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The Story Words Method:

Why Does *The Story Words* Method Work As A Visual
Learning Tool For Teaching Sight Words To Elementary Students?

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Abstract

If children learn better and retain more information through arts integration, why don't we rethink our educational practices and connect with children where learning occurs best? This opportunity for research will explore the reasons for the success of *The Story Words* method and why beginning and struggling readers in elementary schools are drawn to them. The purpose of this study is to explore the research of scholars who have considered the importance of learning sight words and others who believe that visual learning is optimal. I will also include some of the findings from the pilot program that we conducted at an elementary school during the school year of 2005-2006. Finally, it will highlight my experience as I used the method in remediation instruction with elementary students. Discovering research from scholars who have looked at visual learning could provide some understanding for why *The Story Words* method works. It can also uncover the clues about the success of using cartoon characters and silly stories to teach children to become fluent readers.

The Birth of a Method

Their teacher handed me a list of 300 Fry Sight Words and asked me to teach them to the four boys. It was her strong belief, as it is now mine that knowing these words would be a foundation for reading. We set forth, two boys at a time, meeting three times a week and sailing forth on our new adventure together. At first, we tried the drill method, which meant constant repetition and taking turns to spell each word. The following week we would have to start over again, same words, same drill. Drilling was not working because the words had no meaning for them. It was then that I became animated using any creative idea that came to my mind. For instance, I came up with the following to teach the word “Which,” not the one that flies, but which way did they go?” Then a story began as follows: we “w” climbed the first hill “h” and I “i” could see “c” which hill “h” to climb next! Alas, the boys got it! Most importantly, they retained it! It was easy to see that the story and letter association were a good combination for their success.

Eventually, I began to work with just one of the boys. This was when Juan and I started on a journey that would later develop into a sight words learning method, called *The Story Words*. Each sight word became a story and each letter a character or thing in the story. Juan and I met three times a week for about forty minutes each time. After discovering that he was quite an artist and very interested in drawing, I asked him to draw the word “and” the way he saw it. And he did: “a” is a wheel; “n” is a boy on the skateboard “d.”

Every week we sat at a desk across from each other and drew pictures using the letters of each sight word. I also made up sentences to go with the words and Juan began to learn the words easily and quickly. He was so quick that I started drawing words in every

spare moment to keep up with Juan's eagerness to learn. We used index cards and crayons, and as we collected five or more words we would go to the library and laminate them. Juan learned over 150 words in a few months and he retained them. His confidence increased and his countenance glowed as he became more proficient. Amazingly, his reading and writing improved also. He was experiencing success!

After working with Juan and seeing his success, I introduced them to all of my students in remediation instruction. Therefore, *The Story Words* method was being created while teaching children in the third and fourth grades that were struggling to retain basic sight words and had lost their confidence in their ability to read. After unsuccessful attempts to drill the words, this method evolved. I continued to draw pictures of characters or objects using each letter of a word, until a story came to life. The combination of the pictures and the stories were the key to unlocking the children's imagination. It has become an innovative tool for children in pre-school, K-3rd grades, and home school education. It is also an excellent tool for teaching ESL, and special needs children as well as older children who need extra support. *The Story Words* have been successful because children learn the words quickly, retain them, and have fun in the process.

Research

Why does *The Story Words* method work as a visual learning tool for teaching sight words to elementary students? Robert Gupta says that, "Instead of laying the stress on language literacy, we should make the most of the profound visual literacy that people already possess." His interest in comics and literacy has led him to believe that "we learn most from mimicry and pictures and pictures mimic reality more efficiently than text. He

thinks that, “it would be a more learned society if children were given nonfiction comics in classrooms that explained theories and experiments, science and geography through sequential art.” (Gupta, 2006) He began his learning career as a child in a small shanty town in India where he devoured 30 to 40 comic books a day from a circulating book depot.

Jay Cross, who is an internationally acclaimed strategist, speaker, consultant, and designer of corporate learning and performance, has said that,

“visualization is transformative, humans learn twice as well from images and words than from words alone. Pictures translate across cultures, education levels, and age groups... schools spend years on verbal literacy but mere hours on visual literacy. It’s time for us to open our eyes to the possibilities.” (Cross, 2006)

His statement might suggest that art is not a mere learning toy for children, but a possible foundation for learning. My experience with a third grade ESL student certainly brings me to a place of strong agreement with Cross.

Since it is a fact “that at least 50% of the printed page is sight words,” it would stand to reason that wise educators would agree to their importance (Dolch, 1936). In some cases, our students are promoted to third and fourth grades without knowing these high frequency words. Consequently, many are unable to read with fluency and confidence and are often poor readers. *The Story Words* method is perhaps an answer for the proposal of Dolch, Cross and Gupta for learning and literacy since it provides a fast, fun and easy arts-integrated visual tool for early learners to master their sight words.

