

**Using Storytelling in the Public School Classroom:
The StoryBridge Model**

*A New Approach for Bridging Academics and
Social and Emotional Learning*

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Abstract and Project Summary

By the end of 3rd grade, only 36% of American students can read proficiently (2015 NAEP data) and among low-income students, the rate is 17% (Hernandez 8). This statistic is alarming in and of itself, but particularly so given a recent study revealing that students who are not able to read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely than their proficiently reading peers to drop out of high school (Hernandez 4). Such data indicates that much work needs to be done to promote literacy in elementary school. However, it is also increasingly clear that lagging educational achievement is only one of the critical shortcomings in American public schools. Perhaps equally important is what is now being further deprioritized in the quest to increase academic performance. In the face of the wrenching social divisions and hatred emerging in our country, I have become convinced that education cannot just be about academic achievement; we also need to consider who we want students to become as individuals, community members, and citizens.

The question I therefore set out to explore with this project was how public schools can incorporate character-building and social and emotional learning into the school day in low-cost, easily implementable programs that are both personally meaningful and academically enriching. I hypothesized that an emphasis on stories and storytelling in elementary school could represent a viable solution by addressing both such character building and academics. After a two-part research process consisting of fieldwork and literature searches, I developed a program model called "StoryBridge." Designed to bring engaging stories to the classroom and to create a bridge between students' academic and personal experiences, the StoryBridge model is a simple but powerful way of structuring lessons in the library through storytelling, hands-on activities, and personal reflection. Using multi-cultural animal folktales, I then created a prototype of this model with the mission of building character and community in the classroom.

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I. Introduction

The State of the American Public Education System

The question of how best to educate students has been a topic of much discussion and debate since the founding of this country. Groups of people as diverse as philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, government officials, policy makers, parents, educators, and students themselves have inserted their voices into the debate on both national and local levels. Despite - or, perhaps, as evidenced by - all of the ideas about education floating around, however, it is clear that the United States is in desperate need of major education reforms. Although the United States is one of the most highly ranked countries in the world according to numerous indicators of development (2016 Human Development Index), it has one of the lowest national high school graduation rates among developed countries (Mason). Moreover, the reality facing many public schools in the United States is grim: overworked teachers, tight budgets, limited resources, and the intense pressure of Common Core State Standards.

Targeting Elementary School

There are many angles from which people can and do try to approach education reform in the United States, but one particularly intriguing one that stands out to me is the strategy of targeting reading in third grade, a grade that educators and researchers have identified as a “pivot point” in a student’s academic trajectory (Hernandez 5).

In particular, reading levels at the end of third grade represent a critical milestone because third grade is the grade in which students are asked to move from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn.’ By the start of fourth grade, teachers have shifted from teaching the mechanics of reading to giving lessons on the content of various readings. In a phenomenon often called the “Matthew Effect,” students who are not fluent readers by the end of third grade begin to fall more and more behind their peers who are fluent readers. By fourth grade, fluently reading students are acquiring important knowledge, vocabulary, and concepts through reading, and those successful learning experiences in turn boost their overall motivation and academic engagement. In contrast, students who struggle to read can get caught in a vicious cycle. They are exposed to and acquire less knowledge and fewer concepts, and this impoverished intellectual experience results in frustration and poor academic performance, which, in turn, contribute to low self-confidence and low motivation. This cycle often culminates in eventual resignation and disengagement from school (Paul; Robinson).

A recent longitudinal, nationwide analysis of almost 4,000 American students reveals the shocking reality and profound implications of the Matthew Effect when it comes to reading: of the students who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade, one in six does not graduate from high school on time - a rate that makes them four times more likely than their proficiently reading peers to drop out of school. For students who have not mastered even basic reading skills by third grade, the statistics are even more grim: they are six times more likely to fail to graduate

from high school. Moreover, poverty only exacerbates these trends, putting children in “double jeopardy:” of the children in the study who were poor, lived in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and were not reading proficiently in third grade, 26% did not graduate from high school on time (Hernandez 4).

Dropping out from high school then puts individuals at risk for a range of negative life outcomes. Compared to high school graduates, high school dropouts are “much more likely... to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves” (Bridgeland). Indeed, students who are not proficient readers by fourth grade tend to have more behavioral and social problems (Robinson). Thus, it is hardly an exaggeration to state that third grade reading levels are a critical factor in shaping not only a student’s academic trajectory but also their life.

Given these profound implications, the prevalence of reading deficits among students after third grade is alarming: according to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 36% of American fourth graders read at a ‘proficient level’ (2015 NAEP data) and among low-income students, the rate is 17% (Hernandez 8). In light of these statistics, the United States’ shockingly low national graduation rates are, perhaps, less surprising.

Recognizing both the critical importance of third grade reading proficiency and the profound nationwide shortcomings in educational achievement benchmarks, many policy makers have chosen to try to promote reading in elementary school. In reauthorizing the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)¹ as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, President Bush asserted his “unequivocal commitment to ensuring that every child can read by the end of third-grade” and required that, beginning in third grade, states test students’ reading skills annually. In 2015, President Obama reauthorized ESEA as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and established a program for “Putting Reading First” by dramatically increasing the amount of federal spending on scientifically-based early reading instruction (Hernandez 5). This program represented part of Obama’s efforts to boost the percentage of people in the United States with college degrees, a statistic in which it ranked 11th globally in 2015 (OECD Data).

My Interest in and Perspectives on Education

As someone who is passionate about education, I too have spent a lot of time asking, reflecting on, and forming opinions about how to improve the education system and how best to educate students. In fact, when I took the class *The Psychology of Education* during the spring of my sophomore year at Williams, the final assignment was to reimagine the American education system and to write a proposal for a school of my own design. I have also explored the question

¹ The ESEA, which was enacted in 1965 by President Johnson, is the United States’ national education law.

of how best to educate students from a more practical, hands-on perspective while volunteering and working with students.

I have realized, however, that it is not enough simply to ask how best to teach something. We need to examine what we are teaching and, perhaps more importantly, what we are *not* teaching. Over the past year, as I have grown increasingly disturbed by the divisions, bigotry, and hatred manifesting in our country, my passion for education has become charged. I cannot but feel that while trying to address our public school funding crisis and lagging academic achievement, we have lost sight of the question of who we want these students to be when they grow up - not simply what careers we want them to have in order to contribute to the workforce but, rather, who we want them to be as individuals, community members, and citizens.

I have become convinced that education can and should be a tool for building a more equal, just, respectful, and thoughtful society. This process begins with building character and community in the classroom. Given the limited hours in the school day and the equally pressing need to improve nationwide academic achievement, however, we cannot afford to divorce social and emotional learning from academics. The question I wanted to ask, therefore, was and is ambitious: How can we build character and promote social and emotional learning in schools? Moreover, is there a realistic way to do that without compromising academic engagement and achievement but, instead, promoting and strengthening it? In other words,

How can public schools incorporate character-building and social and emotional learning into their academic curricula in low-cost, easily implementable programs that are both personally meaningful and academically enriching?

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Thinking in particular about the significance of third grade reading level, I believed that an elementary school curriculum centered on stories and storytelling presented one compelling possible answer to this question. The Sentinels Fellowship offered me an exciting opportunity to test this hypothesis and to develop my ideas further. Thus, my primary research question was:

Could an emphasis on stories and storytelling in elementary school indeed represent a viable strategy for addressing some of the failings of or gaps within the American public education system, in terms of both academics and character building?

In focusing my research on storytelling and education and the possible intersections between them, I asked a series of questions:

- What are the benefits of storytelling?
- What sorts of programs and models centered around storytelling in schools exist?
- What place do stories and storytelling currently have in the elementary school classroom?
- How might storytelling be used to integrate social and emotional learning, character building, and academics in a meaningful way?
 - What would a low-cost, easily implementable model for that look like in public elementary schools?

Research Goal

My overall goal with this research was to develop a storytelling-based curriculum module that could be piloted in the North Adams school district and made available for direct use or as a model for other public elementary schools.

II. Research Methods

Local Fieldwork

I began my project with a nebulous idea about bringing storytelling and social and emotional learning into the classroom, but I did not want to design a curriculum model based on theory alone; I needed to build a framework in which to construct my idea. I therefore chose to begin my research by doing fieldwork in a local public school in North Adams in order to better understand and respond to the realities in a public elementary school.

I chose North Adams not only because of its proximity to Williams College, but also because it is a community in which poverty rates,² combined with low achievement, put students in that “double jeopardy” of high school dropout described by Hernandez in his analysis of nationwide educational achievement. Indeed, the statistics are stark: 71% of the students at Brayton Elementary School currently receive free or reduced lunch,³ and only 38% are proficient in reading (Niche).

