

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Worcester		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Enhancing literacy and creativity amongst primary aged schoolchildren through a children's literature and storytelling festival		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Jean Webb	Professor of Children's Literature	1996-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Beeline, a children's storytelling festival, was established in 2004 by Professor Jean Webb and has since run annually. The festival has impacted on primary school curricula and classroom practice in the region, by promoting the use of children's own story-telling, writing as a means of exploring personal and social issues, as well as improving general literacy; it has created opportunities for university students, particularly trainee teachers, to develop skills and knowledge, and has contributed positively to the practice of the authors and artists who deliver the festival.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Professor Jean Webb has a long-established international reputation in the field of Children's Literature. She was Executive Board Member of the Children's Literature Association (2010-13) and of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (2013-17). She has supervised 19 PhDs, including that of renowned children's author Michael Rosen, and has examined 35 PhDs in the field.</p> <p>In 1998, Webb set up a research centre at the University of Worcester, The <i>Centre for Children's Literature, Literacy and Creativity</i>, that brought her own expertise in literary criticism of children's literature together with that of education researchers and practitioners focused on using children's stories, in both their written and oral form, to develop children's literacy skills but also to develop their citizenship.</p> <p>In this interdisciplinary context, three key strands emerged in Webb's (and the Centre's) work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the first focused on examining the ways in which contemporary literary texts for children engage with key social issues • the second on how children's literature could be used to engage children with issues of direct relevance to them • the third on how children's literature could be utilised in teaching literacy to primary aged children. <p>Under the first strand, two key "issues" emerge in Webb's research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's health with a particular focus on obesity (Reference 1) and children's relationship with food (Reference 5) • Environment including environmental awareness (Reference 2) and climate change (Reference 6). 		

Reference 3 presents an example of the second strand. The paper explores the ways in which children's fiction can be used to develop environmental agency in children, highlighting the educational potential of children's literature to deepen understanding of place and environment, encouraging the belief in young people that they can be and can become agents for change.

Under the third strand, Webb worked closely with colleagues in educational research contributing chapters to books exploring pedagogical principles for English Language Teaching widening children's and teenagers' literacy competences as well as their horizons through insightful engagement with texts (Reference 6) and exploring new initiatives in primary language teaching (Reference 4).

Against this background, Webb established a small children's literature and storytelling festival in 2004 to carry the Centre's research into practice. The first iteration ran for a single day and brought 100 pupils from local schools, focused on those children for whom such opportunities were rare, to engage in a series of events with Webb and her team, but also with children's author Michael Rosen. The festival became a core part of the Centre's engagement strategy over the next 8 years gradually growing in scale and scope before being expanded further by the University in 2012 when it became a week-long event.

Webb has remained central to the development of the festival, both in terms of vision and content, sitting on the Festival Steering Group since the Festival's expansion in 2012. Her knowledge and understanding and indeed personal relationships have been key to attracting major children's authors, whilst her research focus on environmental and health issues in children's literature have contributed to themes running through the festival programme. Further the Festival's fundamental and continuing focus on children's literacy and creativity remains true to Webb's original vision.

3. References to the research

1. Webb, J. (2008) "Voracious Appetites: the Construction of 'Fatness' in Children's Literature" in Keeling, K. & Pollard, S. (eds), *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature. Children's literature and culture* 59. Routledge, London, pp. 105-121.
2. Webb, J. (2009) "Is Our Future Set in Stone? A Discussion of Michelle Paver's Chronicles of Ancient Darkness" in Harding, J., Thiel, E. & Waller, A. (eds.), *Deep Into Nature: Ecology, Environment and Children's Literature*. Pied Piper Press, Lichfield, pp. 258-267.
3. Bigger, S. and Webb, J. (2010) "Growing Environmental Activists: Developing Environmental Agency and Engagement Through Children's Fiction", *Environmental Education Research*, 16 (3 & 4), pp. 401-414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504621003613145>
4. Webb, J. (2011) "Learning and Teaching Literacy using Children's Literature" in Cox, R. (ed.) *Primary English Teaching: An Introduction to Language, Literacy and Learning*. Sage, London, pp. 51-70.
5. Webb, J. (2013) "Food: Changing Approaches to Food in the Construction of Childhood in Western Culture" in Wu, Y., Mallan, K. & McGillis, R. (eds.), *(Re)imagining the World: Children's literature's response to changing times. New Frontiers of Educational Research*. Springer, New York, pp.93-104.
6. Webb, J. (2018) "Environmental havoc in teen fiction: Speculating futures" in Bland, J. (ed.), *Using Literature in English Language Education: Challenging Reading for 8-18 Year Olds*. Bloomsbury, London, pp. 209-23.

