

Toss Out the Textbook!
The Power of Story in Bringing the
Curriculum to Life

Jane Connolly
Education Officer
Brisbane Catholic Education
AUSTRALIA

The challenges posed by curriculum renewal are familiar to teachers the world over. In Queensland such renewal has lead to the introduction of new syllabuses in each of the key learning areas. The opportunities to engage with and share literature are fewer and the lure of the textbook stronger as teachers grapple with new underpinning philosophies, organisation of curriculum materials, concepts and content. Brisbane Catholic Education teacher-librarians have been working to ensure that story does not become a casualty of the demands of curriculum change and implementation by forging links between literature, syllabus concepts, and content.

Introducing Brisbane Catholic Education

The archdiocese of Brisbane covers a vast geographical area of southern and south-eastern Queensland. It is a diverse mix of urban, rural, well-established, and newly growing areas both within and beyond metropolitan Brisbane. Brisbane Catholic Education administers 136 primary and secondary schools within the archdiocese.

Each of the schools in the Brisbane Catholic Education system, and the 52,000 students within them, benefits from the services of well-equipped and well-resourced school libraries, the great majority of which are staffed by qualified teacher-librarians in either part-time or full-time capacities. The provision to schools of these trained professionals is in line with Brisbane Catholic Education's commitment to enhance and provide resources for a curriculum in which learning and teaching in our schools establishes improved student learning outcomes.

The teacher-librarian role in our schools is a dynamic one. Added to the task of managing the school's library and information services, teacher-librarians in Brisbane Catholic Education schools (a) collaborate with teachers in planning, implementing, and evaluating a curriculum that facilitates student learning, (b) work collaboratively to provide opportunities for students to become discerning users of information, and (c) advocate reading through the promotion of books to children and young people. In this paper I will outline some of the ways in which teacher-librarians have effectively involved themselves in these tasks, ensuring that literature still has a place in the busy life of the school and classroom.

Queensland's curriculum

There have been substantial developments in curriculum renewal and implementation in Queensland in recent years. Since 1997, new syllabus materials have been developed in the eight nationally agreed key learning areas of English, Mathematics, Science, Studies of Society and the Environment, Health and Physical Education, Arts, Languages other than English, and Technology. Teachers in Brisbane Catholic Education Schools also engage with a ninth key learning area, Religious Education.

The new syllabuses have each been developed on an outcomes based framework, a framework that is significantly different to the previous "input" curriculum models in use. The philosophy which underpins this approach acknowledges that learning is continuous and lifelong. Each of the Queensland key learning area syllabuses is designed to assist students become lifelong learners.

The following attributes of a lifelong learner are the overall learning outcomes for the whole curriculum:

- a knowledgeable person with deep understanding,
- a complex thinker,
- a creative person,
- an active investigator,
- an effective communicator,
- a participant in an interdependent world, and
- a reflective self-directed learner.

New syllabuses describe a three-tiered hierarchy of learning outcomes:

- overall key learning outcomes for the whole curriculum to which all key learning areas contribute,
- key learning area outcomes for each specific key learning area, and
- core learning outcomes and discretionary learning outcomes in strands and levels that describe specific learning.

The intention of the Queensland outcomes approach is that students progress from a core learning outcome at one level to the related core learning outcome at the next level in a seamless, continuous, and coherent way. Core learning outcomes for successive levels are conceptually related to each other. The sequencing of core learning outcomes is based on key concepts, organising ideas, or processes in which each level is nested within the next. Figure 1, from *Some Key Features of an Outcomes Approach* (Office, 2002) illustrates this sequencing.

