

The Role of Storytelling in Early Literacy Development

Storytelling isn't just about entertaining children. As Louise Phillips argues it can also play an important part in early literacy development.



Storytelling is an intimate sharing of a narrative with one or more persons. Storytellers use both their voice and body to create the setting, characters and storyline. Good storytelling totally involves the teller and their audience in the story. One four-year old described the impact of this experience after I had told my version of the North-American folktale 'The Gunny Wolf': "I liked the way that you telled it with the flowers...with the grass...I imagined that I was in the forest." Increasingly, storytelling is also seen to make a significant contribution to early literacy development.

Both oracy and literacy are forms of communication between human beings, however, our written language is far more complex than our spoken language. Because the language employed in storytelling is usually more sophisticated than everyday conversational language it contributes not only to the development of a child's oral language but also to the development of written language. In many ways storytelling acts as an effective building block easing the journey from oracy to literacy.

Snow & Tabors (1993) clearly define writing as "a system of its own" which builds upon the base of oracy but then grows far beyond it. For example, literate adults usually use far more complex words when they are writing than when they speak. However, when children are first learning to read and write, their oral language vocabulary will obviously be greater. Snow and Tabors have found that a well established oral language vocabulary is essential for the development of young children's written vocabulary. Children can sound out a written word more efficiently if they know what it is meant to sound like (phonology); and if they know its meaning (semantics) they can predict where it might occur in a text. *Cooper, Collins and Saxby* (1992) claim that regular storytelling experience increases young children's vocabulary, as they encounter a broad range of new words through story, thereby supporting the development of both their oral and written language skills.

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Many storytelling experiences also incorporate word play, such as rhymes and tongue twisters. Such word play provides "a direct route into the sound-symbol correspondences crucial to reading" (*Snow & Tabors*, 1993, p.8) and may also contribute to early spelling skills (*Dyson*, 1993). Good children's storytellers will invite children to actively participate in wordplay throughout a story, until the children are playing with these words for the rest of the day, and perhaps, for many days or weeks after.

A told story is usually thoughtfully crafted and consequently the grammar (as well as the language itself) is more complex than that of everyday spoken language.

This particular style of spoken language has been referred to as 'story grammar' and *Mallan* (1991) sees it providing children with an increased understanding of syntactic structure and organisation which can then act as

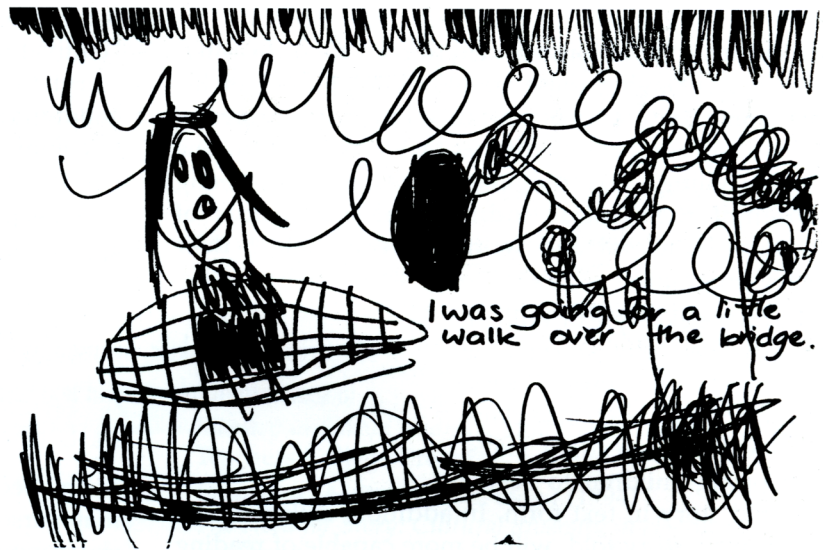
a reference point for when they create their own stories. Storytelling can demonstrate varied and appropriate uses of tense and linking devices along with indicators of who is speaking and detailed descriptions – all grammatical features that parallel those found in written language.

Storytelling as an art form also employs literary conventions, such as point of view, plot, style, characterisation, setting and theme (*Mallan*, 1991). Many different genres can be explored through storytelling, in the same way that varied genres occur in written form. *Mallan* claims that through regular storytelling experience of diverse genres, children will soon learn to expect certain features of that genre. This is typified by the resounding replication of stories beginning with 'once upon a time' and ending with 'happy ever after'. This knowledge builds a 'sense of story'. Children develop a schema of what story is – what it consists of and what it is about. This then gives them a framework for understanding story texts. *Jennings* (1991) confirms this with her observation that children who have had frequent oral encounters with story, can then make successful predictions when reading narrative.

Furthermore, by actively involving the audience in the story, storytelling enhances comprehension skills. Through the use of effective questioning and retelling strategies, children's comprehension skills can be further developed. The same cognitive skills involved in creating mental imagery, making inferences and causal links are used when listening to a told story or when reading a text.