For this phase of my research, I was able to draw upon my experiences doing fieldwork and studying the methodology of fieldwork for anthropology classes at Williams, and my fieldwork consisted of participant observation and interviews. I spent a week as a participant observer in a third grade classroom and in a fourth grade classroom - two days with the fourth grade class and three days with the third grade class. During that time, I followed the students of each respective class throughout the school day, observing and sometimes helping out during lessons, eating with them at lunch, and attending “specials” (library, music, art, and gym). In addition, I spoke with students and teachers alike, both one-on-one and in small focus-style groups, about their experiences and their perspectives on my project.

I hoped that this fieldwork would enable me to design a curriculum pilot that responded to and reflected the specific context and realities of of the North Adams Public Schools (NAPS), building off of strengths and trying to address to existing needs or gaps in the public school system generally and in NAPS specifically. In order to make my curriculum module engaging to students and useable by and useful to public school teachers, I identified the following objectives for my fieldwork:

² The poverty rate in North Adams is 18.5%, compared to 14.7% in the United States and 10.4% in Williamstown. The median household income in North Adams is \$38,490, compared to \$55,775 in the United States and \$74,667 in Williamstown (DataUSA).

³ Qualifying for free or reduced lunch in Massachusetts indicates that family income is less less than approximately \$10,000/household member (Massachusetts School Breakfast and Lunch Program)

To develop an understanding of...

- The structure of the school day and the curriculum
 - Ways in which my ideas could fit into or build off of existing structures
- The classroom environment and culture
- The experiences, interests, and perspectives of third and fourth grade students
- How curriculum is structured, packaged, presented, and taught
- The place of social and emotional learning in the classroom (where, when, and how it takes place)
- The current role and place of stories and storytelling in the classroom – in whatever forms they might exist
- The components of a successful curriculum (based on observations and opinions from teachers and students)
- Challenges, needs, and limitations

Recognizing that I would not be able to fully understand the dynamics of any place after a week, talking with teachers and students alike was a valuable opportunity for me to connect directly with my target audience - the teachers who might implement my curriculum and the students who would be on the receiving end of it.

Literature Review

When public school summer vacation began, I transitioned from fieldwork in the North Adams public schools to reading-based research. Based on classes that I have taken at Williams, I had a solid intellectual grounding in the literature on and current thinking about education as well as storytelling. The seminar “Psychology of Education” offered me psychological perspectives on education, while the tutorial “Story, Self, and Society,” along with English and Comparative Literature classes, provided me with a variety of perspectives on reading and storytelling. I returned to central readings from these classes and explored relevant ideas further through additional reading and literature searches, using my previous academic experiences as launching points to engage even more deeply with the existing research on education and storytelling and to look for intersections between these two fields.

In researching education and questions about education reform, I focused particularly on ideas from psychologists and educators about:

- Resilience
- The place of character in education
- Intellectual, social, and emotional development in elementary school
- The process of learning
- The most effective teaching strategies and techniques
- Factors and experiences that shape academic outcomes and/or contribute to student success

- Students' experiences in public school

Based on my hypothesis about the power and potential of storytelling in education, I read psychological studies and research on the effects of storytelling, particularly when used in educational contexts. After developing an understanding of the benefits of storytelling, I spent a significant part of my time reading books written by psychologists, educators, and storytellers about approaches to and reasons for integrating storytelling and education. Finally, I sought out existing programs that seek to promote literacy skills, storytelling, social and emotional learning, and/or empowerment and resilience among youth. My aim in looking at these models was to consider how I could expand on and learn from the best practices in the field and connect them to the needs of the public school system.

Over the course of this research process, I also looked for ways to supplement my research and collect additional thoughts and perspectives. I listened to podcasts about education, read education-related news and magazine articles, and talked with various individuals in North Adams, Williamstown, and Boston (my hometown), ranging from librarians and community workers to parents, teachers, and students. I talked at length with a fourth grade friend and with the elementary school teachers with whom I have designed curriculum in the past. In addition, I drew upon the expertise of various individuals at Williams College, including members of the Teaching to Learn team, as well as Williams students who have previously done curriculum pilots in North Adams schools.

III. Key Findings: Elementary School Fieldwork

Structure of the School Day and Curriculum

Understanding the structure of the school day and curriculum helped me build a framework for my idea. I was most interested in the curricular requirement that students must engage in 90 minutes of math and 120 minutes of English Language Arts (ELA) every day. The ELA time consists of reading and writing, and it often becomes blended with other subjects like science and social studies.

As a strong believer in the value of interdisciplinary teaching to contextualize learning and make it more natural and meaningful, I was initially attracted to this idea, but I became ambivalent about the requirement after seeing how it plays out in practice. On the one hand, I saw how using ELA time to teach science prompted a teacher to incorporate reading, writing, and storytelling into a science lesson. As a result, the lesson not only enforced valuable literacy skills but also infused emotion and humanity into a subject that is often taught in a dry and purely analytical or abstract way. While the ELA requirement can bring stories and storytelling into subjects like science and social studies, the downside of it seems to be that ELA loses focus on literature for the sake of literature.

In fact, this trend is exemplified in the example of the new ELA curriculum that NAPS will be implementing next year. This Pearson curriculum, which is called called ReadyGen, is

composed of ‘trade books,’ and when I looked at the list of the 12 books in the third grade curriculum, I understood why they were called trade books. Six of these books are intended to teach science (two fiction, four nonfiction) and three to teach history. The majority are nonfiction, and only one is a novel. As an English major with a deep love of literature, I was greatly distressed; if those were the only books that I had been exposed to as a young child, I would not have liked reading. I respect and understand the push for science education, but I do not think that should come at the cost of the humanities and English in particular.

I identified ‘Library,’ one of the four ‘specials’ that students attend weekly, as a part of the school day with great potential to counterbalance the instructional focus of ELA curriculum by offering students an opportunity to engage with and enjoy stories for their own sake. In the library visit I attended, however, this opportunity was a lost one. The librarian read the students a simplistic picture book and then the students did word searches. I recognized that doing fieldwork at the end of the school year did not necessarily give me a representative sense of the typical school day, so I did not want to judge the use of library time based on this one experience. What was clear to me, however, was that students were not engaged in the read-aloud book or in this particular library session, and when I asked them about library time as a special, they were much less enthusiastic about it than they were about art, gym, or music, the other specials.

Another finding that surprised me about the curriculum was how much variation there was between classes in terms of what they were doing. Even with all of the strictly regulated curriculum requirements dictating what to teach when and how much time to spend on each topic, teachers approached lessons very differently. As one teacher explained to me, they are given all of the materials and requirements for teaching, but, in fact, they are only being told *what* to teach, not *how* to teach it, so a lot still depends on the teacher. Thus, there can be a lot of variation in the delivery of a lesson or idea based off of the teacher’s ability and willingness to invest additional time, energy, thought, and creativity towards making mandated lessons more interactive and engaging.

Personal Storytelling and Social and Emotional Learning in the Classroom

Before designing an idea for a curriculum focused on integrating character-building, social and emotional learning, and storytelling, I needed to know where, when, and how each of these currently occurred in the classroom. What I found was that these were not uniformly integrated into the school day or the curriculum.

In terms of character-building, in every classroom, there are posters describing the ‘7 Habits,’ a list of habits that comes from Stephen R. Covey’s book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. These habits emphasize being responsible, taking the initiative, setting goals, making plans, working hard, problem-solving, listening, collaborating, and finding balance. Beyond the classroom posters, however, there seems to be little effort to incorporate these ideas explicitly into daily classroom life, culture, or curriculum units.

There is a specific social and emotional learning curriculum that is suggested, but it is not required, and only some of the teachers elect to do it, generally once a week. Of the teachers I spoke to who do not teach it, their reasons included not having enough time, not having access to the materials, or wanting to teach social and emotional learning in a different way. I was intrigued by this last reason, and in talking further to the teacher who expressed this sentiment, I learned that she preferred to teach social and emotional learning in a more informal and natural way, throughout the school day. In addition to the small social and emotional learning moments that she tries to facilitate throughout the day, she identified morning meeting as an important time for social and emotional learning, a chance for students to reflect on various experiences and dynamics, as well as to share personal stories and opinions.

Indeed, from my point of view as well, morning meeting in that teacher's class stood out as a time that was rich with both storytelling and social and emotional learning. Up until now, only some teachers have held morning meetings in their classes, but beginning next year in the district, all classes will have morning meeting time. As with other aspects of the curriculum requirements, however, one can imagine that the extent to which morning meetings will be an opportunity for storytelling and or social and emotional learning will depend greatly on the way in which each teacher chooses to run the meeting.

Beyond morning meeting, there were few other formal opportunities for students to bring their personal experiences into the classroom. There seemed to be potential for personal storytelling in certain ELA journalling activities, but personal storytelling took place mainly informally during breakfast and lunch. It was interesting to observe how stories beget stories; one student would share a story, then several other students would think of and want to share their own stories about a similar topic, and as this process continued, excitement and momentum would rapidly build. On a few occasions, I observed students connect to a particular concept in a lesson and want to share stories about it, but the teacher prompted them to stop talking and focus on the assignment at hand.

