

Yarns to beat the Gameboy

TO THE average parent, the news that a 'storyteller' is coming to the school won't exactly set the breakfast table alight with expectancy.

Such an event is usually seen as a quaint optional extra, doubtless arranged to give the teachers a chance to catch up with their marking.

But at Chamberlayne Park School, a 'challenging' inner-city comprehensive in Southampton, the visit of storyteller Michael O'Leary is viewed very differently.

There, O'Leary's sessions play a pivotal role in the English department's strategy to tackle children's literacy problems.

O'Leary in action is a captivating spectacle. He enters the classroom of 11-year-olds, all assembled for their 'extra' English lessons, playing the Northumbrian pipes and dragging a brightly painted box of who knows what treasure as if it's a sled.

He lifts the lid, bringing out a huge scarf which he flourishes above their heads like a cape. 'This means,' he says, 'that it's time to sit up and listen properly.' These are children who find concentration difficult but they are instantly enraptured.

'Can I tell you a story of rotting flesh and maggots?' he begins. And he's away, launching into the local folk tale of the Wayland Smithy.

This is more than mere entertainment. Relating a tale that was first spun a century or two ago, O'Leary uses language that's foreign to children of the Gameboy generation.

The couple in the story 'walk out together' before she becomes his 'dutiful wife'. It's the world of 1840 when there was a 'great famine': a world of 'tinkers' and 'silversmiths' where, he says, 'every field and every hill held its own stories because there were no DVDs and no TV for entertainment then, mind'. Their eyes widen further at the concept.

But how does listening to these tales actually help children with their English?

'These children come from homes where there is no reading culture, so

by Fred
Redwood

Michael is teaching them the essence of narrative structure in a natural way,' says Ruth Thornton, the English teacher who has organised these sessions.

'He gives them the confidence to make up their own stories and, later, to write them down.'

As if on cue, O'Leary starts a story of his own. 'Thirty years ago, I lived in Ireland with the gypsies. I used to put this outside for the fairies,' he says, producing a tiny pewter tankard. 'Now you tell me ...'

The number of storytellers in

schools is growing countrywide. According to the Society for Storytelling, there are now more than 500 of them performing for all ages from nursery to sixth-form. One of the best known is Rona Barbour, 59, who, as well as working in schools in the North-East of England, runs teacher-training courses and workshops for the corporate sector.

She also uses her public speaking skills to act as Master of Ceremonies to high-rollers in the hospitality suites at Manchester United Football Club.

Mrs Barbour believes that storytellers are particularly necessary for the youngest children. 'People of my generation were taught morals when we were children, sitting at table, listening to our parents

discussing what our neighbours and relatives had been up to, including their little disputes and acts of kindness,' she said.

'But that doesn't happen any more. Now children are plonked in front of a screen from the moment they wake up in the morning. Texting, computers and mobile phones are taking over their lives. They aren't learning to listen.'

Mrs Barbour believes that lack of communication in the home is also causing children to lose touch with their heritage.

'I ask some children where their parents and family are from, and they have no idea,' she said.

'Many know only the flimsiest details of the story of Christmas — they have no concept of their own

culture. A visiting storyteller is the most natural way to fill this gap in their learning.'

Mrs Barbour managed to bend the ear of the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, about the benefits of storytelling when he last visited Manchester United while she was performing MC duties.

'He shared a lot of my views,' says Barbour. 'If he gets into No. 10, I'll be the first one knocking on his door, asking for more support for storytelling nationwide.'

It's a request that will be seconded by 11-year-old Daniel at Chamberlayne Park School.

'I never hear stories at home, and we don't have any books,' he says. 'I think the storyteller's great — he's really exciting.'



Setting the scene: Professional storyteller Michael O'Leary