Previous models used in Queensland schools were focused on an input model, a scope and sequence of content or topics that belonged to a particular year of schooling. The teacher's responsibility was to cover the content in the agreed time that students were in their care. With an outcomes model students do not move forward in levels simply because they have reached a certain age. The outcomes approach acknowledges that students learn in different ways and at different rates. The focus is on the learner rather than on a particular

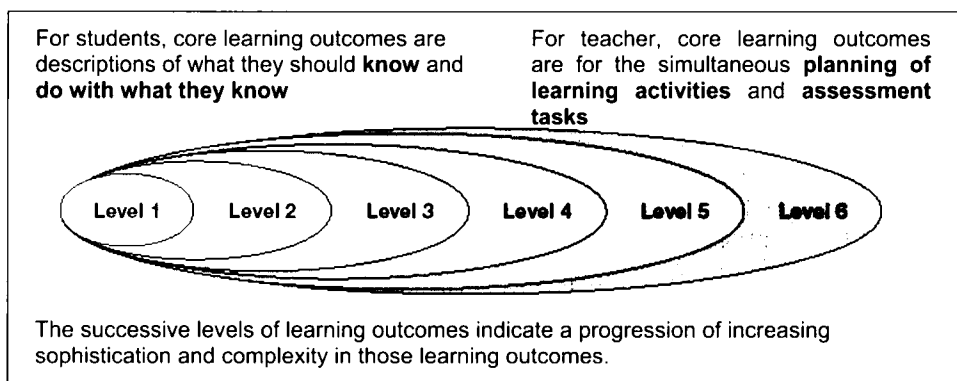


Figure 1: Sequencing of core learning outcomes based on key concepts (Office, 2002)

content. Teachers observe a student’s ability to apply knowledge and understanding in a meaningful context. Their responsibility is to provide such contexts in which students are able to demonstrate their engagement with the concepts, processes, and ideas encapsulated within the core learning outcome statements.

The pace of curriculum renewal has been relentless. Teachers in the compulsory years of schooling (grades 1-10) have had to grapple with not only content and process change but also the significant paradigm change from an inputs model to an outcomes approach. The inputs model was a relatively safe one. When curriculum was based on content deemed applicable and appropriate for a certain age or year level, a teacher’s direction was clear. Content is predetermined and finite. The Social Studies course content, for example, was contained within the textbook, a tome easily segmented into three term’s work.

This approach is also reflected in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix when Professor Umbridge follows a carefully structured theory-centred ministry-approved course of defensive magic, relying entirely on the textbook Defensive Magical Theory. Ron, Harry, and Hermione struggled with this treatise and ultimately became disengaged with not only the text but also the subject itself. The three intrepid wizards recognised that textbooks are not necessarily the way to engage learners and were speechless to discover that there would be no practical application of theory or any stories of great exploits shared. This episode illustrates the value of tossing out the textbook and the power of story in bringing the curriculum to life.

The pace and scope of curriculum change in recent years in Queensland has both liberated and challenged teachers. Liberation lies in the outcomes focus on conceptual understanding rather than the very restrictive and prescriptive specific content coverage. The challenges relate to understanding and adopting new frameworks and adapting current practice in the light of new directions. That changes in philosophy and subsequent practice occurred at the same time as new syllabuses were released exacerbated the challenge for teachers.

Within months new textbooks purporting to support an outcomes philosophy and address the core learning outcomes at all levels appeared in schools, and teachers often greeted them with a sense of relief. Textbooks, however, were not necessarily the solution to the teacher’s dilemma. The learning outcomes confronting teachers were descriptions of what learners should know and do with their knowledge. Stephen Budiansky’s (2001) observation

about science textbooks in American classrooms could be applied more widely in this case: while textbooks “provide a lot of facts, they don’t help children grasp the most basic concepts about the world we live in.” Criticism was levelled at the use of textbooks as the defacto curriculum. Rarely does the use of a textbook alone motivate and engage learners. Nor can a student demonstrate application of knowledge solely through a textbook exercise.

