

Storytelling - The Seeds of Children's Creativity

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Storytelling is an effective educational tool that features strongly across all cultures since human language evolved. Today, it is rarely heard in conventional learning environments. This paper describes an educational program based on storytelling. Research shows that storytelling has the ability to build a greater sense of community, enhance knowledge and memory recall, support early literacy development, and expand creative potential in young children. This program explores storytelling's potential for this through a broad range of extension activities. Conclusively, it is argued that storytelling has a highly effective role to play in the education of young children.

Introduction

Young children have a natural tendency to be drawn to narrative (Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992, p.i). As a storyteller I have found young children to be consistently interested and enthusiastic towards told stories. This interest supports children in gaining and extending many skills and pieces of knowledge, especially when stories are well told.

There is ample research that has found valuable learning potential in storytelling experiences for children.

This research demonstrates that storytelling:

- enhances children's imagination (Raines & Isbell, 1994, p.264-265);
- supports and extends children's social lives (Britsch, 1992, p.80);
- further develops their cognitive skills (such as 'deferred imitation', speculation and knowledge) (Britsch, 1992, p.23; Nicolopoulou, Scales & Weintramb, 1994, p.103; Mallan, 1991, p.12);
- contributes significantly to all aspects of language development (Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992; Mallan, 1991); and
- is an effective bridge to early literacy (Bruner, 1986; Rosen, 1988 cited by Miller & Mehler, 1994).

The program

Inspired by this research, I designed a four-week storytelling-based program for preschoolers (3-5-year-olds) to explore the value of storytelling in early childhood education. This occurred through the sharing of a different story each week, and exploring the story through a variety of 'extension activities'. Mallan (1991, p.12) argues that: 'In order to "process" what the story tells them, children need to be provided with a number of different extension activities'. The 'extension activities' in this program included opportunities for children to tell their own stories, draw stories, and act out stories, which were designed to match different interests and styles of expression. This was an auxiliary component to the children's educational program, as I was not the children's class teacher. My role was facilitator of the storytelling sessions

(including 'extension activity' time) that occurred for one-and-a-half hours on a weekly basis. Effectively, I was a teacher-researcher, under the guise of visiting storyteller.

The purpose of the program was to further develop the children's listening, comprehension, and storytelling skills, enhance their imagination, and foster a sense of community, through creative exploration of stories.

This four-week storytelling program was based on four core stories that were chosen by drawing up maps of a number of stories I was interested in sharing with young children. Links were identified between four stories, as similar messages, plots, themes, and/or motifs were revealed. These four stories highlighted the power of courage and wisdom to resolve conflicts.

Each week a different story was told, there was a sharing/talking time to discuss the story, and then the children moved onto related follow-up activities (avenues for the children to express their ideas inspired by the story). Generally, the follow-up areas included a drawing and writing area; a block play area, a dramatic play area, and a talking/discussion area (looking at pictures, books, props). These activity areas were chosen with reference to Britsch's (1992) year-long study of preschoolers' exploration of story, as she provided similar areas for children to play with story.

Each week's written program clearly outlined the story, the concepts it explored, other related stories (both told and written), and the carefully chosen related extension activities. There were usually four or five activities that immediately followed the story, then a list of further related activities was supplied to room teachers, to explore as ideas and comments arose during the subsequent weeks. All the ideas were inspired by the concepts and topics that each story explored, through a process of mapping and webbing. This framework for developing ideas supported my belief that stories are an excellent source of worldly knowledge.

The program's intention was to provide enough scope to match each child's individual needs and interests, and to encourage children to choose and explore according to their interests. The participating adults followed the children's leads, offering them support to build on their knowledge and skills.

Children's responses

Storytelling is characteristically interactive: the audience interacts with the teller, the story, and one another. Through this interaction during the storytelling program, it was clearly demonstrated that the children readily absorbed the storylines.

The children's recall abilities were frequently displayed through discussions and their drawings. One child drew five different scenes on five separate pages, after hearing the Chinese folktale *The Grateful Snake*.

This display of recall was especially exciting when it appeared across other media. After hearing the North American folktale, *The Gunny Wolf*, one four-year-old played with the story while using Lego™ to create the scene:

*This is the forest. And this is the wolf
And this is the wolf's microwave.*

The 'microwave' was the child's own creative addition to the tale. Another child created two clearly representational bluebirds in (green block) trees and one wolf, all made out of Lego™.

