

## Squeeze in or squeeze out? How teachers fit the non- Biblical parable to the NSWDET *English K-6 Syllabus*.

Nita SMITH KING

Faculty of Education & Social Work  
University of Sydney

Robyn EWING

Faculty of Education & Social Work  
University of Sydney

Paper to be presented at the International Education Research  
Conference hosted by the  
Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE),  
Sydney, Australia,  
27 November -1 December, 2005.

Contact: [nita@radio-active.net.au](mailto:nita@radio-active.net.au)

P.O. Box 169  
Ingleburn, 1890.  
N.S.W. Australia

## **ABSTRACT**

Raising Australian literacy standards continues to be a focus for both Commonwealth and State governments. The setting of benchmarks, emphasising measurable outcomes, has arguably led to more explicit teaching methods. Many schools, parents and teachers report improved literacy results. Sachs (2001) however, has argued that the resultant curriculum control comes at a cost to teacher professionalism, while Ewing (2003) has highlighted the intensification and increasing complexity of teachers' work. This paper reports on research with 65 NSW government primary teachers. Questionnaire data suggests that trying to confine literacy to a set of basic parameters imposed by an external authority leaves teachers uncertain about dealing with literary forms such as the non-Biblical parable (e.g., *The Little Engine That Could*). Nevertheless, this literary device is so highly regarded for the development of values and thinking skills that teachers use them regardless of perceived curriculum restraints—evidence of creative dissent. The paper also argues that teachers need to be treated as professionals, able to stretch boundaries of syllabus documents in order to respond to the needs of their students without feeling uncertain and/or guilty.

## INTRODUCTION

We live our lives by story. We use story to make sense of the past, the present and the future. As Turner (1996:i) says “(s)tory is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organised as stories” with narrative imagining “a way of looking into the future, predicting, planning and of explaining” (Turner, 1996:3). The narrative with parallel implied meaning/s is called a parable because of its side-throwing nature (like the mathematical parabola). It is a literary form found from antiquity in many cultural settings. Parables have endured since pre-Biblical times and we assume they are here to stay given their continued use in various forms today.

Essentially parables are “stories with meaning” (Cuddon, 1991) or “story plus projection” (Turner, 1996:3). With or without a coda to point to a message, the parable can have a “powerful transforming effect on people’s lives” (International Federation for the Teaching of English {IFTE}, 2003:3) in either the oral or written form. As Turner (1996) says,

*the parable conveniently combines story and projection. Parables serve as a laboratory where great things are condensed in a small space. To understand parable is to understand root capacities of the everyday mind, and conversely. (p.4)*

Parables from the simple children’s narrative *The Little Engine That Could* to Lake-DellAngelo’s (1993) longer, but powerful, *Parable of the Bridge* have the potential to act as catalysts in the process of personal, educational and organisational change because they slip past defences. As Lake–DellAngelo (personal communication, June 16, 2003) has written “... [they] allow us to learn [the lesson of] a story without taking it personally”. She adds “[t]he ability of the parable to teach and entertain at the same time is very powerful”.

Many people associate the parable with those told by Jesus. However, the parable is not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Many of the stories told by Sharrazad over the one thousand and one nights were parables. As well as being found in Buddhist, Chinese, American Indian, Afro-American, Aboriginal, South American cultures and those across Europe, parables are also found in the story-telling of many other peoples such as the Eskimo and the Irish. Thus the parable is a literary form that already has an “elsewhere of potential” (IFTE, 2003:3). Parables are not “owned” by the English-speaking world.

Anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that parables are used because they are seen as a fairly simple way of getting a point across through the use of

metaphor or stories within stories, or both. This may well be the case for those children and adults who are able to see both the story and the projection of the parable. Those who find that difficult may not “see” the point until someone else helps in that process, pointing out what to look for—much like the magic 3-D pictures that become popular from time to time. Seeing the first is often the hardest. Having an idea of what the picture is may help, but some people may never see what others can see. Parables are not always easily understood.

This paper reports on a study designed to explore the teaching of parables in NSW primary schools, although the word ‘parable’ was not used in any interaction with school personnel. This was done to help the respondents focus on the structure and purpose of “stories like *The Little Engine That Could*” and not limit their understanding of the term ‘parable’ as used in the Judeo-Christian context. In an educational environment where 73% of all primary teachers in Australia teach in NSW government schools, the selection of a sample of such teachers gives a picture of both state and federal trends.

The Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr. Brendan Nelson has emphasised, as part of the National Inquiry into Literacy Teaching (DEST, 2004:4) the need for “real, sustained improvements in the literacy...skills of Australian to better prepare them for the future”. However, as Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997), Luke (1998), Cope and Kalantzis (2000) and Freebody (2004) have argued, that will not happen if understand reading structures, the mechanic, or both, yet the message. That applies whether the message is contained in text or non-text communication (e.g., advertising, art, oral communication to name a few areas).