The Inspiration Software, Inc. states “research has proven that visual learning is one of the best methods for teaching students of all ages how to think, and how to learn.”(*The*

Inspiration Software, Inc.) Hibbing and Erickson agree “a picture is worth a thousand words for students who struggle with reading comprehension.” They have quoted J.R. Levin in saying, “strategic use of external visual images can provide the background knowledge and memory pegs to help students see what is happening and unlock confusing text.” [(Levin, 1981), Hibbing, Erickson, 2003]. Since the sight words “form the framework of expression and communication,” perhaps having *The Story Words*’ characters as “memory pegs” is a good idea. [(Dolch, 1936), Levin, 1981].

E. Murfee, believes “art education is an activity of the mind and that “creative activity is a source of joy and wonder.” (Murfee, 1998). While I have worked with students of all ages, nothing has been more thrilling than to see them experience the “awe” of learning. *The Story Words* method has been a tool that evokes this kind of learning. Considering “that learning to spell is a complex cognitive undertaking,” creating “joy and wonder” while learning happens is a great accomplishment [(Hodges, 1991), Murfee, 1998]. Hodges states, “spelling in English orthography is a more complex process than reading because spelling requires an accurate reproduction of all the letters of words” (Hodges, 1991). Again, the picture characters and stories in *The Story Words* method may eliminate any difficulty from this task.

Marshall Arlin, Mary Scott, and Janet Webster set out to prove “that pictures interfere with sight-word learning” (Arlin, 1979). However their predictions were disqualified and their conclusions proved the opposite, “pictures presented with words facilitated rather than hindered learning” (Arlin, 1979).

The Way They Learn

Linda Williams, who wrote *Teaching for the Two-sided Mind*, says,

“Children come to school as integrated people with thoughts and feelings, words and pictures, ideas and fantasies. They are intensely curious about the world. They are scientists, artists, musicians, historians, dancers and runners, tellers of stories, and mathematicians. The challenge we face as teachers is to use the wealth they bring us. They come with a two-sided mind. We must encourage them to use it, to develop both types of thinking so that they have access to the fullest possible range of mental abilities.” (Oddleifson, 1995)

Dr. Howard Gardner who is a professor of education at Harvard University developed the theory of multiple intelligences. He recognizes that IQ tests are very limited in exposing the greater potential of a human being. He breaks down intelligence into eight different categories: linguistic intelligence (word smart), logical-mathematical intelligence (number/reasoning smart), spatial intelligence (picture smart), bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (body smart), musical intelligence (music smart), interpersonal intelligence (people smart), intrapersonal intelligence (self smart), naturalist intelligence (nature smart). [(Oddleifson, 1995), Hoerr, 2007)]

Most of our education systems are focused on what Dr. Gardner calls linguistic and logical mathematical intelligence. We tend to measure a person’s intellect by his ability to articulate or be logical. His argument is that this kind of mindset leaves out at least six other intelligences that would encompass artists, architects, musicians, naturalists, designers, dancers, therapists, entrepreneurs, and others. (Oddleifson, 1995)

Educators in most schools do not encourage children who possess these gifts. In fact, they are often labeled “learning disabled” (Oddleifson, 1995). Fortunately Gardner’s theory is catching on and many schools systems are adapting their curriculum to meet the

needs of all children. And yet, there are still a vast number of educators who have not heard or implemented Gardner's theory. "Albert Einstein believed that imagination is more important than knowledge" (Oddleifson, 1995).

We are all trying to move education from the "select and sort" model to the "success for all" model (Oddleifson, 1995). Robert Sternberg talks of the triarchic mind, "street smarts" are as important as linguistic, and logical, mathematical capacities (Oddleifson, 1995). Oddleifson says, that all children are gifted and talented and therefore agrees with Gardner in that we should consider a broader range of intelligences. He thinks that we should see all kids as assets, rather than that they possess various faults, which must be corrected. (Oddleifson, 1995)

Ron Berger, who is a sixth grade teacher,

"talks about the school culture of high standards. The infusion of arts has had a profound effect on student understanding, investment, and standards. As a whole, students not only do well on standardized testing measures, but importantly and demonstrably do well in real life measures of learning. They are capable and confident readers, writers, and users of math; they are strong thinkers and workers; they treat others well. (Oddleifson, 1995).

Elliot Eisner, suggests that "our difficulty in recognizing the benefits of the arts comes through our own fundamental misunderstandings about the very nature of mind, knowledge, and intelligence. Besides believing that language is required for thought, we think that logic is necessary" (Oddleifson, 1995).

Mona Brookes, who is an instructor and founder of Monart drawing schools, says, "the arts are one of the most powerful teaching tools that we have. The reason the shift is

taking place is because it works” (Brooks, 2002). In spite of budget cuts, many teachers are buying supplemental resources and training themselves in methods for integrating the arts. They are aware of the loss that children experience academically without the arts. She says that some teachers have noted that students who learned to draw characters and subjects from their book gained a greater understanding of content. These children learn more quickly and retained more information when they drew pictures for science, geography and social study lessons also. Math was also enlightened from the use of the arts (Brooks, 2002).

