokes others to explore more learning strategies to engage students with their hearts and minds.

I also hope that this paper shifts the perspective that character development is important as students can then grow to be the best version of themselves. I hope that readers will be curious to explore other learning strategies that will help students develop their character. After all is said and done, if I can help one student discover their story, then my entire teaching career would have been worth the effort and I would have helped this world to be a better place.

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