In fact the use or overuse of textbooks can be barriers to learning. Their very structure suggests that all students learn in the same way and at the same time, a notion that is entirely contrary to lived realities and an outcomes philosophy. Textbooks in structure and content are aimed at an arbitrarily determined level. Bobis (2002) believes that textbooks may well be obstacles to a recognition of prior learning. She illustrates her objections through recounting a story of her five-year old daughter being able to successfully complete a mathematics activity contained within the set text before beginning formal schooling. Three terms into year one, the class was finally introduced to the textbook task. Teachers who have long ago given up the practice of expecting a class of twenty eight to read the same book at the same time are still applying this outmoded practice when using textbooks.

Creation of an online database of fiction

The implementation in Brisbane Catholic Education schools of the first of the new syllabuses, Health and Physical Education (HPE), was accompanied by widespread professional development to support teachers’ engagement with a new framework and discipline renewal. A considerable focus was placed on pedagogy to assist teachers in their adoption and implementation of this key learning area.

To this end, a collaborative partnership developed between teacher-librarians, health and physical education teachers, and education consultants in both HPE and teacher-librarianship to explore the conceptual underpinnings of the new syllabus. The HPE syllabus features three strands: Promoting the Health of Individuals and Communities, Developing Concepts and Skills for Physical Activity, and Enhancing Personal Development. The collaboration between the HPE teachers and teacher-librarians resulted in a project, *A Literary Approach to Personal Development*, which focused on the third strand, Enhancing Personal Development. It identified examples of fiction that could be used by teachers and students and listed these titles in an easily navigated and cross-referenced database.

An invitation was extended to teacher-librarians to become co-readers and co-talkers who would explore a range of texts, identify appropriate examples of fiction, match these with the concepts embedded in the core learning outcome statements, and write annotations of each of the selected texts. In addition to the USBN and standard citation information, the annotations included the book’s format, potential cross curricula applications, HPE levels, suggested outcomes, subject headings, and a summary of the story.

The writers of the annotations were guided through a process of review and engaged in lively debate about potential inclusions before commencing the task of writing. (Figure 2 provides an example of the annotations produced.) The environment they created was responsive and very supportive. The project’s leaders edited the annotations before including them in the database, which was intended to be a dynamic instrument. During the first 18 months of implementing the HPE syllabus, teacher-librarians met on a number of occasions to add to the initial entries and delete any titles no longer deemed appropriate.

This database became a widely used and valuable resource as teachers began to engage with the new syllabus. There is little doubt that the database has been successful as a practical resourcing tool. Teacher-librarians have used the database as a guide when planning with teachers and as a buying guide when resourcing the curriculum. Perhaps its greatest success however has been in “legitimising” the place of story in a discipline not traditionally linked with the use of narrative. Using fiction as a way of exploring some complex notions enables the exploration of other stories, the stories of the students themselves. The sharing of story enables students to make connections, to add to their store of knowledge, and to build on what is known. Kaye Lowe (2002, p.7) sums this up well

The mind is a narrative device: we run on stories. Stories unite all worlds. It is the compelling nature of stories and their telling that impacts on how we relate to each other, how we define who we are, and how we learn. Stories are the entry point for meaning making – a place where learning and life merge. Stories contribute to our development of whole, coherent human beings.

Mike by Brian Caswell

“Mike”, the first title of the Boundary Park trilogy by Brian Caswell, looks at the life of a young boy who has been forced to move house and consequently leave behind the friends and life style to which he has been accustomed. With a father he rarely sees because of his work and a mother who makes decisions based on what she feels is best for the family, Mike feels disempowered and is not at all happy with his new situation.

Added to all of these burdens is the presence of the “school bully” Shane the Pain – who finds an easy target in the new boy who has difficulty making friends. Mike eventually comes to understand himself and those around him considerably better, with the help of Riny, an aged neighbour who was in her day a swimmer of note.

This short concise novel investigates in a subtle way dislocation, friendship, self-esteem, personal goals and achievements, fear, self-discipline, growing up and death. The issue of “sports parents”, as well as the discipline associated with a swimming training regime would also be familiar to many readers.