Classroom Needs

My fieldwork thus revealed that there is presently very little space given to stories in the classroom. Stories that explore the human condition have lost their place in ELA to stories designed to teach science and history, and most students are brimming with stories to share but there is not a formal time in which this sharing can take place.

The fact that personal stories do not have much of a place in the classroom seems to reflect the broader need for students to be able to connect what they are learning to their sense of self, interests, and goals. When I asked the students to tell me about themselves and what they enjoy, the majority of them spoke about sports and about their desire to become professional athletes. The fact that they did not talk about school seemed to me to suggest that they did not see being a student as an important part of their identity, nor do they seem to find what they learn in the classroom personally meaningful. The need to make school feel personally meaningful is

significant, as without that personal connection to the classroom material, students are unlikely to develop the intrinsic motivation that studies show is a critical factor in academic success (Cordova and Lepper 715), including in reading comprehension and performance among struggling readers (Logan 124).

Students and teachers alike highlighted several other issues in the classroom that might be addressed by a more consistent and explicit focus on social and emotional learning and character-building in the classroom. These include students...

- Struggling to work collaboratively in a group
- Not respecting one another (and not feeling respected)
- Not listening to one another
- Feeling like they don't fit into an academic environment

Relevant Limitations and Challenges For Teachers

I recognized that for my curriculum program to be useful, it would need to take into account the limitations placed on teachers. Based on my observations and interviews with teachers, I developed the following list of possible constraints to keep in mind while developing my curriculum program:

- When teachers can work with a class for only one year, just when they have really gotten to know the personalities, strengths, and weaknesses of their students, the year is over and they then have to start again with a new set of students
 - Working with students for one year can also disincentivize teachers from investing a lot of time and energy into working with struggling or challenging students
- It is difficult to do projects, especially group ones, when many students are being pulled out for their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
 - Also, students often have to do a lot of independent work to show the teacher what they know —> less time and fewer opportunities for group work
- Strict requirements allot a very limited amount of time to each unit, so there is a lot of pressure on teachers to teach something and move on
 - —> not much time to let students explore and learn by discovery; everything is rushed
 - It is even more rushed because of end-of-year skills are tested in April or May, before the end of the school year

I hoped to find creative ways to circumvent or mitigate some these limitations and challenges so that the program I developed would be not only a useable tool but also a valuable resource.

Interests and Experiences of Third and Fourth Graders

Since the target audience for my curriculum was third and fourth graders, I wanted to understand the experiences that they find interesting, fun, and meaningful. Based on my discussions with the students and their teachers, as well as my observations of how the students behaved and chose to spend their time when they were not engaged in structured activities (e.g. what they talked about at lunch and what they did at recess), I developed the following list of components to try to incorporate into my curriculum:

- Opportunities for students to make connections to their personal experiences and interests (ex: sports, outer space, or animals)
- Opportunities for students to express themselves by
 - Telling personal stories
 - Sharing opinions
 - Engaging in creative, imaginative activities (making art, playing imaginative games, etc)
- Participating in high energy, action-oriented activities and games
- Using technology (iPads and laptops)
- Learning about anything of a humorous, extreme, surprising, or sensational nature

Components of Successful Curricula

The teachers I interviewed identified or described the following factors and characteristics in their most successful lessons and units:

- Building off of a theme or idea and exploring it in multiple ways (from multiple angles, with multiple activities, media, etc)
- Opportunities for creative expression and imaginative thinking
 - —> Allows students to connect to and take ownership of what they are learning
- Hands-on activities; interactive, kinesthetic learning
 - —> Bringing ideas to life; learning by doing
- Inclusive lessons that can be differentiated for different levels
 - Every student able to participate and contribute
 - Assignments in which each student can contribute something unique to a collective whole (ex: different roles/jobs in collaborative groupings)
- A culminating final product that students have the opportunity to share (ie in a showcase, performance, movie screening) - a piece of work that students invest time and energy into and can be proud of
- Presented in an interesting context; framed in a compelling or personally relevant way
 - Topics and ideas that allow for personal connection
- A mix of individual, partner, and group work activities or assignments
- Clear, intentional objectives
 - For the teacher - why to teach something a certain way

- For the students - why should they learn and care; what should they learn
- Responsive to/shaped by the interests and curiosity of the students

IV. Literature Review

Theories about Learning and Development

Theories from developmental psychology provide important insights into how students best learn. According to the constructivist model of child learning and development described by Piaget and Vygotsky, children actively construct their knowledge of the world through their experiences and interactions, especially during play. Piaget views children as intrinsically motivated, self-directed, budding scientists who learn and develop largely by acting independently on physical objects (Patricia Miller 30). Vygotsky takes a slightly different angle, focusing on the importance of social interaction, particularly peer collaboration and teacher guidance, in learning and development (Patricia Miller 173). The implication of their constructivist view is clear: learning is not a matter of passively receiving and storing knowledge but, rather, a dynamic process that occurs when children can interact with their surroundings.

Other psychologists such as Werner, Freud, and researchers who study temperament place an emphasis on a child's inner emotional experiences and unique individual perspective. Children, Werner emphasizes, must be understood as acting, feeling, creative individuals who see, interpret, and experience the world in unique ways as they explore and shift between different 'spheres of experience,' as when sliding between imagination and reality (Franklin 484). For Freud, a child's behavior and personality are shaped by continual seeking for personal fulfillment through action and interaction (Patricia Miller 110). Studies of temperament also focus on the child's inner self in interpreting behavior and personality, but they suggest that children respond to the world based on certain fixed and stable reactions with which they are born (Kagan; Chess and Thomas).

Another foundational thinker about education is John Dewey, who believed that learning should occur "through and in relation to living," both in terms of what is being taught and in terms of how it is being taught. He therefore argued that students should explore projects and activities with real-world significance as well as those that have personal meaning or interest for them individually. In addition, he advocated for an approach to teaching that promotes "active learning" by building off of, rather than suppressing, what he identified as the four natural impulses of the child: the investigative impulse, the expressive impulse, the constructive impulse, and the social impulse (Dewey 43).

In addition to all of these psychological theories about teaching in ways that reflect processes of learning and development, there are also compelling ideas in both the field of education and psychology about the importance of the classroom environment and culture. In thinking about how to make students better learners, educational psychologist Ann Brown called for the creation of a school culture centered on agency, reflection, effort, and progress. Specifically, she believed that by encouraging their students to articulate, share, and discuss

ideas, educators could empower them to develop a deep understanding that could be actively and creatively applied in “generative” ways (Brown 399). Educators like John Holt have similarly highlighted the importance of reflection and, in particular, of considering one's own and others' perspectives (Holt 16).

A Place for Character in the Classroom

While many theories and approaches to education reform focus on the teacher or the school, there are also theories that emphasize the student and the complex tangle of often interconnected factors that contribute to his/her success. For decades, educators and policymakers have known that demographic and environmental variables such as socioeconomic status and parental involvement, play a significant role in student success and academic outcomes. Recently, however, research at the intersection of psychology, education, and neuroscience has suggested that personal qualities and tendencies, such as attitudes, beliefs, and character, are just as, if not more important than some of these more easily quantifiable factors (Zins et al).

In fact, psychologist Angela Duckworth found that ‘grit’ is more predictive of academic performance than IQ (Duckworth and Seligman 941). Moreover, her research reveals that grit can be cultivated by strengthening self-discipline and persistence, which Duckworth identifies as the two character strengths that constitute grit. Similarly, research from the field of positive psychology also suggests that resilience can be increased by cultivating specific character strengths. Martin Seligman focuses on optimism and hope, and his research suggests that changing how students interpret situations, in particular, struggle and failure, can increase resilience. The implications of these findings are profound. In education, as in life, challenge tends to promote the most growth, so resilience is critical for learning. Moreover, resilience and grit correspond to effort, which is a necessary component of both achievement and skill.

Psychologist Carol Dweck provides a framework with which to tie many of these findings together and to consider them in the context of stories. She identified two different types of mindsets among students, and her research revealed that these different styles of thinking affect how students define their goals and interpret their outcomes, thus shaping students' overall motivational patterns and response to challenge. Specifically, students who have a ‘fixed mindset’ believe that their abilities are fixed and innate, and they display a “maladaptive motivational pattern” in which they define success in terms of performance, so they avoid challenging or novel tasks and are debilitated by confusion. In contrast, students with a ‘growth mindset’ believe that they can improve their abilities with effort, so they focus on progress, seeking novel challenges and persisting in the face of difficulty and learning more as a result (Dweck 1040).