The storytelling sessions clearly acted as an inspiration for children's exploration of knowledge. Some concepts about wolves that were introduced during *The Gunny Wolf* fascinated and intrigued many children as they spent close to an hour exploring non-fiction books on wolves. The stories acted as a reference point for the

children to interpret what living in this world is about. Vandergrift (1980, cited in Raines & Isbell, 1994) explained this value of story with the notion that each experience a child has with a story builds on previous interactions and provides a structure for stories that will follow.

Another example of the children expanding their knowledge was through their exploration and creation of possum nests after hearing *Possum in My Bed!* (personal story). The children created them with shredded paper and self-chosen items from the collage trolley. One child made a nest with the collage materials, then placed an egg carton lid on top, '*for the possum to hide when a wolf comes*'. This displayed a creative combination of two different stories (*Possum in My Bed!* and *The Gunny Wolf*).

The quintessential value of story is its far-reaching ability to open and inspire imagination.

The ability to visualise, to create images in the mind, is at the very heart of storytelling, not just for the listener, but also for the teller.

(Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992, p.9)

Storytelling does not spoonfeed its audience with imagery. Instead, a sketchy outline is drawn for the audience to give colour, texture, and shape in a way that is relevant to them, and the experience of the story then becomes personal. One preschooler explained her experience of *The Gunny Wolf*:

I liked the way that.. I liked the way that you telled it with the flowers... with the grass...

I imagined that I was in the forest.

This is certainly what I wanted to achieve: to transport the children into the story, so they can live, breathe, and feel it.

To further inspire children's imagination it proved highly effective to ask the children what they think might have happened next, after the end of a story. For example, in my personal story about a lost letter, I asked: 'What do you think happened to the letter?' The children readily responded with answers:

A dog might have buried it.

It might have got runned over.

Someone picked it up and put it in a letter box.

When given the opportunity, most children are very keen to tell stories, and in this incident almost every child was bursting to share stories about letters and being lost.

After telling the story *The Grateful Snake*, I asked the children what they imagined the horse and the rooster looked like. This inspired many children to share the different colours and patterns of their horse and rooster. Later, one child drew the magic horse with each part of its body a different colour (e.g. head blue, legs red) and it was about to step on some flowers (perhaps a reminder from the previous week's tale *The Gunny Wolf*). In the background at the top of the page were 'magic mountains' because you could turn the page upside down and they were still mountains. The child created these reversible mountains by drawing a zigzag line across the page, with a horizontal line through the middle. It was clearly an exceptional example of creative imagery, inspired by tales being told.

Even though this was a short-term program, inspired creativity was evident. Staff at both settings recalled a number of anecdotes where children incorporated scenes or characters from the stories spontaneously into their play. For example, the outdoor hobby horses were transformed into 'magic horses', as inspired by the 'magic horse' in *The Grateful Snake* story. And one child made all the different-coloured flowers in *The Gunny Wolf* with Duplo™, and then used their fingers to be the wolf, replaying the story some two to three weeks after hearing me tell it. One teacher participating in the program referred to this process of sharing stories with children as 'planting the seeds', and that it is unpredictable how the seeds will sprout. The children also created many dearly representational artworks (see Figure 1- even the differences of the three flower props I used have been represented). Perhaps this was a result of providing many creative activities for children to explore features of the story. The adults who participated in the program actively encouraged discussion with their children about their creations, thus inspiring more labelling of their work, and more attention to representational creative expression.

One child's spontaneous creativity was displayed when he was drawing after hearing *The Grateful Snake*, and he suddenly remembered that he had some photocopied money in his bag. He then spent the activity time diligently cutting out the money, intending to use it in our puppet show of the story. He had recalled that the magic horse and rooster produced money. His own creative mind solved the problem of what to use for money in our group reenactment of the tale.

Group retelling of the stories provided opportunity for everyone to be involved and share ideas. It also enabled the story to be reinforced and a greater sense of community to be built. The group re-enactment of the story *The Grateful Snake* was an effective cooperative exercise, where the children shared the space behind the puppet screen without any struggles, and some employed leadership skills to direct performers on and off 'stage'.

Many storytelling researchers (Britsch, 1992; Mallan, 1997; Dyson & Geneshi, 1994) have found that the experience of storytelling gives the group of children a greater sense of community, both with themselves and with participating adults. For example, Nicolopoulou et al. (1994, p.106) identified that storytelling seems to 'generate greater cohesion and solidarity among children'.