Caswell tells Mike’s story with a humorous touch through the eyes of the main character. The easy conversational tone and use of appropriate speech patterns and language, as well as an in depth knowledge of a young person’s perceptions make the story very real and appealing to a young audience and useful for engaging in discussion on a range of topics within the HPE syllabus.

Resource Curriculum Areas:

English
Religion
Studies of Society and the Environment

Health and Physical Education Levels:

Level 4

Format:

Short Novel

Subject Headings:

Fiction: 1. Self-esteem 2. Death 3. Family life 4. Swimming 5. Bullying 6. School 7. Human relationships

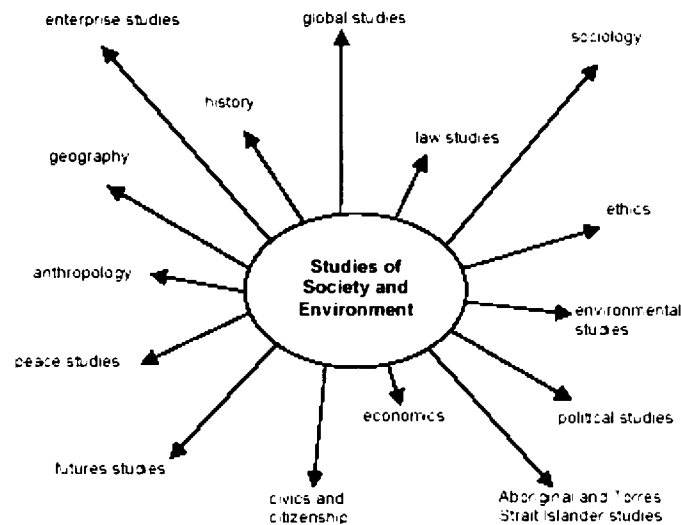
Publishing Details:

University of Queensland Press
ISBN: 0702225274

Figure 2: Example annotation of selected text

Connecting literature to studies of society and the environment

The success of *A Literary Approach to Personal Development* was such that, when the new Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) syllabus was launched in 2000, making links between this new knowledge learning area and literature seemed to be an obvious first step. The values, processes and concepts of the SOSE key learning area are drawn from a range of disciplines and fields of study, including those shown on the following diagram from Nature of the Studies of Society and Environment Key Learning Area (Office, 2001, Nature, p.3):



Once again, with the introduction of this new syllabus, literature provided a mechanism in developing an understanding of the nature of the key learning area. One of the unique aspects of the SOSE syllabus is its focus on four key values: democratic process, social justice, ecological and economic sustainability, and peace. These values underpin the key learning area and are embedded in the core learning outcomes.

Students study how the key values have been and can be used defined and debated both in abstract terms and in real contexts in a range of places past and present. They appreciate the different perspectives people have of values and values issues, and how cultural and other differences can influence these perspectives. (Office, 2001, Studies)

One of the early strategies employed in the implementation of the syllabus in Brisbane Catholic Education schools involved professional development with both primary and secondary teacher-librarians. As part of their role in schools, teacher-librarians are expected to collaborate with teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum that facilitates student learning. Current knowledge of syllabus content is an important aspect of their role. As each new syllabus has come on line, familiarisation with syllabus structure and content has been an important aspect of teacher-librarian professional development.

The SOSE key learning area involves both the study of society—the complex web of human relationships and structures developed in different places at different times—and the study of environments, both natural and built. Students are encouraged to be active participants in their world, to investigate, create, participate, communicate, and reflect on

those social and environmental factors that impact on the world of the present and, potentially, the world of the future. It is a key learning area in which challenging and controversial issues are investigated and critical thinking is promoted as students develop the ability to reflect on the four key values. The teacher-librarian SOSE familiarisation programme included a significant focus on resourcing the key learning area. In exploring the challenging and controversial and in promoting critical thinking, there is a need to look far beyond the textbook.