Ultimately, a mindset is simply a story that students tell about themselves and their abilities, and that story is shaped by the stories and messages to which students are exposed. In fact, Dweck's research showed that teachers who define success in terms of learning and effort

can promote a ‘growth mindset’ in their students. Dweck’s research thus powerfully demonstrates the importance of stories and their effect on various habits and character strengths related to successful learning, including intrinsic motivation and grit. Moreover, her research, along with that of psychologists like Duckworth and Seligman, indicates the need for a major shift in thinking about the place of character development in the classroom. Indeed, Paul Tough made just such an argument in his book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*.

I personally agree with Tough and believe that schools should educate the whole child, not just the student, and that character building and social and emotional learning are an important part of the broader mission of education. Even for those who hold different educational ideologies, however, the benefits of focusing on character in the classroom are undeniable; children who have been taught to qualities like persistence, self-discipline, optimism, grit, and resilience benefit not just personally but also academically.

A Developmental Perspective on Elementary School Interventions

From the point of view of developmental psychology, elementary school represents a powerful time for such lessons in character, as well as for proactive interventions to keep students engaged in school. According to developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, around age 7, an important developmental transition takes place as children shift from the representational, egocentric, nonreversible, and semi-logical thinking that Piaget characterized as the Pre-Operational Stage to the Concrete Operational Stage in which they can engage in logical thinking about the concrete world by applying abstract, internalized mental operations to it.

Various experiments have shown that around this age, children also develop the ability to take other people’s perspectives and at the same time, strengthen their a sense of self (Norfolk et al 84). As elementary school students develop their sense of self, they begin to label themselves as smart or stupid, good students or bad students. If they identify as poor students or if they otherwise feel that school does not connect to their interests or identity, they tend to start disengaging from academics in a process that can become somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Norfolk et al 83). The older students get, the more difficult it becomes to change the way in which they see themselves and relate to school, both in terms of their mindset and in terms of the stories they tell about themselves as students.

Educational Benefits of Storytelling

Storytelling offers a powerful tool for interventions and for teaching more broadly, and its power comes in large part from its universal and foundational place in human life. Indeed, an extensive body of sociological literature discusses how storytelling is fundamental to how people experience their worlds and themselves. On a personal level, stories are the means through which individuals make meaning, develop a sense of identity, and imagine future trajectories for their lives. The narratives that people learn to tell about themselves can expand or limit their

possibilities for growth and development. On a social level, too, stories are tremendously powerful. They create and spread values and belief systems and shape how people relate to each other, whether uniting or dividing them (Frank 3).

Storytellers and educators who use stories in the classroom would agree wholeheartedly with such theories. Many of them discuss the power of storytelling and, in particular, the seemingly magical way in which an audience becomes captivated while listening to a story. Storytellers relate with amazement how, time and time again, regardless of the context - whether a school, a retirement home, or a prison - they have found that a good story can draw in, engage, and inspire listeners of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and interests. Indeed, storytelling can work with all sorts of individuals and learners, including ELL (MacDonald and Whitman 151) and special needs students (Macdonald and Whitman 165). Aspects of the storytelling experience connect to each one of the learning styles outlined in Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Chace 27). Moreover, one of the unique characteristics of storytelling is the fact that it is flexible and interactive, allowing the storyteller to adapt and respond to the audience as the story unfolds (Hamilton and Weiss 5). At the same time, listeners can actively participate in the story and create their own individualized versions of it as they visualize the story and fill in details with their imagination (Hamilton and Weiss xvi). Few, if any, activities are as universally enjoyable, engaging, and accessible while also being so personally meaningful.

Experts in education such as Kieran Egan and Vivian Paley have called for putting storytelling at the center of all teaching, and they are not alone. There are a number of thoughtful books written by educators and storytellers that provide compelling reasons for incorporating storytelling into education,⁴ along with a range of suggestions for doing so.⁵ They argue that storytelling can energize and animate curriculum (e.g. MacDonald and Whitman 71; Hamilton and Weiss 197), whether by connecting content to emotion in a way that reveals the human dimension of dry facts or by connecting content to reality and giving form to abstract ideas (Roe 10). By helping students see how an idea is relevant or connected to their lives, stories provide a context for learning - and an emotionally meaningful one at that. Learning thus becomes more engaging, enjoyable, and meaningful, and students are more motivated to learn and learn more effectively, internalizing information more deeply and remembering it more easily (e.g. Norfolk et al xvi). A Native American proverb captures the dynamic well: "Tell me a fact, and I'll learn. Tell me a truth, and I'll believe. But tell me a story, and it will live in my heart forever" ("Diversity Memo..."). When a story contains a lesson, that lesson too can live in students' hearts and minds.

Recognizing the wealth of anecdotal evidence regarding the power of stories, storyteller, educator, and researcher Kendall Haven undertook the ambitious task of collecting this anecdotal evidence and analyzing it in combination with research studies from 15 fields of science for his

⁴ See, for example, Chapters 1 and 2 of *Children Tell Stories* by Hamilton and Weiss; Roe pg 16; pp x-xv of Brody's *Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope*; or pp xiv-xv of *Story Solutions* by Kevin Strauss

⁵ See, for example, the books by Hamilton and Weiss; MacDonald and Whitman; Roe; Norfolk et al; or Gillard

book *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. He collected experiences from more than 100 performing storytellers and 1,800 story practitioners (mainly teachers) and reviewed over 150 qualitative and quantitative research studies - including literature reviews encompassing over 1000 additional studies - that discuss the effectiveness of stories and/or storytelling for specific applications, including education. Based on this meta-analysis, Haven concluded that human beings are 'hardwired' for stories. The human brain is predisposed to think, learn, and remember in terms of stories, and this tendency is reinforced throughout development to such an extent that adults depend upon the architecture of stories to interpret events and human behavior. It follows, he argues, that "stories are an effective and efficient vehicle for teaching, for motivating, and for the general communication of factual information, concepts, and tacit information" ("Hardwired for Story").

Indeed, individual research studies on the value of storytelling consistently reveal educational benefits such as enhanced memory, creativity, attention span, critical thinking skills, and application of concepts to new situations, as well as a more positive attitude towards subject matter taught through storytelling (Miller and Pennycuff; Baldwin and Dudding; MacDonald and Whitman 199). Also of note for my project is the fact that studies reveal that young children in particular benefit from stories, as stories provide a means for them to connect to and understand abstract or nuanced concepts that they would not otherwise be able to grasp (Hamilton and Weiss 2). Schank summarizes nicely: "Storytelling has demonstrable, measurable, positive, and irreplaceable value in teaching" ("Hardwired for Story").

Storytelling as a Means of Promoting Literacy

In addition to all of the general educational benefits of storytelling, storytelling has specific benefits on the language arts, making it a powerful and doubly effective tool for promoting literacy. Numerous studies⁶ show that listening to and telling stories enhances language acquisition and vocabulary use, reading comprehension, and various reading and writing skills (Miller and Pennycuff 36), including the ability to visualize, understand and apply narrative structures, summarize, sequence, predict, infer, and make connections. The six language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing) are highly interconnected and work in conjunction to contribute to literacy skills, so the numerous benefits of storytelling for literacy are no surprise. Storytelling not only integrates all of the language arts but it also provides a meaningful context and authentic purpose for them (Roe 33). Unfortunately, in many ELA classes in public schools, the language arts are often divorced from one another and from the very contexts (ie rich, exciting stories) in which they naturally exist. This approach fails to reflect the natural way in which students learn, improve, and apply these skills, and it also risks sucking the joy from language and literacy, decreasing students' engagement and motivation.

⁶ Many lists of these studies and numerous references are available, including in Baldwin and Dudding; MacDonald and Whitman 49 and 200; "Hardwired for Story;" and Hamilton and Weiss 13

Storytelling also contributes to literacy by offering exposure to and experiences with literature that foster an enjoyment of language and an interest in reading (e.g. Hamilton and Weiss 15). For students who are still learning to read, especially those who might be struggling, being able to listen to a story offers an enticing taste of what it feels like to read fluently and get caught up in a story (e.g. Roe 40; Norfolk et al 1). In addition to being enjoyable, this experience allows students to engage with the elements of a story more deeply. Rather than getting caught up in the mechanics of reading, students can focus on, internalize, and develop an intuitive understanding of a story's elements, form, and structure - a 'story schemata' (e.g Hamilton and Weiss 19; and Whitman 49). In this sense, storytelling can be understood as a both an introduction and an "invitation" - an invitation into the world of words, books, and learning (Norfolk et al 1; Roe 40). According to librarian and storyteller Barbara McBride Smith, storytelling is the best way to get children interested in reading (Hamilton and Weiss 15). I believe that lifelong readers are also lifelong learners and that storytelling is therefore also a way of making students lifelong learners.