The study had two parts, one confirmatory, the other exploratory and was part of a larger Type VIII Sequential Mixed Moel design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998:151–156). Firstly it located teacher use of the parable in an Australian school confirming anecdotal evidence about how often, how and why teachers use stories like *The Little Engine That Could*. Secondly, the study explored teacher-syllabus interaction, asking *Do you think these kinds of stories are discussed in the NSW English K-6 Syllabus? If so, where? If not, should they be?* That question yielded some interesting response patterns in regards to issues of teacher professionalism—namely the narrowing of the language curriculum and the resultant de-skilling of teachers—thus supporting Sachs’ (2001) concern that curriculum control affects teacher professionalism.

## METHOD

### Participants

Approval for the study was given by the ethics committees of the University of Sydney and the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSWDET). Permission to approach local schools was also given by the relevant NSWDET District Superintendent.

Apart from one pre-service teacher, all participants were currently employed by the NSWDET. One very experienced early childhood teacher attached to a large primary school also responded to the survey. Approximately 13% of respondents did not indicate their teaching experience. Twenty six respondents had eight or less years' experience teaching. Twelve respondents had taught between 10 and 16 years, while fifteen respondents had taught between 19 and 30 years. Only one respondent was male.

The schools were spread across an outer Sydney DET district and ranged from schools with a staff of 35 teachers to schools with a staff of 10. The school and the surrounding housing settlements were quite diverse in terms of facilities, affluence and socio-economic status.

Although most principals encouraged or permitted interested teachers to respond, at least two principals restricted the survey to those they thought would most likely respond and/or those they thought would be best able to answer the questions—an opportunity sample. These irregularities meant that some of the responses represented the views of teachers who were seen as more enthusiastic or confident in the teaching of English. This is particularly relevant to the final question in the survey, namely how these stories relate to the NSW *English K-6 Syllabus*. Informal comments by a few teachers suggested that the inclusion of this question meant the survey required them to reflect carefully.

The survey was conducted during Term 3, 2001. In many cases it came before or after other major school events such as Basic Skills Testing, Education Week and major cultural and sporting events in and between schools. In many cases, principals spoke of the difficult job of balancing the willingness to contribute in the process with the sheer weight of additional activities already being placed on teachers' loads in a time of rapid policy change and professional learning demands.

## **The Teacher Survey—“Research into Narratives like *The Little Engine That Could*”**

Participants were required to read an explanatory letter which made the required ethics statements, focussing participants’ attention on “stories like *The Little Engine That Could*”. Attached was the single page questionnaire. The questionnaire was researcher-designed and comprised three parts.

**Part 1** comprised three questions that participants answered using a rating scale (7 *always* to 1 *never*). This part provided frequency data. Participants were asked (a) how often they used such stories in general and (b) how often they used them in their written and oral forms. The word ‘parable’ was not used in the information letter because of the possibility of confusion between parable as a generic form and the specific use of the form by Jesus. It was decided that information about parables as a generic term would be best given in the report going back to participating schools. There was also provision for additional comments in the survey but less than 4% of participants chose to use this opportunity. **Part 2** comprised four questions. In addition to responding to why and how they used such stories, teachers were required to specify some examples of the kinds of messages that were in stories they have used. **Part 3** asked teachers: “*Do you think these kinds of stories are discussed in the NSW English K-6 Syllabus? If so, where? If not, should they be?*”

### **Procedure**

A NSWDET district superintendent provided an introductory letter and suggested a sample of 14 schools that he considered representative of the district. The final sample came from 13 schools. Initial contact was made with schools by telephone. These calls were followed by the formal letter to the principal (including copies of the DET approval and the actual survey). One principal organised a staff meeting so staff could be approached by the researcher. However, most principals or executive staff approached staff themselves at such meetings.

Kits included the explanatory letter and the survey. Principals stipulated the number of ‘kits’ to be provided for use and these were delivered to schools for internal distribution. To protect anonymity and to increase response rates, teachers were also provided with a stamped addressed envelope.

All responses were kept in school groups using a code that represented individual schools. Kits included the explanatory letter and the survey. To protect the anonymity of the participants, their responses were coded according to their school and years of experience. These codes were to be used when quoting responses. For example A:08 would refer to a teacher

with 8 years' experience at school "A". An 'x' denoted the participant had not stated the number of years taught. Where there was more than one teacher with the same experience (or not stated) letters were used (H:20a; H:20b; H:xa; H:xb).

## RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Question responses are discussed below in response to each question.