Further benefits for young children participating in retelling a story (after listening to it) have been highlighted by Glazer and Burke (1994, p.144).

They argue that storytelling enhances children's awareness of story structure and that they can recall and comprehend more effectively. This in turn guides children in creating their own stories.

Storytelling provides an excellent forum for children to develop more sophisticated listening and speaking skills. Children are exposed to the 'beauty and rhythm of language' through a wealth of literature, cultivating a diverse understanding of story conventions, genres, plots, characters, styles and motifs (Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992, pp.10-13).

Literacy link

At the drawing area the children were actively encouraged to tell 'their stories'. These were documented in print, when the child was ready, by a scribing adult. One teacher explained the children's enthusiasm for this process:

All children wanted to do it because they wanted to do their story ... and they were proud, they would show their parents their story as soon as they arrived.

By articulating the story that matched their drawing, the children were extending their verbal expression, along with making links between written words and spoken words. Vygotsky (cited by Dyson, 1993, p.24) referred to this as 'graphic speech' and argued that it paved the way for writing. And as Britsch (1992, p.182) found in her storytelling research with preschoolers, children realise that stories come from within themselves and that written language is an accessible tool. The purpose, production, and form of the story lies within the child in this approach, which is clearly a 'cultivated' approach to writing, rather than an imposed one (Vygotsky, 1978, cited by Britsch, 1992, p.22).

The text in Figures 2, 3, and 4 display the children's ability to tell mini-stories, to use different tenses, to define characters, and to describe actions. Storytelling can demonstrate varied and appropriate use of tense and linking devices (Mallan, 1991) along with indicators of who is speaking or scripted dialogue and detailed descriptions. These are all grammatical features parallel with written language. Mallan (1991) declares that children gain an understanding of syntactic structure and organisation when they listen to stories. These can then act as a framework when they create their own stories. Storytelling can be employed to effectively bridge oracy and literacy by employing many written conventions in the oral form.

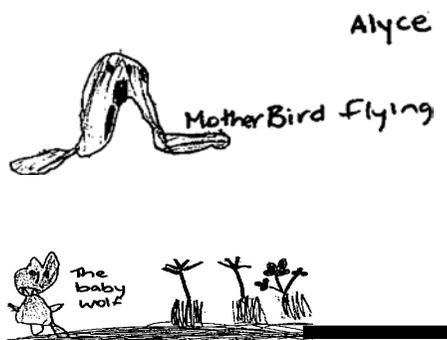


Figure 1

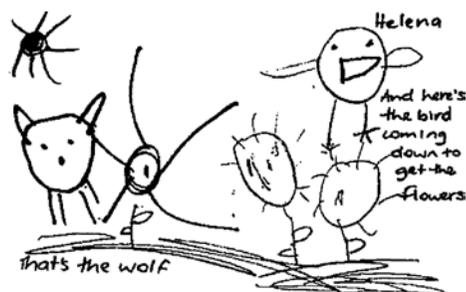


Figure 3

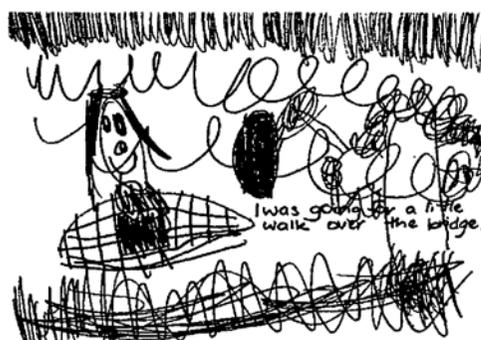


Figure 2



Figure 4

Conclusion

This paper provides an illustration of utilising storytelling as the cornerstone of an early childhood program. For many years storytelling has been forgotten in many educational environments, as our world of visual-imagery has rapidly flourished. By granting storytelling an essential role in the education of young children, their imagination will be inspired as they create their own visual images and ideas; their minds will be challenged; and their language skills will be further cultivated, as they are inspired to experience and explore all language forms (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

Young children will also develop closer relationships and a sense of community, through the intrinsically social experience of storytelling.

These benefits can be achieved as long as the children's interests are closely observed; their experiences and stories welcomed; appropriate support offered; a listening ear is present; and a story-laden tongue forthcoming (Glazer & Burke, 1994, p.163).

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