Storytelling as a Means of Promoting Social and Emotional Learning

Using storytelling to get students to engage with stories also offers a rich social and emotional benefits (e.g. Pearmain 4). Telling, listening to, and exploring stories from different cultures builds cultural awareness and sensitivity, helping students to recognize the differences and commonalities across people and cultures. More generally, stories expose students to experiences that are different than their own, and, as a result, students become more sensitive to and appreciative of diversity, as well as more empathic and self-aware (Hamilton and Weiss 23; Roe 175). Stories also provide examples of different ways of responding to situations, and therefore help build students' inner resources and emotional awareness. Many stories, including as fables, folktales, and fairytales, serve to teach life lessons and provide positive and negative examples for listeners. At the same time, when it comes to exploring complex themes and questions about the human experience, stories allow for subtlety and nuance. As Hannah Arendt said, "Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."

The act of storytelling itself also provides social and emotional value. When someone tells a story, a powerful connection forms between that person and his/her audience. This connection is one of the critical differences between storytelling and read-aloud; when someone reads from a book, the book functions as a sort of barrier between the reader and listeners (Hamilton and Weiss 3).⁷

In the classroom, storytelling can be used to build community and establish a positive classroom culture based on respect and shared values (Hamilton and Weiss 23). Teachers can act as storytellers, but so too can students, and, in doing so, they build self-esteem and

⁷ Other differences include the extent to which the listener is called upon to participate in the story by using his/her imagination. When a book has pictures, the listener does engage with or personalize the story in the same way he/she would do when listening to someone tell it.

self-confidence and connect to their peers in new and meaningful ways (Hamilton and Weiss 16). Among the audience members as well, a connection forms on the basis of the shared experience of listening to the story, as well as the collectively received lesson or takeaway.

All of this research on storytelling, combined with my research on elementary school education, provided ample support for my hypothesis that a storytelling-oriented program could, in fact, offer a powerful way to address critical needs in the American public school education system, both in terms of academics and in terms of its approach to social and emotional education.

Existing Models of Storytelling in Education

My next step was to research the existing educational models, programs, and/or curricula that involve storytelling. After an extensive review of these models, I realized that most models tend to approach and think about storytelling in the classroom in one of two ways: as a tool for teachers to use or as skill for students to learn. Bringing storytelling to the classroom as a teaching tool seems largely motivated by academic goals, whereas involving students in storytelling seems to reflect more of a focus on social and emotional learning.

A.) Academic Use of Stories

Storytelling as a Teaching Tool:

When educators treat storytelling as a tool, they do so as teaching technique, making an effort to incorporate storytelling into curricula based on the recognition of its educational benefits. In fact, storytelling is at the heart of the educational philosophy of the Waldorf Schools, where teachers treat storytelling as their primary method of teaching, regardless of the subject (Baldwin). Although there is not currently such a value placed on storytelling in public schools, there are few, if any, drawbacks to using storytelling in a curriculum this way, and it can be done at no additional cost to teachers. Fitting storytelling into curriculum requirements does, however, tend to require an investment of the teacher's time and creativity for planning purposes, especially when teachers are trying out this approach for the first time. Public school teachers should not be offput by this, however, because there are a variety of resources available, including professional networks,⁸ websites, and books discussing how storytelling connects to Common Core State Standards (e.g. Hamilton and Weiss 14; "Storytelling and the Common Core Standards") and offering suggestions for how to incorporate storytelling into every class from math to music.

Stories in Curricula:

⁸ The National Storytelling Network (NSN) has a very active listserv and many special interest groups, including the Youth, Educators, and Storytellers Alliance (YES)

I also looked specifically into existing curricula involving storytelling. Interestingly, while there are numerous ideas for ELA folktale units⁹ - in part because teaching folktales is a Common Core State Standard requirement for third grade ELA curriculum¹⁰ -, very few of these have an explicit focus on storytelling. I found this surprising as folktales are, of course, originally an oral form of stories. Instead, most published or publically available curricula involving storytelling seek to teach a variety of non-ELA subjects through storytelling. This likely reflects the desire to use mandated public school ELA time to teach other subjects and the fact that storytelling is a convenient way of making a subject ELA-related, in addition to a powerful approach to teaching. Examples of such ready-to-use, storytelling-oriented curricula include “Sky Tellers, the Myths, the Magic, and the Mysteries of the Universe,” an astronomy unit created through a collaboration between the National Science Foundation and the International Storytelling Center, and “The Storytelling Project Curriculum,” a unit created by professors and students at Barnard College in order to teach high school students about race. Additionally, there are several of books, such as *Tales with Tales* and Michael Caduto’s *Keepers* series, that offer a large selection of ideas for building a nature-based or environmental science curriculum through storytelling. Much less common are curricula in which storytelling is a meaningful part of the curriculum content, not just an approach to teaching. These tend to be social studies curricula in which students engage with storytelling by collecting, listening to, and discussing other people’s stories and memories (Norfolk et al 113).

B.) Stories for Social and Emotional Benefits; Storytelling for Students

High School Storytelling Programs:

Other approaches to storytelling in the classroom use it less for its academic benefits and more for its social and emotional benefits. Programs with this approach seek to involve students in storytelling as a means of empowering them, promoting self-expression, and building positive community. The majority of these programs are for high school students and involve training these teenagers in personal storytelling, working with them to develop the skills and confidence to tell a personal story to an audience. Examples of such programs in schools include the Moth’s High School StorySLAM teams and Norah Dooley’s StoriesLive curriculum.

There are also a number of organizations that operate within a similar intersection of youth empowerment and personal stories but do so outside the classroom, offering enrichment opportunities for teenagers. In addition, rather than using oral personal storytelling, many of these programs encourage youth to share their stories through writing, poetry, and even theater.¹¹

⁹ See, for example, “When Tortoise Wins: Using International Folktales to Teach Language Arts” from the University of Pittsburgh, “Folktales and Social Development” by Cynthia Medaniels, or “Folk Tales and Fables: Curriculum Guide” by Mike Peterson and Jennifer Hind

¹⁰ The North Adams Public School District uses the ‘Race to the Top’ curriculum.

¹¹ See, for example, 826Boston, The Telling Room, The Playwright Mentoring Project, the nbCC Youth UNITY programs, and WordXWord.

Elementary School Storytelling Programs:

The closest equivalent programs for elementary school students involve teaching them to tell pre-existing stories such as folktales, fairytales, and simple children's books. Storytellers Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss have created a month-long storytelling unit for third graders involving folktales, and storyteller Karen Chace offers a guide creating an elementary school after-school storytelling troupe to tell folktales. All of these programs treat storytelling as a valuable skill to teach to students.

More often, storytelling programs for elementary school students take a imaginative, interactive, and informal approach to storytelling. Such programs are based on the work of the influential educational researcher and teacher Vivian Paley, who wrote extensively about the value of storytelling for learning and development, particularly for young students. Specifically, Paley developed an activity called storytelling/story acting, in which a young student dictates a story to a teacher who writes it down and then reads it aloud for the class to acts out together. The resulting stories are often fantastical and only loosely structured, but the emphasis of the activity is on building confidence and encouraging personal expression through language, rather than on instructing students in particular literacy skills (Mardell 58). Paley's storytelling/story acting model provides the basis for programs such as the "Boston Listens" program, which was piloted in the Boston Public School kindergarten classrooms, and the "Helicopter Stories" programs in classrooms in the U.K. A rigorous qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the Helicopter Stories program shows that it has positive results on students and facilitators alike (Cremin et al. 9).

C.) Blended Academic and Social and Emotional Learning

Having students tell stories is not the only way of promoting social and emotional learning with storytelling, however. StoryCorpsU, a program developed by the nonprofit StoryCorps, blends academics with personal empowerment in a year-long, cross-disciplinary high school curriculum in which videos from the StoryCorps' archive of personal stories are used to spark discussions and elicit personal stories from students. Finally, one could argue that studying stories - one of the most basic tenets of an ELA lesson - is in itself a way of promoting social and emotional development, but it can become even more so based on the stories that are selected (Pearmain 5). In addition, Barbara King's model of the "collaborative storymaking process" provides a method of responding to and engaging with stories on a personal and emotional level that could easily be used following a story told by a teacher for an ELA lesson (King 208).

V. Program Model Design

Design Ideas Based on Literature Review

Based on my fieldwork and literature review, I developed the following list of goals and best practices for the design and delivery of my curriculum:

- Opportunities for students to:
 - Play
 - Pursue their curiosity (ask questions, explore what interests them)
 - Explore and creatively express their ideas and experiences (i.e. through art and language)
 - Engage with their surroundings through a wide variety of activities, experiences, and physical materials
- Student-driven, hands-on, and interactive learning
- A combination of independent and collaborative, supported learning opportunities and activities
- Promoting a respectful, open, and supportive environment of shared values
- Encouraging reflection, discussion, and the consideration of multiple points of view
- Recognizing, respecting, and exploring individual differences

Design Ideas Based on Pre-Existing Storytelling Models

I concluded from my research into pre-existing storytelling models and programs that for classes in which stories are a necessary part of the curriculum, storytelling can be used as teaching tool, while the specific stories that are told, the way that students engage with them, and opportunities for students to tell their own stories can all promote social and emotional learning. In addition, a program that involves both student and teacher storytelling seems to be the most effective way to tap into both the academic and the personal benefits of storytelling.