### ***Part 1: Frequency of Use—The When Question.***

Teachers were asked how frequently they used "stories like *The little Engine That Could*". They were also asked how often they used them in (a) the oral form, and (b) the written form. That meant there were three separate, but related responses.

Even though responses to the question of how frequently these teachers use these kinds of stories were uncomplicated, an examination of the response patterns when the responses concerning oral and written usage indicated that it would be unwise to take the responses to the oral/written divide at face value because of the different patterns discernable. The overall grade of "6" (i.e., "frequently") can be used to illustrate this point. Some teachers used the overall grading as a mean (6: 7/5 or 6: 5/7). Some used the overall grade as the sum of other responses (6: 2/4 or 6: 5/1). Others used the overall grade as an initial response and then expressed a balance between oral and written almost randomly (6: 4/4 or 6: 5/5). Still others chose an overall grade and then appeared to indicate a tendency between one or other form (6: 6/5; 6: 5/6). It was therefore clear that using numerical data from the oral/written divide as it stood would prove unreliable.

To preserve the validity of the data provided by participating teachers, it was decided to concentrate initially on the overall grades and then further subdivide the oral versus written responses as one of three patterns. These three patterns were

- (a) an indication towards an oral preference (eg.7/5; 4/2; 6/5),
- (b) an indication towards a written preference (eg.5/7; 2/4; 5/6),
- and
- (c) an indication that both oral and written forms tend to be used equally (eg.3/3; 4/4; 5/5).

Table 1 shows overall use (*always / frequently / often / sometimes / seldom*). No respondent chose *rarely* or *never*. It can be noted that 47% of respondents use these kinds of stories *frequently* or *often*, while 46% of respondents use

them *sometimes*. No teacher used the “never” option. These results confirm anecdotal evidence that most teachers do, in fact use these kinds of stories in the classroom.

When the results of preferences towards using such stories were examined in terms of use in the oral form, the written form or equally, there seemed to be a pattern—a movement along the continuum of usage. In other words, this data suggests that the more teachers used parables, the more likely they were to use them in the oral form. Conversely, the less frequently teachers used these stories, the more likely they were to use them in the written form. Further studies need to examine if this hypothesis can be supported and identify any contributing factors.

TABLE 1

<i>Teacher use of parables, showing preferences towards oral or written forms</i>														
“Always”			“Frequent”			“Often”			“Sometimes”			“Seldom”		
1			15			15			30			4		
O	E	W	O	E	W	O	E	W	O	E	W	O	E	W
1	-	-	7	6	2	7	2	6	7	10	14	-	-	4

O= Tendency to use parables more in oral format

E= Tendency to use parables in oral and written formats equally

W= Tendency to use parables more in written format

### **Summary**

As suggested, the teachers in this sample seem to be confirming anecdotal evidence among practicing what some literacy experts have long suspected, namely that the more teachers tend to use these stories the more they tend to use them in the oral form. Conversely it also seems to suggest that teachers who use them less frequently tend to use them in the written form. At this stage, however the sample size is too small to make any definitive claims.

### ***Part 2—Why and How teachers use these stories and What messages they contain.***

**Question 1** asked teachers: “*What benefits do you see exposing children to these kinds of stories?*” Teachers responded in three main ways, almost exclusively interpreting this question in regard to benefits for the children’s on-going education as opposed to benefits for their own teaching career by achieving stated objectives. Some teachers made multiple responses so there were 92 separate comments from the 65 respondents.

These stories were seen as useful

- (a) for accessing information that would relate to *social/interpersonal outcomes* including daily living skills and personal development (sometimes through the use of such skills) (54.3% of responses),
- (b) in the *teaching of analytical literary skills* (35.9% of responses), and
- (c) as a *teaching tool* (9.8% of responses).

Although initially appearing to suggest a product/process divide, the responses were on a continuum between process and product. Given this survey touched the tip of the iceberg, it must be emphasised that the initial perception of a divide between skills or process issues does not mean these teachers would be unable to understand the importance of the relationship between skills involved in accessing parallel meaning/s and social and/or interpersonal growth. Indeed, given responses to Questions 2-4, there is considerable evidence that most teachers who tended to emphasise skills outcomes were aware of (and actively facilitated) social and/or interpersonal outcomes.

Parables for Social/Interpersonal Outcomes: [50 responses] Teachers believed very strongly that these kinds of stories allow children to be exposed to various situations [B:5 et. al.] to enable them to develop their own set of morals/values [H:20; F:4 et. al.]. Sometimes this involved making choices (between) moral dilemmas [H:10] which could be done through the use of imagination [B:5]. They also strongly believed that because they can often relate to characters' feelings [C4] they provided a context that children can understand [C:6]. Teachers saw that this is better than trying to teach abstract ideas (out of context) and it makes it real [C:6]. They also used them to reinforce previous discussions [H:20+]. They said these stories teach (children) to look beyond face value and read in to the intrinsic message which causes them to think and form opinions and make decisions [H:x]. Or as teacher MF:25 said, they are personally and socially beneficial—personally because they help understand self, persevering, building character and learning values—and are socially beneficial because [these stories] help teach to tolerate and cooperation with others.

