

Empowering Kids to Tell Stories

By Karen Chace and Sue Black ©
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Fifth grader Katie tells us, "I used to think that I really couldn't do much, but now I know that I can do whatever I set my mind to." Third grader Jeffrey "carries himself taller and prouder; his body language screams "I did it!" Samantha "has been given her voice...." And Allison "no longer considers herself an outsider; she believes in herself!"

What happened to Katie, Jeffrey, Samantha and Allison? They joined a storytelling club and learned to tell a story.

Meeting with over 150 enthusiastic student storytellers during the past five years, our goal was simple -- to share our love of storytelling. It was a perfect complement to the curriculum and seemed like the next logical step as the 'storytellers-in-residence' at our respective schools.

A most unexpected thing happened along the way. Neither of us foresaw how teaching Storytelling to students in grades one through seven would change the way the students viewed themselves and their world. Fifth grader Catherine Augustine summed it up, "Every time we met we always learned a ton! Not just about storytelling, but also about life."

Sue notes: Catherine is a very quiet teller. On the day she practiced her story with a series of partners, Catherine's first listener scooted closer. He was struggling to hear, forcing her to project. She could hear other stories in progress with dogs barking, fishermen pleading and mice singing. Catherine could see all the different styles but she knew she had to find her unique voice.

Karen notes: Jacob's goal was to overcome his shyness. He participated in group activities but never took center stage. He was ready to quit at the mere mention of telling in front of his peers but he persevered. By year's end he stepped onto the festival stage, sure-footed and ready; his smile lit up the auditorium.

A survey we sent to the students and their teachers tells their tale better than we ever could. Here is their story, in their own words...

From the Kids' Point of View:

Everything I Ever Needed to Know About Life I Learned in Storytelling Club:

- Take a deep breath and always look around. (RG, grade 6)

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- Break it down. (GD, grade 6) and take it bit by bit. (CF, grade 6)
- It's not easy, but keep trying. (CP, grade 4)
- Try not to be nervous. (PK, grade 5)
- Keep practicing. (CJ, grade 5)
- It's o.k. to be bad as long as we improve. (SJ, grade 4)
- If you focus hard enough you will succeed. (JS, grade 5)
- Don't worry because it will always be liked by someone. (CA, grade 5)
- You shouldn't worry, just have fun! (KM, grade 3)
- Never give up if it's hard. (MM, grade 4)
- Everyone wants you to do well! (GD, grade 6)
- Relax and just be yourself and have fun. (KS, grade 5)
- It's okay to mess up. (JM, grade 4)
- If you mess up, just move on and admit to your mistake. (SL, grade 4)
- If I stay calm, I can do it! (DC, grade 3)
- Believe in yourself (JF, grade 4)
- You never know what'll happen. (CF, grade 6)

Everything I Ever Needed to Know About the People I'll Meet in Life, I Learned from a Storytelling Club Audience:

- Everyone wants you to do well! (GD, grade 6) They want you to succeed. (TD, grade 4)
- If you mess up they don't care. (KS, grade 5) They don't know the story, so they don't know when you mess up. (RG, grade 6)
- Some are very respectful. (JN, grade 5)
- Sometimes they can be a little loud. (AN, grade 4)
- There may be a couple that don't like it, but that's their loss. (CA, grade 5)
- If they don't show emotion, that doesn't mean they don't like your story. (SP, grade 5)

- They have different ways of expressing themselves. (CJ, grade 5)
- They don't get tired of my stories. (MM, grade 4)
- They listen to me too. (CJ, grade 5)
- They pay attention more than I thought they would. (DC, grade 3)
- They're easy to handle when you get half way into your story. (AM, grade 3)
- They are nice and care about your story. (SC, grade 3)

There was a ripple effect to the benefits of storytelling club; learning to tell stories was changing the way they interacted in their world.

During the spring concert at Sue's storytelling festival...Third grader Nicholas came up to me and whispered that he had changed his mind and didn't want to tell. When I assured him his decision was okay with me he took a deep breath, told me he would think about it some more, and sat down with the storytellers in the back row. The tellers seated on either side of Nicholas gathered close; they leaned in, heads nearly touching, listening, nodding, and offering him their support. Suddenly, three voices erupted in the back row – "Nicholas wants to try!" He was walking toward the stage.

Teachers with storytellers in their classrooms saw them grow in amazing ways. Nicole Gracia, fourth grade teacher, was astonished that Connor who "was not thrilled to share his work in front of the class could take the stage and perform in front of 100 peers."

Karen notes: Connor had a very distinct case of stage fright prior to the festival performance; his biggest fear was failing in front of his peers. He worked hard, and that night he not only performed with ease, he even added an impromptu dance at the end of his story. The audience erupted in applause!

Student storytellers wowed their teachers in other ways too

- self confidence increased (3rd, 4th, 5th grade)
- very helpful to their peers (3rd grade)
- interacted in positive and influential ways (3rd grade)
- gained a stronger sense of their abilities (4th grade)

- school work improved (4th grade)
- true spirit of self came out (4th grade)
- accepting and patient attitude when working with peers (4th grade)
- shy students showed more leadership (4th grade)
- students didn't fear failure/focused on positive outcome of risk (5th grade)
- willing to work with children who were different than them (5th grade)
- morals and cultural perspectives taught in their stories carried through to life (5th grade)
- self-confidence sky-rocketed and student spoke out more (5th grade)
- obvious pride in their work and accomplishments (5th grade)
- proud, yet modest (5th grade)
- felt like leaders/acted more mature than their peers (5th grade)

Just as the stories the children chose to share held their own unique twists and turns, so too did our storytelling club journey. Our students found their unique voices, discovered an inner strength and ability, and transformed themselves before our very eyes. Dylan's mom told us, "This experience will stay with him for the rest of his life!"

The same is true for us....it turned out better than we could have ever dreamed!

Storytellers Sue Black (Illinois) and Karen Chace (Massachusetts) direct storytelling clubs in their community schools. They 'met' four years ago on the Storytell Listserv and soon discovered they had student storytelling clubs in common. They have teamed up to write about the amazing transformations they have witnessed in the student storytellers as a result of their Storytelling Club experiences.