An exploration of the nature of the key learning area would indicate that the SOSE classroom should be filled with texts, such as those described by Veronica Brady (Clancy, 1998, p. 25), that

blow up in your face, provoke, inspire, trouble and help you discover all kinds of new possibilities about yourself, other people, the world in which we live and the world of the future which we are in the processing of making.

The literary world provides such texts. Philosophers, educationalists, psychologists, writers and readers have written of the capacity of story to engage and inform, to help shape experience, and to communicate very effectively what actually matters to people.

Children's literature is a way in which adult writers share the meaning of being human with children and can be a means of heightening sensitivity to people, places, and things. Literature speaks most powerfully of what a human being can be. It is an art form that stimulates individual creative responses and presents human options for actions and beliefs. Literature activates a multi-levelled consciousness, gives order to human experience, and assists in exploring values. Literature in its many forms is a reflection of life, and through interaction with literature children have the opportunity of growing as reflective people. As such, literature is a powerful tool. It is also a readily accessible tool and the experience of sharing story with children can be an effective means of tuning minds to a SOSE inquiry.

A very effective means of bringing literature into the SOSE classroom has been the linking of the four key values underpinning the core learning outcomes with relevant literature that explores the concepts within each of these. An exploration of democratic process, for example, may involve reflection on or an understanding and application of concepts such as:

- constitutional government,
- equal rights,
- equality before the law,
- freedom of movement and conscience,
- individual freedom,
- freedom of speech social responsibility, and
- tolerance.

In coming to an understanding of social justice, students would explore concepts such as:

- discrimination,
- disadvantage,

- equity and equality,
- cultural sustainability,
- respect for diversity,
- social rights, and
- social well being.

Similarly, in exploring the key value of economic sustainability students would explore the following concepts:

- biological diversity,
- conservation,
- stewardship,
- scarcity,
- economic growth,
- heritage, and
- wilderness value.

The key concept of peace, based on positive relations with others and the environment would include understanding, reflecting on and perhaps applying concepts such as:

- anti-discrimination, anti-racism, anti-sexism,
- empathy,
- hope,
- honesty,
- moral integrity,
- peace,
- tolerance, and
- trust.

Teachers and teacher-librarians are quite adept in making links between literature and a topic or theme-based approach to SOSE. However, in Queensland, as SOSE studies today acknowledge the importance of exploring values, the links to these values and the stories that explore them, need to be forged. Story allows insight into other lives and experiences and is a rich resource in beginning the exploration of many of the concepts and values within SOSE.

Before offering a number of examples of stories that lend themselves to such an exploration of SOSE values and concepts, it is important to comment on the ways such stories should be used. In the inaugural Isis speech at the Oxford Literature Festival last year, Philip Pullman (2003) cautioned against the use of literature in classroom solely for the purpose of “analysis, comparison, review or comment. Stories are written to beguile, to entertain, to amuse, to move, to enchant, to horrify, to delight, to anger, to make us wonder.” Literature in the SOSE classroom should be used for just such purposes—as a beginning point, a place from which to launch into further investigations. Neither a textbook nor a story should be used as a defacto curriculum. An engagement with story leads very naturally into

analysis not of the story itself but of the issues raised within it. The Queensland SOSE syllabus promotes inquiry learning, an approach that emphasises process as well as product moving away from the acquisition of facts to the development of understandings and concepts and generalisations. The beginning point in any inquiry approach is that of tuning in to an issue. The sharing of story is a powerful and engaging way to set up a SOSE inquiry.

Figures 3 and 4 show two examples of such application. The sharing of these stories is an effective springboard into the various topics, concepts and values of the SOSE syllabus.