Parables as Analytical Skills: [33 responses] These may have been expressed as critical reading, interpreting skills, comprehension skills, and/or solving problems but approximately 40% of teachers saw these stories as useful for teaching skills that relate to reading between the lines for a message that was deeper than surface level. Still others advocated them to get (students) thinking and questioning [M:1] and making their own

*framework in their mind [M:8a]. Teachers [B:7; HI:x; et.al.] also pointed out that texts can be used for more than one purpose and that texts can be analysed in more than one way—and even on various levels simultaneously [HP:x] such as character profiles, plot and purpose [HP:1b]. Linking the issues to written examples, teacher H:20 wrote that they teach them to look at meaning of written text as a whole and to look more deeply into meaning.*

**Parables as Teaching Tools:** [9 responses] Where teachers approached the question in terms of their own teaching, it overwhelmingly related to helping them in a difficult situation, such as dealing with sensitive situations in less overt or threatening ways. Teachers wrote of *encouraging children in need (LC: 12), helping children open up (A:2; C:20; H:7; HP:1 and others), and linking with other subject areas such as Personal Development (PD) (WF:15 ; M:8b; et al.).*

### ***Summary:***

This survey has shown quite clearly these teachers were very aware that this kind of narrative, also called a parable, could be used for social purposes apart from their use as a tool for teaching children to access message/s that are not stated explicitly. These teachers are saying the underlying reasons they use parables involve supporting character building for the development of both internal standards and civic action/s in the lives of the children they were teaching.

**Question 2** asked “*What sorts of messages would be behind the stories you use?*”

In this section, teachers were encouraged to suggest specific stories they could recall using. Most teachers did that. The range of texts was extremely wide, with some teachers also recommending anthologies. One teacher [MF:25] made extensive notes and photocopied the index of a particular text she had found useful. The only common thread involved stories teachers had found useful in teaching child protection issues. Indeed, across schools, small numbers of teachers persistently pointed to the usefulness of these stories in addressing issues of personal safety and personal development, especially where sensitivity was crucial.

In regards to the main part of this question, namely what kinds of messages teachers aim to extract from such stories, respondents made an average of 2.5 messages each. Responses included

- (a) *overcoming difficulties* (including when things don't go as planned) through perseverance, doing one's best, and accepting one's limits and the limits of others (56 responses),

- (b) aspects of *cooperating with others* such as respecting others and acting rather than reacting (40 responses),
- (c) *going the extra 'mile'* by being generous of spirit and friendly to the needy (30 responses),
- (d) addressing specific problems such as *stranger danger* and/or abuse (22 responses) and
- (e) *core internal values* (9 responses).

The responses in this section were quite complex, for many inter-related quite strongly with some of the reasons expressed by teachers in the previous section (e.g., H10's *making choices between moral dilemmas*). They also strongly related to many of our store of community proverbs such as *honesty is the best policy* and *two wrongs don't make a right*. Such proverbs hone in on internal values and their public expression. These underlying and inter-related values are at the core of MF:25's summary that (they are) personally and socially beneficial—personally because they help understand self, persevering, building character and learning values—and socially beneficial because they help teach to tolerate and cooperate with others.

### **Summary:**

This section needs far more detailed analysis, but it is immediately obvious that teachers had no difficulty answering this question, often quoting proverbs (or even developing their own proverb-like phrases).

Turner (1996:5) reminds us that the proverb is really a complex set of situations and conclusions contained within just a few words. Although not specifically the subject of this paper, it is important to keep in the back of our minds the problem of the proverb because of this relationship. Proverbs such as *no rose without the thorn* or *remember Pearl Harbour* may mean little or nothing to those with no experience or knowledge of thorny plants or WWII history. Even those who have that experience or knowledge may find it difficult to make the leap to the underlying messages of *often good things also involve something less than agreeable* or *be prepared*. This is because proverbs that relate to parables (e.g., *be prepared* or *no pain, no gain*), appear to present even more difficulties for primary children than the parable (Smith King & Harrison, 2000). In that study, primary aged children were asked about the underlying message of a parable about an oak seedling and then choose which proverb matched that message most closely. Matching the correct proverb proved significantly harder than selecting the parable's underlying message. This appears to be suggesting that while it may be quite difficult for students to extract a message for

themselves (i.e., blending the story with their own experiences and coming up with an overall message) that is easier than linking that same story to the message that someone else has discovered.