Written language also requires an understanding of symbol systems. Symbol systems are a human way of organising and responding to experience. Storytelling certainly presents opportunities for this. Recurring motifs clearly demonstrate story's use of symbols. For example the wolf motif is frequently used to symbolise the evil, dangerous enemy. *Dyson* (1991) has found that by the time children go to school, regardless of their social or cultural background, they are able to symbolise worlds in their oral stories, drawing and play.

Literacy development however needs to be considered in the light of a broader understanding of the significance of literacy in a particular society as well as in the specific culture of each child (*Hall*, 1987). Storytelling



A 4-year-old's drawing and story after experiencing the authors personal life story about getting lost when posting a letter.

is often a distinct social and cultural experience and for many young children provides a comfortable link between oracy and literacy. *Dyson's* (1993) study of William, an African American child, clearly demonstrates this. William's African American background submerged him in playful storytelling. He developed into a story writer with a strong sense of

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writing as interactive play, clearly influenced by his sociocultural traditions of rhythmic 'to-and-froing' interactions. Having these traditions supported in his educational environment meant that he became an effective and competent writer as he wrote the stories he enjoyed telling. Text only has meaning for young children if their social and cultural experiences of language (both oral and written) are built into their literacy program.

The above example of William demonstrates how storytelling can inspire writing. *Cooper, Collins & Saxby* (1992) also claim that it enhances reading skills, by inspiring children to search for a told story in text form. In addition, children who have heard a story told, will be more capable of reading a text of the same story because they will be better able to use their prediction skills. *Isbell* (1979, cited in *Raines & Isbell*, 1994) conducted a storytelling study that compared two groups of three to six year olds over an eight-week period. One group had a story read to them three times a week, and the other had stories told to them three times a week. When the group who had stories told to them were asked to retell the story, they were more capable of retelling it. They included more story conventions; told longer and more sequential stories; and employed more diverse vocabulary, than those that had been read to.

Glazer and Burke (1994) also stress the value of young children retelling a story after listening to it. This retelling not only enhances their awareness of story structure but also aids the development of recall and comprehension skills which children can in turn use to guide them in creating their own stories. Using questioning to prompt the recall of story elements can also lead to such questions being internalised and then used by the child to guide their own recall without the need for adult prompting.

Britsch (1992) studied a group of three to four year olds' experience of storytelling for one year. From this experience she discovered the value of what she called 'talk story' a process whereby ideas were continually discussed before, during and after they had been written down. At the age of three and four these children were recording their stories with symbolic images and through this experience the children were beginning to understand that written language was a means of representing their thoughts. This was made especially clear when they dictated their stories to a scribing adult. *Britsch* embraced the approach of allowing reading and

writing to emerge within play situations, in essence "cultivating" it rather than imposing it. Implementing a storytelling based program, where both adults and children told and shared stories, helped develop a sense of community and nurtured the culture of the group, so that the children could freely play with words.

"Storytelling provided an introduction to the idea that stories come from within themselves and not just without, and to the understanding that written language is an accessible tool." (*Britsch*, 1992: 182)

Research by *Miller and Mehler* (1994) revealed that many educators believe personal storytelling serves as an effective bridge into early literacy. They also found that personal storytelling occurred most frequently in classrooms that had the most favourable teacher-pupil ratio, and that many families provide a richer context for personal narrative. *Snow and Tabors* (1993) similarly stress the value of small group and one-to-one interactions, so that children have more opportunities to move from co-constructing literate forms to recording them independently. This clearly demonstrates the need for more one-to-one and small group interactions in educational settings as well as the need to work together with parents and families in the education of their children.

Early childhood education needs to embrace literacy programs that actively employ storytelling to help form a bridge between children's established oracy skills and their developing literacy skills. By doing this children will encounter a broad range of language: new words, archaic expressions, puns, phrases, rhymes, chants, tongue twisters, metaphor, figures of speech, and revoiced dialogue (*Cooper, Collins & Saxby*, 1992; *Dyson & Genishi*, 1994). This establishes an extensive oral language base for building on literacy skills, such as word recognition, spelling, grammar, understanding of

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A 4-year-old's drawing and story after experiencing the Chinese folktale 'The Grateful Snake' where the snake transforms into a dragon.



literary conventions and comprehension. It is also essential to present storytelling and literacy experiences that are meaningful to the children, reflecting their social and cultural experiences.

Storytelling can thus be used to cultivate children's literacy skills by:

- ✓ exposing children to a broad range of narratives;
- ✓ providing opportunities to play with words, with story, and with text;
- ✓ inviting children to retell (orally), reenact, or retell (through pictures or written words) a story after a storytelling experience;
- ✓ employing effective questioning to extend retelling and comprehension skills;
- ✓ embracing the creation of children's own stories expressed in any form, be it orally, pictorially, acted out or written down; and
- ✓ extending their skills by playing with the story in a number of different forms (visual arts, dramatic play, block play).

To further enhance the effectiveness of a storytelling approach provide opportunity for frequent one-to-one and small group interactions and give a commitment to work with parents in developing children's literacy skills.

"Children's language blossoms when caregivers observe closely the interests of children and capitalize on these to stimulate literacy, when children are invited to share their experiences and their stories, when ready help is available in reading and writing, when a listening ear is always present, and when a telling, story-laden tongue is available." (Glazer & Burke, 1994: 163)

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