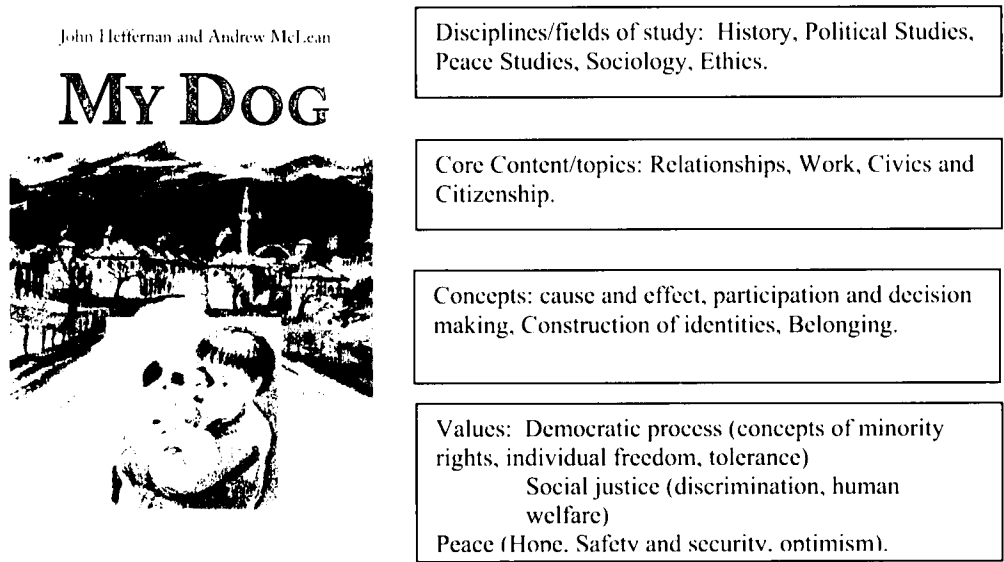


Figure 3: Using story to prompt discussion relevant to SOSE syllabus

Winner of the Children’s Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers in 2002, and Honour Book in the Picture Book category in the same year, *My Dog* (Heffernan, 2001) is the story of a young boy, Alija, who is caught up in the conflict in war-torn Bosnia. When the fighting threatens the safety of his village, Alija’s family is dislocated: he and his mother are sent to safety while his father remains at home. When soldiers take his mother, Alija is left alone with his dog. The author has described the story as one of optimism and hope in the face of adversity. The story has been used very effectively in upper primary and early secondary classes as a beginning point for (a) investigating the features that distinguish good communities and good citizenship practices and (b) posing questions about the rights of children. In so doing the SOSE concepts of citizenship, social obligation and responsibility, belonging, human rights, and basic needs have been effectively explored.

Another title used extensively in engaging young students in an exploration of democratic process has been *Click Clack Moo, Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000), a Caldecott Honour book in 2001. When Farmer Brown’s cows discover an old typewriter in the barn they begin to make demands for better working conditions. At first Farmer Brown refuses their requests but when both the cows and the hens cease to provide services until they receive a fair hearing, Farmer Brown is forced to compromise and negotiate.

Literature provides abundant opportunities for children to strengthen their understandings of the complex web of human relationships and circumstances in present past and future scenarios. A group of teacher-librarians who saw the benefits in linking literature to the key values of SOSE during the initial syllabus familiarisation went on further to

examine closely the core learning outcomes in each of the four strands of the syllabus: Time Continuity and Change, Place and Space, Culture and Identity, and Systems Resources and Power Making. They made further links to appropriate literature that could be explored during a unit of work with a more particular focus. Their work has been instrumental in a review and overhaul of the database earlier established to support the teaching of HPE. The lists they compiled are now being further developed and in due course these will become part of a redeveloped database that will fulfil a broader function.

