

Story Sacks

An exciting way of bringing books to life!

Story Sacks offer a fun, multi-sensory approach to sharing stories with children. The bringing together of spoken word, music and items related to a story has long been recognised as an excellent way of developing communication between pupils and/or adults (Barron, I. and Powell, J. 2003). However, while story sacks have been used and adapted for example, in 'Curiosity Kits' (Lewis et al., 2000), to date they are still underused in the primary classroom. This article explores ideas on how teachers can create and use storysacks with their classes to engage and excite children about reading. Story sacks have the potential to be motivating, challenging and a colourful resource – use them to increase children's interest, involvement and understanding of stories.

The 'Story Sack' concept was developed by former head teacher Neil Griffiths in 1995, following research in the UK which showed that the number of children being read a bedtime story was only 16%, compared to over 30% of their parents' generation, and that this lack of reading could be directly linked to literacy problems.



Neil Griffiths created Story Sacks as an alternative way for children to benefit from books and, most importantly as a fun activity where learning takes place without noticing (Griffiths, 2000). They are designed to help adults share books with children in a way that is positive, theatrical, special, interactive and fun. They are a way to get children of all ages and all cultures more interested in reading.

What is a Story Sack?

A story sack is a large cloth bag containing a good quality story-book with supporting materials, such as puppets, soft toys of the main characters and a game to stimulate



reading/language skills. There is usually an audio tape of the story so as children can follow along as they read or act out parts of the story. It also consists of a non-fiction book on a related topic. The sack opens up the world of books and allows further exploration and enjoyment

through using props and related activities. Focusing on a particular tale, it is a tool used to promote reading in school and at home. So open up the story sack and discover what's inside!

Why use Story Sacks in the primary classroom?

What story sacks offer the primary classroom is the chance to make sharing a book pleasurable (Griffiths, N. 2001). Accompanied by puppets, scenery, activities and games, stories become more lifelike and appealing. Research has shown that learning that provides endless fun and enjoyment has invariably a positive effect on children's retention abilities (James, F. and Kerr, A. 1998). By catching and holding sustained interest, story sacks are a visually attractive and tactile resource, providing children with concrete reinforcement of the storyline. This has the potential to motivate and excite children about reading.

By providing a meaningful context in which to learn, story sacks encourage both active listening and participation in reading. All supporting materials included in the story sack are designed to extend the reading experience and stimulate further language activities. This in turn enhances comprehension, vocabulary, phonic, rhyming and decoding skills



(Griffiths, N. 2000). Children can participate in dramatising the events of the story by using puppets and other materials such as scenery that are provided in the bag. Interactive response activities related to the story can be made, helping children understand the 'new language'. Furthermore, they encourage children to see themselves as real readers and promote a life long love of reading.

How to make your own story sacks

Start with a bag It doesn't have to be a fancy bag! Even a simple paper bag will do. Just decorate the outside of the bag, fill it with the book and supporting materials and there you are! However, if you want to get a bit fancier, go to your local dress-maker and have a sack custom-designed. These can be decorated using fabric paints, embroidery and the name of the story can be sewn onto the outside of the bag.

What the bag looks like doesn't really matter too much, although you do want it to look inviting to the children. It is what's inside the bag that counts!

Picking a story What story book you choose will depend on the children you are making it for. Most importantly, pick a book appropriate for the chosen age group. Take into account any special interests of your class including favourite themes, characters, authors and genre. The more interested the children are about the subject of the story, the more likely they will truly enjoy the book and possibly read it independently at a later stage.

If a story has a strong storyline and quality illustrations, then it will have more appeal to the children. However, not every book is suitable for use in a story sack. If the story has too many central characters, too few props or too many props in the storyline, then it may be difficult to make into a story sack.

Filling your story sack The sack should be filled with items that support the central story book.



Here are some ideas to help you decide what to put in the sack with the story book:

- Soft toys of the main characters (or masks, puppets, costumes).
- Props, scenery, artifacts related to the story.
- A non-fiction book to learn more about the factual parts of the story.
- A cassette tape of the story being told (either purchased or home made).
- A language game based on the story eg, word bingo.
- Related videos.

- Written activities eg, comprehension questions, word searches, crosswords.

Each sack may contain materials which bring the story alive and help children learn through play. However, it is important that you make story sacks that are manageable – usually, no more than seven items are included in any one sack, to prevent overload of supporting materials. You just want enough characters and items to bring the story to life. It should also be sturdy and

safe, with nothing sharp as a toy. By introducing variety, you will make maximum use of the resources and retain children's interest!

Bag +Book +Toys+ Activities = Story Sack!

Bring your books to life!

Story Sacks are fun, interactive, attractive and a powerful learning tool in any primary classroom. Through supplying your time and creativity, they have the potential to enhance children's English language abilities, both oral and written. They also offer the potential for collaboration with homes and provide a valuable resource for parents to share with their child. What better way to enjoy reading with young learners, than through sharing Story Sacks.

References

Barron, I. and Powell, J. (2003), Story sacks, Children's Narratives and the Social Construction of Reality. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, Vol. 5, No. 3

Come, B and Fredericks, A D (1995), *Family literacy in urban schools: Meeting the needs of at-risk children*. *The Reading Teacher*, 48, (7), 556-570.

Griffiths, N (2001) *Once upon a time... Literacy Today* No.26, p.9

Lewis, M, Fisher, R, Grainger, T., Harrison, C. and Hulme, P. (2000), *Curiosity Kits: non-fiction reading kits*, UKRA Leaflet.

James, F and Kerr, A (1998), *On First Reading*. Belair Publications Ltd, ISBN: 0 947882243, p.58.

Where can I find out more about Story Sacks?

National Literacy Trust (UK) Storysacks page – gives examples of story sacks in practice and features links to further resources: www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/earlyyears/storiesackspractice.html

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