References 1, 2 and 5 were part of the University's REF2014 submission to English Language and Literature, in which over 77% of outputs were rated as 2* or above. References 1, 2, 4 and 5 are available on request. Reference 6 is part of the University's REF 2021 submission and has been rated as at least 2* through the peer review processes that inform selection of outputs set out in the University's REF 2021 Code of Practice.

4. Details of the impact

The impact claimed here arises from a children's literature and storytelling festival, Beeline. The festival has run every year from 2004 to 2019, halted only in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic. The festival has grown significantly over those 15 years in structure, scope and attendance. Since 2012, it has run as a week-long event in October hosted on the University campus but with a significant outreach element, with components of the festival, specific events and workshops being taken into schools across Worcestershire and into venues off campus. It has increasingly focused on telling stories in all their forms, through the written word (the festival has hosted many significant authors of children's literature, e.g. Anne Fine, Kevin Crossley Holland., Michael Rosen, Jacqueline Wilson), through the spoken word (e.g. storytellers such as Michael Kerins), through illustration (e.g. Petr Horacek, Axel Scheffler) and through performance, reflecting the research centre's wider focus on the link between literacy and creativity.

The festival is primarily targeted at schoolchildren and at schools in Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Warwickshire and into Birmingham, for the most part primary age but also secondary, although since 2012 there has also been a "public" arm of the festival targeted at families. Data presented in table 1 shows there has been a steady growth in attendance, with around 30,000 children and their teachers taking part in the festival over the period (Source A).

Year	Children	Schools
October 2013	3000	44
October 2014	3000	39
October 2015	4100	38
October 2016	4107	56
October 2017	4200	53
October 2018	4200	57
October 2019	4327	50

The primary impact of the festival has been on children:

- This is firstly through their direct engagement with the festival. The festival always attracts fulsome praise from the children themselves. It brings them into contact with the written word, with the process of storytelling in all its forms and with key social and environmental issues presented through the stories. An independent evaluation of the festival undertaken in 2016 which surveyed teacher's views on the benefits of the festival highlighted its inspirational value, in particular inspiring children to write, its impact on their learning experience, and on their attainment (Source B).
- It is secondly through the contribution of the festival to primary school curricula and classroom practice. Many schools visit the festival every year and build it into their lesson planning and overall literacy and orality strategies for the Autumn term. This is highlighted by testimonies from schools who have attended the festival over a number of a years (Source C). These testimonies set out the simple but fundamental value of the festival in engaging children with reading and writing; a number of teachers note that many children do not experience reading outside of school and emphasise the centrality of the festival in helping them understand that reading is valued and is fun. They highlight how the festival enriches their curriculum: for example, themes explored at the festival, such as environment, have been used as the jumping off point for class literacy topics on conservation and climate change.

The festival has also brought benefits to the University's own students:

- Since 2012, the University's School of Education has worked with the Festival to provide storytelling workshops to 150 students per annum on the BA Primary Initial Teacher Education. These festival workshops have become a key component of the curriculum for this course recognising the centrality of storytelling to developing children's comprehension skills and thus the need to develop trainee teacher's knowledge, understanding and practice in this area. The benefits for the students' own development

but also for their future pupils have been articulated by the Course Leader for Initial Teacher Education (Source D). She highlights that feedback from students on these workshops has stressed their value in developing their confidence and their practice.

- The festival also offers a Graduate Commission to students in the School of Arts (UG and PG). This is an opportunity for a group of students to produce and present their work at a festival for the first time. Students who have been given this commission have gone on to tour their show after the festival and have stated that it has been a critical stepping-stone in the journey from University to professional practice (Source B).

The value of the Festival is clearly articulated by the authors, artists and performers themselves (Source E). For example, Michael Rosen writes passionately about the impact the festival has on children, matched by Kevin Crossley-Holland, whilst Michael Kerrins speaks articulately about the same thing but also how it has benefited him as a storyteller. Indeed, there is evidence that the festival has had reciprocal benefits for the authors, artists and performers themselves. This is set out by Anne Fine who speaks about how the festival has provided her with ideas and opportunities to develop her work.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Attendance data in University's Annual Accounts 2013/14 to 2019/20
- B. Independent evaluation of the Beeline Festival 2016
- C. Testimonies from schools – teachers' views are collected annually through feedback mechanisms but in addition testimony was sought from schools who have attended the festival over a number of years and which are broadly representative of schools in the region.
- D. Testimony from Course Leader BA Primary Initial Teacher Education
- E. Testimony from authors, storytellers and artists – testimony was sought on the general impact of the festival but also the impact on their practice from a number of key contributors to the festival over its lifetime and specifically from 2013-2019. Testimony was provided by Peter Chand, Kevin Crossley Holland, Anne Fine, Petr Horacek, Michael Kerrins, Michael Rosen.