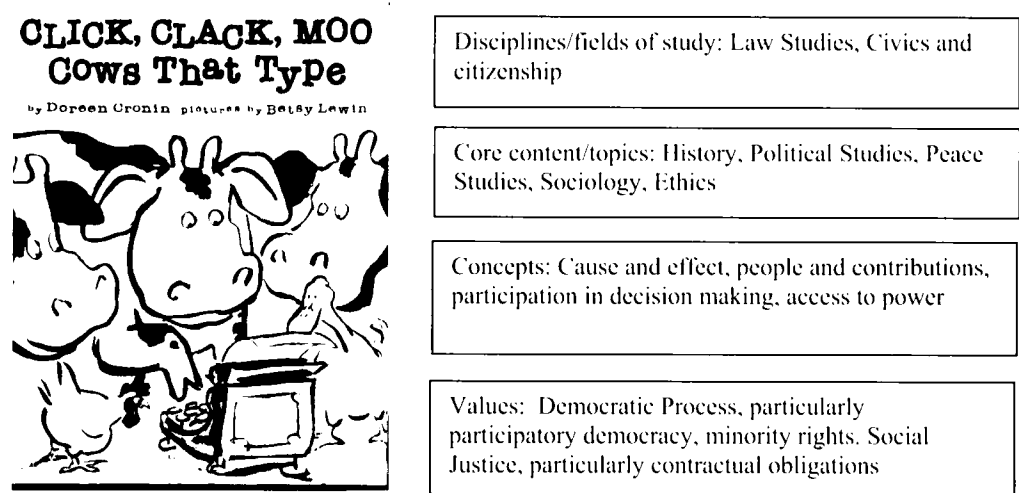


Figure 4: Using story to prompt discussion relevant to SOSE syllabus

Linking the school library with the religious education classroom

The use of story as a teaching tool has long been commonplace in the Religious Education classroom. Such stories may be those taken from scripture, religious tradition, or the known world of children. Such stories may explore familiar themes such as family, friendship, loneliness, joy, or hope. Sometimes, unfortunately, didactic stories, which overtly “teach” particular values, are also employed to impart a particular message. There is great value in using the “right” literature as a means of stimulating empathy and moral inquiry in encouraging a process of reflection. Robert Coles (1989) concluded as much when he commented on a reader’s response to characters and situations in story that can lead to moral introspection and self-reflection. The importance of involving a specialist in children’s literature in resourcing the religious education curriculum is self-evident.

When the Religious Education syllabus for Catholic Schools in the Brisbane Archdiocese was developed in 1997, teacher-librarians added their knowledge of appropriate stories to the units of work that were produced to assist teachers in implementing the syllabus. In June 2003, in order to bring into alignment the Religious Education key learning area and other key learning areas in Queensland, the Religious Education Learning Outcomes for years 1 - 10 were launched. To support the implementation of this outcomes based syllabus, a series of modules have been written. The modules are excellent resources for teachers to use in developing units of work. While some suggested literature resources are included in the list of recommended resources appended to each module, teacher-librarians have been encouraged to adopt the approach taken in linking literature with SOSE and HPE

and to focus on the concepts embedded in the outcome statements rather than on module content.

There are four strands in the Religious Education syllabus: Scripture, Beliefs, Celebration and Prayer and Morality. At this still early stage of implementation and familiarisation, story has been explored as a way of engaging with concepts in the Morality strand. The morality strand encourages students to develop a clear-sighted, honest, and realistic attitude towards themselves, other people, and the world in which they live. When read together, the three conceptual organisers within the strand provide the content, concepts, and context of each strand. Story is a very effective and engaging way to explore the many concepts within the morality strand. As children engage with appropriate literature, attitudes will develop as images of life are processed. Enabling students to interact with such resources is a means of encouraging higher order and transformative thinking. Such engagement will assist children in demonstrating outcomes such as this one at level 2 (typically students in the third year of compulsory school): students make links between moral messages in religious and other texts and life experiences.