**Question 3** asked: *Do you think children need adult help understanding these kinds of stories? If so, what kinds of strategies have you used in the past to go beyond the actual surface story to get to the message?* Not one respondent said that children never needed help in understanding these kinds of stories. Some teachers (19%) said children may need help “sometimes”. Many of these teachers saw the children in their own class as being able to access the implied message/s with little or no help from them, even if other children needed help. While this response could suggest a lack of awareness of the problem, it may also mean that (a) such children have had quite adequate help in the past and/or (b) those stories they are given are at the exact degree of difficulty they require. However 81% of teachers said they thought children did need adult help with these stories.

Only two teachers [HI:7; F:28] suggested combining oral and written language methods (role play followed by writing) as a way of getting children to understand the underlying message/s. All other recommendations were oral in nature. Discussion was the method most mentioned (56 responses). Brainstorming, guided discussion, exploration of themes, using thinking and/or feeling modes, linking to experiences, telling one’s own story, and explaining related concepts were all mentioned within this general category.

Two other teachers [H:10; HP:30] said they overtly told children there was a hidden meaning, although some other participants may have implied that in their responses. Two teachers stated they would use *specific comprehension strategies* [H:20c; IN:28] and mentioned the *here, hidden, head* framework contained in the NSW *English K-6 Syllabus* (1998). These four responses represent 6.6% of the sample.

Thirteen teachers (20%) mentioned other creative ways of approaching the problem such as *character analysis* [F:28], *role play* [HI:7; H:xc; HP:30; HP:16; M:10; M:8a], using a *hot seat* [H:20+; HP:1a; F:4; LC:0] and/or *art and music* [LC:12]. Such activities can be very useful in getting children to go “beyond the script” (Ewing and Simons, 2004), transporting them into the actual situation. Educational drama, “using the body in time and space to explore issues, questions, perspectives or ideas” (Ewing & Simons, 2004:3) requires planning beforehand, guidance through the processes, and times of refocusing and reflecting afterwards. To use drama without these elements is to risk concentrating on the explicit or surface story and

thereby actually bypassing the actual point that the drama, art or music was meant to uncover.

**Summary:**

Teachers appeared far less certain about how helping children access the implied message/s of the parable. Their feedback indicated a wide variety of approaches. These approaches appeared to be predominantly oral in nature, with discussion being the preferred method. Responses to this question seemed a little more tentative in nature than those regarding when and why they used such stories. This may suggest the underlying, unspoken question *Am I really being successful in getting the message across?* something more intensive interviews could reveal.

Only two teachers suggested actually telling the children what the message was and working out from that point. This strategy can sometimes be seen in the written form when the writer adds a coda or summary that hints at the message/s. Jesus' Parable of the Soils is a good example of this (Matthew 13:3-8). It is followed by an explanation of why Jesus chose to use parables and an explanation of the soils parable in verses 18-23. Aesop's fables, included by some teachers as examples, are well known for their use of a coda, but not all "stories like *The Little Engine That Could*" have one.

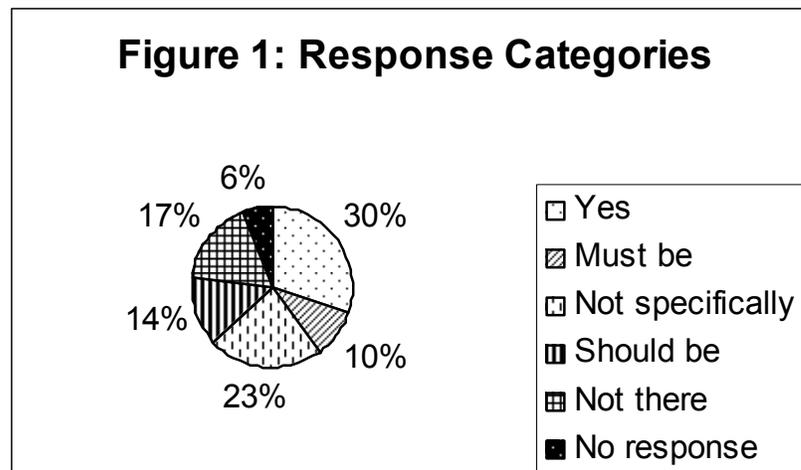
The teacher who begins by showing the children the implicit meaning/s will know that the children are aware some stories do have hidden meaning/s. It may well be that children who are explicitly shown the implicit meaning/s may be predisposed to detect such meaning/s when encountering other parables.