Program Model: “The StoryBridge Module”

My goal in designing this program model was to create a usable, scalable, and practical module that is not simply a stand-alone unit for a particular school or grade level. The model is intended to bring engaging stories to the classroom, and the intended outcomes encompass the myriad benefits of storytelling, as well as the opportunity to create a bridge between students’ academic and personal experiences.

In fact, the idea of stories as bridges underlies the entire design of my model - to such an extent that I named the model “StoryBridge.” Stories act as bridges not only between things - between the academic and the personal, between different academic disciplines, between cultures, and between individuals - but also to things. StoryBridge is based on the belief that fostering a love of stories and a culture of storytelling among students can lead to a love of literature and reading, which then can open up new ideas and perspectives, leading students towards a life of learning.

StoryBridge Lessons

What StoryBridge offers is a simple but powerful way of structuring classroom time around stories and storytelling - an idea that can be implemented at no additional cost to a public

school. I designed the model to be used during library time because the library special is a fairly standard part of the school day set aside to promote literacy and to encourage students to read but, unlike ELA, is not dictated by the rigid curricular requirements. This model not only meets the basic goals of library time but exceeds them by offering opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration and personal enrichment. Another advantage of the StoryBridge model is its potential to be adapted to additional settings and contexts outside of library time, such as after-school programs or youth empowerment and literacy programs run by local non-profits.

At the heart of every StoryBridge lesson is a story, delivered to students by the librarian during a storytelling session. While any type of story could be used, folktales are the most obvious choice as they short, simple, and created for telling. Moreover, they are stories with great resonance and power; they exist as the product of years of testing by generations of storytellers. Ideally, the stories selected should draw from a range of cultures and countries.

Inspired by the ideas of storyteller Elisa Davy Pearmain, I decided that the storytelling session should be followed by activities that fall into one of two different categories, “Exploring” or “Connecting.” The goal of “Exploring” activities is to help students develop their understanding of a particular story and of story-related concepts more generally, while “Connecting” activities aim to deepen and expand upon this understanding by putting it into a context that feels relevant and meaningful to the students. These two types of activities thus work together in a thematic lesson, and “Exploring” activities should be followed by “Connecting” activities for students to have the full experience of the StoryBridge program and its benefits.

Story Time

In accordance with the advice of numerous storytellers and story practitioners (e.g. Pearmain 14), each storytelling session will be preceded and concluded by a simple ritual to help students to focus and to create a mood that sets the storytelling experience apart. The particular rituals could be a matter of the storyteller’s personal preference, but one simple and powerful opening ritual could be dimming the lights, turning on an electric candle, and ringing a chime, waiting to start telling the story until the sound of the chime fades. After the librarian finishes telling the story, the story time can be concluded with a closing ritual that reverses the opening ritual (e.g. by ringing the chime, turning the candle off, and turning the lights on).

“Exploring” Activities

“Exploring” activities are designed to engage the students with the stories in fun, interactive, and hands-on ways. They encourage students to explore the ideas and perspectives of a story through play, imagination, and creative expression. To keep students excited and to accommodate a variety of learning styles, activities in this category involve a range of different media, with many opportunities for personal expression. There are a number of physically engaging activities for young and/or high energy students. While participating in these activities, students are not only reviewing a story but also experiencing and internalizing it. In doing so,

they can develop their own, personally meaningful understanding of each story and of the elements and structures of stories more generally. In addition, they can practice important literacy skills including sequencing, summarizing, and visualizing.

“Exploring” activities can be grouped into three basic categories and include:¹²

- ***‘Translating’ the Story***
 - Whole group dramatization
 - Retell the story with puppets or a flannel board
 - Pantomime retelling game (assign different scenes to students; guess what the others are pantomiming)
 - Retell the story as gossip or as a news report
 - Create a song about the story
 - Create a poem about the story
 - Make sequential drawings or a comic strip of the story
- ***Entering the Story***
 - Role-play conversations or interviews with characters
 - Write letters to characters
 - Imagine being on a jury for characters
- ***Story-building***
 - Creative adaptation of the story/“What if...”
 - Change something about the plot
 - Add or change character(s) (including by inserting characters from previous stories)
 - Change the setting
 - Modernize the story
 - Change the point of view from which story is told
 - Create a new or alternate ending

“Exploring” activities that fall into the category of “Translating the Story” put a creative spin on the idea of reviewing or retelling a story. They ‘translate’ the story in the sense that their goal is to check and promote comprehension, and they take the original form of the story (ie oral delivery by the librarian) and change it into another form by altering who tells the story and how it is delivered. Given their emphasis on comprehension, these activities are especially appropriate for younger students, as well as for the first few lessons.

Activities in the categories of “Entering the Story” and “Story-building” require synthesizing and applying story-related concepts and therefore might be more successful after students have been exposed to and explored a variety of stories in previous library sessions. Story-building involves creatively adapting the story to develop a new story, so it is also a good way for teachers to informally assess students’ comprehension, as well as their comfort with and understanding of narrative structure and story elements. While Story-building could certainly be done in writing, the task of writing could limit creative thinking and detract from students’ enjoyment and engagement with the story, so I think the stories should be constructed and shared

¹² Many of these activities are drawn from Pearmain, Chase, and Hamilton and Weiss

orally. Another reason for keeping the focus on oral story-building is to allow students to experience storytelling and its many benefits for themselves since, unlike writing, it is already emphasized in other classes.

“Connecting” Activities

“Connecting” activities are designed to build off of the theme of a story, moving students beyond the content and world of a particular story and encouraging them to find connections to their own life and to the ‘real world.’ They work to build a meaningful context for stories and their lessons and to bring students’ experiences and sense of the world into harmony with their classroom experiences. These activities are therefore more focused on reflection and discussion than “Exploring” activities. In addition, the form that they take is more dependent on the theme of the story and the level (ie: personal, classroom, school, community/neighborhood, national, or global) at which they seek to create connections to the text. Examples of possible “Connecting” activities include expressing the theme of the story and its broader relevance through art (including poetry, music, and various forms of visual art) or sharing personal stories about the theme in one’s own life.

Considerations for Implementing a StoryBridge Lesson: Library Sessions

I estimated that each story follow-up activity would take at least 20 minutes and when I also accounted for the time it takes to introduce and close each library session, as well as to tell the story, I realized that a single 45-50 minute session of the library special has enough time for only one type of follow-up activity. I therefore decided that two library sessions should be devoted to one story. In the first library session, the librarian will tell a story, which will then be followed by an “Exploring” activity. Students’ engagement with that particular story will extend into a second session that begins with a review of the story (potentially through a short “Exploring” activity focused on retelling), followed by a “Connecting” activity (*see appendix 1*).

“Extending” Activities

To enhance students’ engagement with a story or stories even further, librarians might also consider “Extending” Activities, which would extend the story and its lessons outside of library time - to other classes and even to students’ homes. After considering how a story connects to their lives, students might be motivated to pursue or act upon that connection in some way, and the librarian could suggest possible action extensions to them. In addition, the librarian could collaborate with other teachers to develop interdisciplinary activities such as a research project related to the theme or content of a story. There are many different approaches such a research project could take, including researching the culture from which the story originates, different versions of the story, or the science and actual facts behind ideas in a story.

VI. Prototype Design

Character-Building Prototype of the StoryBridge Program

To put the StoryBridge model into an immediately usable form for librarians and to consider how it might be used to incorporate academics and social and emotional learning through storytelling, I developed a curriculum prototype. My mission for this specific prototype is to build character traits that promote resilience, social and emotional development, and deepened connection to self and others.

Several storytellers have published excellent books about using stories for building character and promoting social and emotional development in the classroom,¹³ but without a preexisting model for incorporating such ideas into the school day, the likelihood of public school teachers being able to implement them seems low. I therefore sought to put these ideas into a more useable form with my StoryBridge model, drawing in particular on ideas from Elisa Davy Pearmain and Kevin Strauss and adding my own as I did so.

My idea for this curriculum is to use stories about animals to present an array of valuable character traits, with each animal protagonist demonstrating and representing a trait that contributes to resilience, grit, and the motivational pattern and growth mindset that help students become strong learners and successful students. The curriculum and its focus on character is not simply about promoting academic and/or personal success among students, however. Character is a combination of personal habits and behavior towards others. Character building, therefore, benefits both the students in question and the many communities of which they are a part.