Although the majority of my time with *The Story Words* was with Roberto, I introduced them to other children from the classrooms in which I assisted. It was overwhelmingly noticeable that the kids were having fun learning with the Story Words. It was also evident that they were learning quickly and their confidence was being restored while, they too, experienced the success that Roberto had experienced. It was exciting to see the children learning and laughing. This experience inspired me to write a poem for Story Words:

Every Word is a story,

Every child loves to tell,

Smiling, laughing, loving learning,

Soon they know that they can spell. (*The Story Words, Inc.*©)

Eric Oddleifson expressed a similar idea when he said, “A quality education requires bringing heart and hand into balance with head, we quickly conclude that high educational standards simply cannot be met by most of our children without the arts” (Oddleifson, 1995).

Seymour Sarason decidedly understands the heart and soul of a child and the responsibility of formal education. He says,

“school is a place a very young child enters with awe, curiosities, expectations, questions, and the desire to feel competent and recognized, and that young child should have those personal characteristics when he or she finishes formal schooling. For those characteristics to be extinguished, to go underground, to get expressed primarily in fantasy is to impoverish a lifetime” (Oddleifson, 1995).

If children learn better and retain more information through arts integration, why don't we rethink our educational practices and connect with the children where learning occurs best? How can we ignore the needs of a child's colorful learning style and not paint a picture for success? It is a joy to provide each child with a style of learning so that he or she may experience a lifetime of continued enthusiasm about obtaining knowledge. *The Story Words, Inc.* is joining the bandwagon of change and reform in order to meet the needs of our children and take them on a journey that would excite them and fill their curiosities for learning. *The Story Words* could take them to a place where laughter and learning would be synonymous. Martha Graham said, “If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it” (Oddleifson, 1995). Roberto and I had a profitable year together. When I tested him in the fall of the following year, he still had 100% retention of the sight words that he learned the year before with *The Story Words* method.

Plan of Action

Roberto's teacher and others encouraged me to find a way to mass-produce the cards since they were so successful. So I showed them to my friend Victoria, and told her what was happening with the children and how easily they were learning with this method. By

this time I had worked with students who were on different learning levels and they were all excited about learning this way. The students who were struggling readers excelled and the students who were good readers loved the characters and stories. It would be later before we would try them with preschoolers and Kindergarten children. The teachers said they had not seen anything like it. Victoria thought they should be created on the computer, which led her to become our graphics designer. Our adventure was just beginning. My daughter Christy became our educational consultant and together we have worked many hours to create *The Story Words* method since the spring of 2005. We have come a long way from my crayon colored, stick figure drawings. Victoria, Christy and I have worked diligently to improve, create new products, market, and print *The Story Words* so they can be placed into the hands of educators, parents, and children. It was soon after we had our first cards printed, that we applied for a U.S. patent and now our patent is pending. We have created a company, and Victoria and I have become co-owners of *The Story Words, Inc.* We are also a publishing company, printing *The Adventures of Abby the Letter A*, Books 1-4, another product of *The Story Words, Inc.* in book form.

We conducted a pilot program at Black Mountain Elementary School during the 2005-2006 school year, which gave us encouragement and helped us to fine tune *The Story Words* products. We also created large Kindergarten cards as requested by teachers in our pilot program. The size of the cards is perfect for whole class instruction and they contain the 30 high frequency words suggested for Kindergarten. Some of the encouraging comments from them and a college professor were:

I have been teaching for over 25 years and I don't think my students have ever learned as quickly and retained the knowledge so consistently. In the past they would learn a word and the next day it was gone. (*Diane Jackson – Kindergarten teacher*) Kids who struggle the most with spelling seem to be most excited about their abilities to remember the words. Most of the children are remembering to spell all their words correctly in their own writing. Most children's retention of each word's spelling is dramatically improved. Retention is high. I am always surprised by how much they remember on the second day of each week. Even with 5 words per week, they could remember details in each one. Sight word recognition has boosted their reading ability exponentially. Confidence is huge for most. Almost 100% memory recall. (*Courtney Andrew – First grade teacher*)

I have taught in Buncombe County Schools for 30 years and have recently retired. I wish Story Words would have been available for me to use with my elementary and middle school students who struggled with word recognition. Story Words would provide a tool for students having difficulty with high-frequency vocabulary in reading and writing. The simplicity of Story Words would make implementation an easy transition in any classroom for any teacher. (*Jayne Brown – Mars Hill College Professor*)

Conclusion

Since my experience with Roberto in 2004, I have repeatedly encountered the need for remediation with sight words. Children who struggle to read have poor sight word recognition as revealed by E.W. Dolch. He says, "It is invariably found that a non-reader or a poor reader has an inadequate sight vocabulary" (Dolch, 1936). *The Story Words* method for learning sight words is always met with enthusiasm from students. The lively

bright characters and funny stories make learning sight words easy. Our desire is to put them in the hands of educators and parents of young children everywhere. I never dreamed that what started with an idea, index cards, and crayons would become a revolutionary new method for teaching sight words. It is now my passion to provide this tool for children to learn and give them the opportunity to build a solid foundation in literacy that empowers them to succeed.

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