**Part 3: The Where of Parables in the English K-6 Syllabus.**

Question 4 asked: *Do you think these kinds of stories are discussed in the English K-6 Syllabus? If so where? If not, should they be?*

This open-ended question yielded the most diverse and unexpected responses. From the most negative response to the most positive, the pattern was

- (a) no comment at all (6.5%),
- (b) *no, they aren't in the syllabus* (16.5% including two teachers saying they should not be included),
- (c) *I don't think so—I haven't seen them* (14%),
- (d) *they probably are but not specifically* (23%),
- (e) *they MUST be but I'm not sure where* (10%), and
- (f) *yes, they are* [30%].



In other words, 70% of the respondents were unsure where these stories would fit into the syllabus they are using as the underlying framework for teaching using the English K-6 Syllabus (BOS,1998) in NSWDET schools.

Examples from each of the response categories are included in the category descriptions that follow.

No comment [6.5%]: Four respondents, including the early childhood teacher, did not answer this question.

No, they aren't in the syllabus [ 16.5%]: Only one teacher said where they thought they should go—*under narrative would be good [G:3]*. The only teacher who explained why she thought they should *not* be included argued they are not needed—*teachers use them at their own discretion and link them with literacy and social needs [H:4]*.

Not that I can see—but they should be [14%]: Similar responses were not really [B:7], I'm not sure [F:4], I'm not aware they are there [F:25], I don't think so [H:1a] and no idea but maybe they should go with narratives—*response and review [F:xa]*.

Probably, but not specifically [23%]: All but one respondent in this category replied using the word “specifically”. The other commented that there is no direct discussion—*some elements covered by RS 2.7 & RS 3.7 with [F:5a] indicating a beginning awareness of an inferred link. Teacher [C:4] added teachers need explicit material as well as children.*

Yes, they must be, but uncertainty as to where [10%]: One fifth of this group stated the need for examples that would help programming and/or suggested activities. Four fifths of this group mentioned the importance of linking in with social aspects, including child protection. As [N:28] said, (t)eachers need to use material to fulfil the syllabus requirements. If we can teach children to become better citizens in the process, it's probably more important than improving their literacy skills.

Yes, they are in the syllabus [30%]: Respondents in this category referred to sections, points and pages in the syllabus to indicate where they see these stories slot in. They mentioned critical literacy, text types, narratives, fables, symbolic meanings, plot and theme, 'learning to and learning about', scope and sequence, audience, responding to text, social purpose, interpretation and comprehension—all literacy concepts that (a) are discussed in the syllabus and (b) are relevant when using the parable.

**Summary:**

The survey was titled "RESEARCH INTO NARRATIVE TYPES". Yet 70% of the teachers who responded failed to comment that *a story like The Little Engine That Could* might fit even *somewhere* in relation to narrative. This is despite the fact that they were teaching quite young children to recognise literary forms such as the narrative. Although they knew the research was about narrative they did not see that story as a form of narrative.

Of that 70%, it is possible that the 23% who said *it must be there somewhere* would have searched under *narrative* or even *text types* had they been asked. However this still leaves almost 40% who seemed to have absolutely no idea what the syllabus document might have to say about this kind of story and/or have an educated guess that it could possibly be a particular kind of narrative.

The NSWDET *English K-6 Syllabus* (BOS,1998a:67) recognises a wide variety of literary texts that may "explore and interpret human experience..... (and) can be a powerful and evocative experience that shapes the student's imagination and thought." The syllabus states that such texts may be occur across media boundaries (e.g., television and film). Within this broad category of *literary texts* the writers of the syllabus for NSW children from Kindergarten to Year 6 recognise the narrative, the literary recount, observation, literary description, personal response and the review (p.68).

The parable would most easily fit within the narrative category along with “short stories, fairy/folk tales, some myths, fables, legends” to name just a few of the examples given (p.68). They also fall under the heading, *Narratives—Social Purpose and Structure*.

The accompanying Modules section of the NSWDET *English K-6 Syllabus* (BOS,1998b) defines the social purpose of the narrative this way:

*Narratives construct a pattern of events with a problematic and/or unexpected outcome that entertains or instructs the reader or listener. Narratives entertain because they deal with the unusual and unexpected development of events. They instruct because they teach readers and listeners that problems should be confronted, and attempts made to resolve them. Narratives incorporate patterns of behaviour that are generally highly valued (p.113). (Authors’ emphasis)*

The syllabus clearly allows for the parable as a form of narrative, so it is of some concern that so few of the teachers in the sample (30%) could say where it would be located.

## CONCLUSIONS and FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study explored (a) how often teachers use stories like *The Little Engine That Could*, (b) how and why they do that, and (c) how they see these stories fit within the context of the NSW *English K-6 Syllabus*.