Curriculum Design Process

Given the significance of third grade literacy levels for high school graduation, I designed the curriculum specifically with third graders in mind, although it could also be used for other elementary school grade levels with minimal modification. I chose to base the curriculum on animal folktales because most elementary school children are interested in animals, and having animal characters in every story provides a very clear connecting thread. In addition, animals are characters with whom all students can feel a connection or affinity, regardless of their own gender or racial identity, so students tend to perceive the lessons and themes from animal stories as more universal than those from stories about specific people. Finally, given the mission of the curriculum and the developmental level of elementary students, I thought that it was important to provide students with a simple, recognizable, and concrete cast of characters through which they could deal in the abstract concepts involved in character-building.

¹³ In particular, I was very inspired by the ideas in *Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope: Stories, Storytelling, and Activities for Peace, Justice and the Environment* by Ed Brody; *The Moral of the Story: Folktales for Character Development* by Bobby Norfolk and Sherry Norfolk; *Building Character with True Stories from Nature* by Barbara Lewis; *Once Upon a Time...Storytelling to Teach Character and Prevent Bullying* by Elisa Davy Pearmain; and *Story Solutions: Using Tales to Build Character and Teach Bully Prevention, Drug Prevention, and Conflict Resolution* by Kevin Strauss

In considering what character traits to emphasize, I drew from David Levin, Dominic Randolph, and Chris Peterson's extensively researched and scientifically-supported list of character traits for success (Tough 76). Of the seven character traits that they identified - grit, self-control, zest, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, and curiosity - I decided that zest and curiosity could be promoted through the design and the delivery of the program, whereas social intelligence, grit, optimism, self-control, and gratitude should be the guiding characteristics behind the selection of stories in the curriculum. With these five character traits in mind, I read through numerous collections of folktales, looking for stories that met the following basic criteria:

- Animals as characters
- Main (animal) character provides a clear example, whether positive or negative, of a key character trait
- Engaging plot/content (not too simplistic)
- Not longer than a few pages in length → able to be told in about 10 minutes or less

I sought to blend academic and social and emotional learning not only through the use of the StoryBridge model but also through the selection of stories for this specific prototype. Specifically, I tried to choose stories that contain personally and socially meaningful thematic content, thereby functioning as a tool for building character while also representing valuable content in their own right. After reading through numerous books of folktales and selecting the most suitable stories, I organized them according to the traits embodied by the protagonist. I also noted key themes and the skills that could be developed through engaging with each story (*see appendix 2*). The animal protagonists illustrate different dimensions and manifestations of the character traits from Levin's list:

- Social Intelligence
 - Loyal Butterfly (friendship)
 - Helpful Guinea Fowl (friendship)
 - Responsible and Brave Parrot (citizenship)
 - Responsible Monkey (leadership)
- Grit (Persistence + Problem Solving) and Optimism
 - Resourceful Zebra
 - Optimistic Frog
- Self-control
 - Persistent Turtle
 - Disciplined Ant
 - Negative examples:
 - Rattlesnake

- Spider
 - Gratitude
 - Grateful Rabbit

In addition to representing specific traits, many of the animals also offer examples of serving different roles in a community, including being a leader, a follower, a citizen, a friend, a bystander, an ally, or a bully. In many of the stories, the animal protagonist exemplifies a positive character trait or interpersonal skill, while the antagonist or a minor character exemplifies the opposite of that trait or behavior, thereby reinforcing the lesson by serving as a negative example. In engaging with the stories in this curriculum, students will have the opportunity to explore the manifestations of various traits and to develop specific personal and community-oriented skills.

Lesson Plans for Curriculum Prototype

Each lesson in the curriculum prototype will focus on a story that highlights one animal and its character trait or cluster of related traits. In the first library session for each story, the librarian will engage students in a discussion about that animal protagonist, guiding them to identify and define its predominant character trait(s). Since lessons are composed of two library sessions, students will explore each trait over the course two weeks, a timeframe that will allow students to engage more deeply with the concepts.

The lessons are designed to build on each other, with some of the animals demonstrating secondary character traits that evoke an earlier animal's primary character trait, and some stories even featuring animal characters from previous lessons. More importantly, however, the lessons are explicitly connected to one another during Story-Building "Exploring" activities when students are asked to imagine how another animal character might have responded in that situation. This activity not only enforces earlier character trait lessons but also promotes flexible thinking and the ability to evaluate different possible responses to a situation. In the "Connecting" activities at the end of each lesson, students will be encouraged to consider ways in which they can in the future or do already act similarly to that animal. By the end of the curriculum, after identifying with every animals in this way, students should realize that they too can contain the traits of all of those animals and, what's more, they can choose demonstrate those traits in their choices and behavior.

VII. Possible Next Steps: Implementation

Curriculum Pilot

In order to further develop and troubleshoot this curriculum and the StoryBridge model for which it is a prototype, I would like to pilot it at Brayton Elementary School this upcoming year during library time for the third graders, and I am presently in discussion with the school. Ideally, I would run the pilot myself, modelling the idea for the librarian so that she can offer

feedback and perspectives and might also be inspired to try using the curriculum or the model for other grade levels.

Since I am familiar with the environment there and have already established connections with the Brayton third grade teachers and the librarian, as well as with the Literacy Coordinator for the North Adams Public School District, Brayton represents an ideal place for me to implement a pilot of my curriculum. Moreover, Brayton does not have a pre-existing structure or method for facilitating time in the library, and the Literacy Coordinator and librarian expressed interest in the idea of the StoryBridge model.

In addition, the specific curriculum will act as a complement to Brayton's new ELA curriculum, ReadyGen, which is organized thematically into four units for third graders: Observing the World Around Us; Connecting Character, Culture, and Community; Seeking Explanations; and Becoming an Active Citizen. My curriculum represents a powerful extension of the unit "Connecting Character, Culture, and Community," and various themes in the stories I have selected offer more specific points of connection to each of the ReadyGen units.

A pilot would also represent an important opportunity for me to determine what works well and what does not. Indeed, numerous elementary school teachers, as well as fellow Williams students who have implemented their own pilots at Brayton have told me that it is difficult to anticipate in advance how students will respond to a curriculum and that I should expect a necessary period of adjustment and trial and error during my pilot. My curriculum is, therefore, currently in a draft form, with several options for the first few lessons.

My goals for a pilot include determining how long the different component parts of the model take, as well as what activities are the most or least engaging. I also want to consider whether "Exploring" and "Connecting" activities do, in fact, work in distinct ways. If they were to overlap significantly, then I may reconsider whether it is necessary to divide a StoryBridge lesson over two sessions.

Pilot Assessment

Following the pilot, as a possible next step, I would want to find a way to assess its outcomes, likely through qualitative measures such as conducting interviews with or surveys of the librarian and students involved in the pilot, as well as the teachers of the students. Using such measures, I could consider student growth along both academic and social and emotional dimensions, and I could evaluate the success of the program by comparing those demonstrated student outcomes to the scientifically proven benefits of storytelling and to my goals for StoryBridge and my mission for its curriculum prototype.

Curriculum Packet

Finally after all of this, the lesson plans will need to be finalized and put into a curriculum packet that explains the StoryBridge model, describes the pilot and its outcomes, offers tips and suggestions for educators, and lists other relevant resources. This curriculum

packet would provide the materials and resources for educators to use either the specific curriculum or the general StoryBridge model. I am hoping the curriculum packet could be made available for free on the CLiA website, where schools and youth outreach organizations alike could access it.

VIII. Reflections

Challenges

Since I felt - and continue to feel - so intellectually and personally passionate about this work, one of the biggest challenges for me was to figure out how to take all of my ideas, questions, interests, and convictions and shape them into a “narrow” research project and then into an even more narrow curriculum product. There were many exciting potential directions in which I was able to imagine taking my research and my project, and it was difficult to focus on a single goal and mission. The ambitious scope of my project, with its many stages and dual levels of fieldwork and various types of research, as well as program/model design and prototype/curriculum design, further complicated this task of staying narrowly focused. Each stage or level of the project could have represented an entire summer project in and of itself.

Ideas for Further Explorations Building off of This Work

The more I thought about storytelling, the more I realized how many different missions storytelling could be directed towards - an exciting realization but also one that made the task of selecting a single mission all the more challenging. In designing my curriculum prototype, I set aside ideas for ways of cultivating mindfulness, combatting stereotypes and racism, promoting nature-based learning, and connecting students with senior citizens. Using any one of these ideas, it would be possible to continue developing prototypes of the StoryBridge model.

I also had ideas that could have been developed into interesting after-school programs, enrichment opportunities, or units at an independent school. I did not pursue these ideas for my project as they would have been difficult to fit into the school day and would not have served as a meaningful model. They could, however, represent interesting projects for future research and curriculum development. One such idea was using storytelling to develop an interdisciplinary, nature-based unit that takes the concept of Leave No Trace (LNT) and explores the positive and negative traces that we leave on the people and places around us and they on us.