Experiences of forgiveness and reconciliation, kindness, generosity, joy, gentleness and goodness, and experiences of loving and being loved would be explored as students are given the opportunity to demonstrate the outcome. The following picture books provide a rich stimulus for investigating such concepts:

The Gift, Libby Hathorn

The Little Blue Parcel, Norma Spaulding

The Red Tree, Shaun Tan

Robber Girl, Margaret Wild

The Easter Story, Brian Wildsmith

Badger's Parting Gift, Susan Varley

Miss Lily's Fabulous Pink Feather Boa, Margaret Wild

Teacher professional development across the curriculum using story as stimulus

As the school library consultant within Brisbane Catholic Education my goals include (a) the provision of support and advocacy for the involvement of teacher-librarians as integral members of curriculum planning teams within schools and (b) the promotion of the integration of literature into school curriculum programmes. Members of the curriculum team have successfully explored the potential of story to engage learners in a number of areas other than those already described. These include workshops (a) using literature as an impetus to engage with the Drama and Media strands in the Arts syllabus, (b) using literature in the teaching of philosophy in schools, and (c) using story to explore aspects of the Science and Society strand of the Science syllabus. In early teacher familiarisation of the Technology syllabus the power of story has again been harnessed and used as stimulus to develop sample units of work.

The new English syllabus places an emphasis on the four interrelated dimensions of language use: Code Breaker, Text Participant, Text User, and Text Analyst. Text analysis requires the development of an understanding of how discourse influences the interpretation and construction of textual representations. Students are encouraged not only to comprehend texts but also to construct and reconstruct their own texts with a critical perspective. The development of such a critical perspective is implicit in creating the insights that enable students to identify possible, probable, and preferred individual and communal futures. The place of story in assisting the development of such a perspective cannot be overstated. Lowe (2002, p. 1) has commented that story should not just be viewed as narrative “but considered as meta-narrative — an ongoing construction that gives sense to our world and our experiences.” Her observations are not new. Clancy (1999, p.1) has similarly said “that the experience of literature is fundamental to the well being of all people. It sustains and nourishes us while educating us for life and about life.”

In exploring the critical literacy aspect of the syllabus, literature has been used as a valuable and effective tool. One example of professional development was using literature to provide a different lens to that offered by media reporting on the background of refugees seeking asylum in this country. Literature provided another side to the story. Stories, both real and fictitious, gave an insight into the experiences of people who find themselves seeking asylum and, when viewed in conjunction with media reports, provided an excellent example of how discourse influences interpretation of text.

Conclusion

Delegates at a conference celebrating story from Aesop to the e-book need little convincing that literature has an enduring place in the lives of all children and that there are many compelling reasons for using literature in the classroom. Judith Langer (1995, p.145) has commented that

literature makes us better thinkers. It moves us to see the multi-sidedness of situations and therefore expands the breadth of our own visions, moving us towards dreams and solutions we might not otherwise have imagined. It affects how we go about learning in academic situations, how we solve problems at work and at home. And it moves us to consider our interconnectedness with others and the intrinsic pluralism of meaning. It helps us become more human.

Furthermore, story engages all learners. The curriculum renewal and paradigm shifts that have confronted teachers in Queensland in recent years call on teachers to plan and implement learning experiences to assist students become lifelong learners. In many ways teachers are being asked to create their own stories and to compose their own operas that will enable students to engage in meaningful and connected curriculum inquiries. The sharing of story is a powerful means of engagement. In sharing in story, learners are given permission to respond to the multiple messages the story may hold for them.

The work of teacher-librarians in Brisbane Catholic Education schools in promoting the cross curricula applications of story has been invaluable in both assisting teachers in their understanding of new syllabus content and encouraging a consideration of resources more appropriate than a single textbook. Their aim is to ensure that the potential of story to

challenge and engage students and facilitate deeper understandings is not overlooked, that literature is given an equitable and enduring place in a teacher's repertoire of resources.

One or two means of achieving their aim have been described here. How else have they achieved their objective? Well, that's another story...

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Author Note

Jane Connolly is the educational consultant to the one hundred and thirty six primary and secondary school libraries in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. In this role she works closely with other curriculum consultants in providing professional development to teachers and school leaders. Jane has been a teacher, teacher-librarian and a lecturer in children's literature. She regularly reviews children's and young adult fiction and in 2000 and 2001, was the Queensland judge of the Children's Book Council of Australia's Book of the Year Awards.