***The “How”—Parable Use:*** This study confirms anecdotal evidence that teachers employed by the NSWDET do, in fact, use parables to varying degrees in their teaching. There is embryonic statistical support of a hypothesis that the more teachers use these kinds of stories, the more they do so orally—with the reverse pattern observed. Further sampling is needed to confirm the observed trends.

***The “Why”—Parable for Value Systems & Source Material:*** There is now confirmation that primary teachers use these stories primarily to teach civics, morals, values and codes of behaviour and have used a wide variety of source material from ancient writings such as Aesop’s fables to modern stories such as the Rainbow Fish series. Despite this, not one of the 65 teachers surveyed mentioned the NSWDET position paper, *The Values of NSW Public Schools* (2001).

Disturbingly, only two teachers mentioned “accepting multiculturalism” and teaching “cultural” messages, with no reference material coming from our own Aboriginal people’s rich store of parable, let alone parables from any of the non-Anglo cultures that constitute our nation. Further research is needed to explore whether this pattern is widespread.

***The “Why”—Parable as a Teaching Tool:*** Parable can be seen as both a literary form and as a mental process. This study has focussed on parable as a literary form, a “special kind of narrative” (Turner, 1996:4). Those teachers who mention the *here, hidden, head* phrases of the syllabus have honed in on the essential nature of the parable as a text—the textually explicit (*here*), the textually implicit (*hidden*) and the scriptally implicit (*head*) information described by Pearson and Johnson (1972) balanced against the hidden message/s.

***“The Where”—Parable in the Syllabus:*** The setting out of uniform procedures and training people in their use is the hallmark of bureaucracy (Babbie, 1988:64-69). Although the word ‘bureaucracy’ is often used synonymously for ‘rigidity’, it is important to remember that the concept of bureaucracy developed as a way of addressing the inconsistencies inherent in systems that respond on an ad hoc basis. In the education arena, the provision of more explicit content documents provides more portability of schooling for students and less uncertainty for teachers.

Nevertheless, the “increasing bureaucratisation of the NSW Board of Studies” has been cited by Harris (2001) as the catalyst for the “tightening of curricular controls and the further marginalisation of teacher participation in the curriculum decision-making processes”. This increasing reliance on the development of standards frameworks for both teaching content and assessment prompted the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) to raise the issue of curriculum control for discussion at their 2001 conference.

One of the problems associated with rigid frameworks is the degree of flexibility permissible. This study, for example, has shown that teachers do not always find it easy to work within uniform procedures and still be open to literary structures and definitions that are outside the core stated structures and definitions. Some become ‘technicians’ (Penney, 2001) sticking rigidly to what is stated in syllabus document—thereby giving up their professional standing; others incorporate the non-Biblical parable despite not knowing where it fits. Far less are actually able to comfortably integrate material that falls outside rigid definitions and examples by stretching the boundaries of the syllabus (only 30% of the sample).

Such difficulties may well be related to the intensification and increasing complexity of teachers’ work over the last decade (Ewing, 2003:2). Research has shown teachers’ work is highly sophisticated, complex intellectual in nature (e.g., Clark & Yinger, 1979; Shulman, 1987; Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Smith & Lovat, 2003; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2003). Such research has shown increasingly that the knowledge

base that teachers bring to their work is based around intensive decision making that has serious consequences for learners. For example, within a thirty minute lesson, a teacher may make over two hundred decisions. In addition, the work of quality teachers can significantly improve the learning outcomes and hence the life chances of students (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Yet when teachers are being subjected to a constant stream of policy documents and curriculum revisions, each of which requires changes to teaching strategies and assessment/reporting procedures, teachers may well feel overwhelmed.

There is ample evidence in this study for Sachs' (2001:1) argument that "teachers, in the privacy of their classrooms, interpret and implement these (syllabus) documents on the basis of their own experience, discipline base, beliefs and philosophy of teaching and education". As she says, it is a struggle between bureaucracy and professional agendas. Mostly left out of the debate (Harris, 2001), the teachers in this study—teachers at the chalkface—took back the control by teaching what seemed to make sense and/or felt right, with or without the tacit approval inherent in adherence to the policy document.

This study has shown that teachers seem to know, almost intuitively, that these kinds of stories are worth using. In an environment where "(a) growing number of educators now argue that stronger foundations would be established if philosophy (rather than mathematics) became the premier discipline from the early years of primary school" (Marginson, 1993:250-251) if we want to "produce proactive, critical thinkers", the parable has much to offer—both as a vessel for discerning what is not stated in text and for the cognitive activity described as 'blending' (Turner, 1996; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Indeed, Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 389-396) see that learning to blend is a crucial, naturally occurring mental activity for children (and adults). Each time children and adults layer one situation onto another to create a new space, there is either new learning or the reinforcement of previous learning, a feature of this kind of narrative.