Another way in which I could build off the work I did this summer would be to take some of the pre-existing models of classroom storytelling that I researched and to introduce them to elementary schools in the North Adams Public School District. Indeed, I encountered a few ideas that I think could be interesting and powerful additions to the North Adams classrooms, particularly the after-school student storytelling troupe proposed by Karen Chace and the storytelling/story-acting model that was piloted in the Boston Listens program.

Takeaway Lessons

The combination of fieldwork, scholarly research, and curriculum design for my project helped me consider the topic of education from a variety of angles. In particular, it taught me a lot about the experience and realities of being an educator and seeking to reform education from the ground up. I concluded that the issues with education in the United States do not seem to be from a lack of good ideas; at every stage of this project - even when thinking about an idea as specific as character-building through storytelling - I was able to find numerous relevant and helpful resources, from scientific research studies to whole books filled with curriculum suggestions and lesson plans. It felt to me at times that there were almost too many ideas, and that the real challenges with education are on the level of implementation, in the bridge between theory and praxis. As I learned firsthand, far more challenging than generating ideas and reading theories is the task of trying to sort through all of that research and then figure out how to translate it into the classroom, especially given curricular requirements and tight time and financial budgets.

I am inspired to continue exploring these issues and topics, and in regard to education, I hope to learn more about education policy and to consider how education reform can promote social justice. The project also reinforced my belief in the power and importance of stories. I did not expect to be personally affected by reading folktales for my curriculum, but I found myself thinking of these stories throughout the day and behaving a little differently as a result. The experience solidified my decision to be an English major and inspired me to consider other ways in which I can seek to bring stories into my own life and share them with those around me.

IX. Appendix

Appendix 1:

Library Session Outline

The general breakdown of a lesson and anticipated timing for its components is as follows:

Session 1 (45 min)

1. Introduction (5-8 min)
 - a. To lesson
 - b. To story
2. Story Time! (with opening and closing storytelling rituals) (10-12 min)
3. “Exploring” Activity (20-22 min)
4. Session Closing (5 min)

Session 2 (45 min)

1. Introduction (5 min)
2. Reviewing the story (ie with a brief “Exploring” activity focused on retelling) (10-12 min)
3. “Connecting” Activity (20-22 min)
4. Closing (5-8 min)
 - a. Of session
 - b. Of lesson

Appendix 2:***Animal Folktales to Build Character and Community*****I. Social Intelligence*****Friendship*****Story #1: *Three Butterfly Friends***

- **Butterfly representing Loyalty**
 - ***Traits explored:*** respect, loyalty, perseverance, kindness, politeness, consideration
 - ***Themes:*** friendship, inclusion vs. exclusion, diversity (of appearance, respect for/appreciation of vs. fear of), judgement vs. acceptance and open-mindedness
 - ***Skills developed:*** problem solving; bullying prevention
 - ***Source:*** Pearmain 99; Strauss 44
 - ***Origin:*** Germany

Story #2: *How the Guinea Fowl Got Her Spots*

- **Guinea Fowl representing Helpfulness**
 - ***Traits explored:*** kindness, courage, loyalty, empathy, persistence
 - ***Themes:*** friendship, teamwork, responsibility (to friends)
 - ***Skills developed:*** problem solving; collaboration; bullying prevention; helping those in need
 - ***Source:*** Pearmain 130; Strauss 38
 - ***Origin:*** Africa

Citizenship**Story #3: *The Brave Little Parrot***

- **Parrot representing Responsibility and Bravery**
 - ***Traits explored:*** responsibility, perseverance, courage, love, compassion, optimism
 - ***Themes:*** responsibility (to community), civic duty, sacrifice, privilege, rewards for work
 - ***Skills developed:*** being a good example; seeking explanations (pourquoi story); helping those in need; recognizing responsibilities; learning from others
 - ***Source:*** Pearmain 74
 - ***Origin:*** India

Story #4: *How the Beetle Won a Colorful Coat*

- **Parrot representing Responsibility and Bravery (example 2)**
 - ***Traits explored:*** respect, empathy, assertiveness
 - ***Themes:*** pride/ego vs. humbleness, judgement, appreciation of differences
 - ***Skills developed:*** problem solving; bullying prevention; being an ally; recognizing others' strengths; seeking to understand before judging
 - ***Source:*** Strauss 29; Pearmain 271
 - ***Origin:*** Brazil

Story #5: King Solomon and the Hoopoe Bird

- Parrot* representing Responsibility and Bravery (example 3)
 - **Traits explored:** responsibility, courage, assertiveness, wisdom, being prepared (foresight), humility
 - **Themes:** wisdom, compassion, greed, abuse of power, respect
 - **Skills developed:** bullying prevention; speaking out/taking a stand; learning from others; changing your mind and admitting that you were wrong
 - **Source:** Pearmain 239
 - **Origin:** Jewish
 - *adapted from the original hoopoe bird

Leadership**Story #6: The Monkey King**

- **Monkey representing Leadership and Responsibility**
 - **Traits explored:** leadership, courage, responsibility (to those you lead)
 - **Themes:** sacrifice, care for community/civic duties, respect, greed, empathy
 - **Skills developed:** learning from others; changing your mind and admitting that you were wrong; problem solving
 - **Source:** Pearmain 228
 - **Origin:** India (Jataka)

II. Grit + Optimism**Story #7: Never Give Up! A Tale of Two Frogs**

- **Frog representing Perseverance and Optimism**
 - **Traits explored:** determination, optimism
 - **Themes:** hope
 - **Skills developed:** positive thinking
 - **Source:** Pearmain 250
 - **Origin:** adaptation of Russian folktale (also attributed to Aesop)

Story #8: The Tortoise and the Hare

- **Turtle representing Perseverance + Patience**
 - **Traits explored:** determination, patience, dedication
 - **Themes:** pride/ego vs. humbleness, confidence, hard work, judgement
 - **Skills developed:** recognizing others' strengths; paying attention; working with mindfulness, care, and intention
 - **Source:** Pearmain 248
 - **Origin:** Aesop (Greece)

Story #9: Brer Tiger and the Terrible Wind

- **Zebra* representing Resourcefulness**
 - **Traits explored:** resourcefulness, bravery, cleverness

- **Themes:** bullying, generosity vs. greed/selfishness, sharing vs. hoarding, justice, teamwork
- **Skills developed:** problem-solving, collaboration, bullying prevention; awareness of limited environmental resources
- **Source:** Faulkner
- **Origin:** adapted from African folktale
- **adapted from the original rabbit*
- *connection to weather unit in 3rd grade science*

Story #10: *Heads or Tails*

- Zebra* representing Resourcefulness (example 2)
 - **Traits explored:** flexible thinking/adaptability
 - **Themes:** teamwork
 - **Skills developed:** problem solving; collaboration; learning from your mistakes; bullying prevention
 - **Source:** Pearmain 56
 - **Origin:** unknown
 - **adapted from the original horse*

III. Self-Control

Story #11: *How the Rattlesnake Got Its Venom and Rattles*

- Rattlesnake representing Self-Control (and lack of)
 - **Traits explored:** self-control (moderation), social intelligence,
 - **Themes:** abuse of power, leadership, fairness
 - **Skills developed:** group problem-solving; conflict resolution; assertive communication; seeking explanations (*pourquoi* story)
 - **Source:** Strauss 196
 - **Origin:** adapted from an African folktale

Story #12: *Anansi and the Pot of Wisdom* (another version = *The Calabash of Wisdom*)

- Spider representing lack of self-control
 - **Origin:** Nigeria (Igbo)
 - **Traits explored:** thoughtfulness/wisdom, resourcefulness?,
 - **Themes:** forms of intelligence (wisdom, thoughtfulness, common sense, cleverness, resourcefulness), greed, judging others
 - **Skills developed:** problem-solving; learning from others
 - **Source:** Pearmain 332; *Anansi and the Pot of Wisdom* by Muriel Mandell

Story #13: *The Grasshopper and the Ant*

- Ant representing Discipline
 - **Traits explored:** being prepared, concentration/focus, persistence, patience, kindness, generosity
 - **Themes:** hard work, gratitude
 - **Skills developed:** planning and setting goals; delayed gratification
 - **Source:** Pearmain 246

- **Origin:** Aesop (Greece)

IV. Gratitude

Story #14: *The Secret Heart of the Tree*

- **Rabbit representing Gratitude**

- **Traits explored:** gratitude, respect, appreciation, honesty, consideration, empathy
- **Themes:** respect for others, good manners, honesty vs. dishonesty, greed vs. self-restraint/moderation
- **Skills developed:** environmental stewardship; bullying prevention
- **Source:** Pearmain 268
- **Origin:** adapted from Africa

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