This study provides evidence that NSWDET primary teachers are using these stories in the primary classroom, but it also shows that they are confused about fitting the parable, with all its richness, to the *English K-6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies, 1998), squeezing them in to varying degrees, despite not knowing where they belong. Their responses seem to suggest that the more explicit nature of the syllabus document may be deterring teachers from thinking for themselves—or that, rather than becoming familiar with the syllabus document, they are opting for second hand sources such as commercially produced material. Further investigation will be needed to determine the reasons.

Teachers are using the non-Biblical parable in NSWDET primary schools because of the richness they provide in regards to critical thinking, values and personal development issues. Such stories are used increasingly in the adult world to make get across subtle (and not-so-subtle) messages, often in difficult situations where speaking directly would be less effective. Teachers who use these stories to help students read between the lines to get to the underlying message are helping them in the process of becoming critical readers.

However, this research suggests that teachers are not sufficiently familiar with the K-6 English Syllabus document, suggesting inadequate professional development. These teachers are regularly teaching the students in their charge how to recognise narratives and other text types. Yet most failed to recognise *The Little Engine That Could* as basically a narrative, albeit a special kind. Teachers need to be confident to include text types that do not fit exactly into the set examples. Finally, it is essential that teachers be treated as professionals, able to stretch the boundaries of syllabus documents in order to respond to the needs of their students without feeling uncertain and/or guilty.

## REFERENCES:

- Babbie, E. (1988). *The sociological spirit*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Board of Studies (1998a). *NSWDET English K-6 Syllabus*.
- Board of Studies (1998b). *NSWDET English K-6 Syllabus (Modules)*.
- Board of Studies (1999). *NSWDET PDHPE K-6 Syllabus*.
- Clandinin, D. & Connelly, F.M. (1991) Narrative and story in practice and research. In D. Schon (Ed.), *The reflective turn: Case studies in educational practice* (pp.258-270). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clark, C. & Yinger, R. (1979). Research on teacher planning: A progress report. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 2, 175-177.
- Cuddon, J. (1991). *A dictionary of literary terms*. Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). *Solving the dilemmas of teacher supply, demand and standards. What can states and districts do?* [On-line]  
Available: <http://www.teachersupport.org.uk/index.cfm?p=170>
- Ewing, R. (2003). Statement. *Resources*. [On-line]  
Available: [http://ie.u.asn.au/resources/salaries\\_ewing.html](http://ie.u.asn.au/resources/salaries_ewing.html)
- Ewing, R. & Simons, J. (2004). *Beyond the script: Drama in the classroom--Take two*. Newtown, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association.
- Fauconnier, G., & Turner, M. (2002). *The way we think: Conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Groundwater-Smith, S., Ewing, R. & Le Cornu, R. (2003). *Teaching: Challenges and dilemmas* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Nelson Thomson.
- Harris, C. (2001, December). *Curriculum control: At what cost?* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education. Perth, Western Australia.
- IFTE (2003, July). Information booklet provided for the 8<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Federation for the Teaching of English, Melbourne, Australia.

- Lake-DellAngelo, M. (1993). The parable of the bridge: A study in performance. *Education Technology*, 6, 57-59.
- Luke, A. (1998). Getting over methods: Literacy teaching as work in new times. *Language Arts* [On-line]  
Available: <http://www.schools.ash.org.au/litweb/page401.htm>
- Marginson, S. (1993). *Education and public policy in Australia*. Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press.
- Muspratt, S., Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997) *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practices*. Creskill, NJ, USA: Hampton Press.
- NSWDET (N.S.W. Department of Education and Training). (2001). *The values of NSW public schools*. (Discussion paper with Memorandum DGS01/2385). Sydney, Australia: Ken Boston.
- Penney, D. (2001, December). *Contesting control: Playing a political game. Educational research and curriculum development in contexts of constraint*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Perth, Western Australia.
- Pearson, P. D., & Johnson, D. D. (1978). *Teaching reading comprehension*. New York, U.S.A.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Sachs, J. (2001, December). *Curriculum control: The cost to teacher professionalism*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Perth, Western Australia.
- Shulman, L. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations for the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 1, 1-22.
- Smith, D. & Lovat, T. (2003). *Curriculum: Action on reflection* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Tuggerah, NSW, Australia: Social Science Press.
- Smith King, N. J., & Harrison, H. M. (2000, December). *Enhancing the comprehension of parables: Putting children through their p.a.c.e.s*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Sydney, Australia. (ERIC Document No. ED 450 408)
- Turner, M. (1996). *The literary mind*. New York, U.S.A.: Oxford University Press.