Telling and Retelling Stories

Learning Language and Literacy

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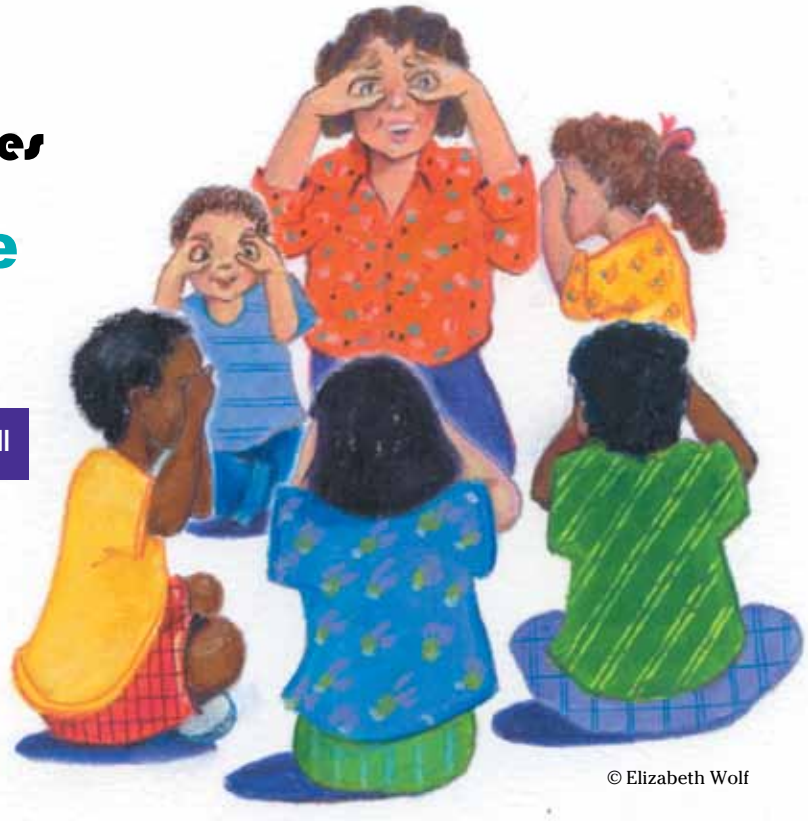

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Young children are active participants in building language and literacy skills. They learn as they participate in meaningful experiences and interact with children and adults, constructing language during the process. Much of the language children learn reflects the language and behavior of the adult models they interact with and listen to (Strickland & Morrow 1989). Adults scaffold children's language learning by providing a model that is expressive, responsive, and enjoyable.

One way to enrich children's language experience is through the use of storytelling. Many studies have shown that children build vocabulary, use more complex sentences, and improve comprehension when frequently exposed to stories. Egan (1986) explains that we remember best in story form; he supports the use of stories as a way of organizing curriculum for children. The magnetic quality of the story is the universal power to remember, entertain, teach, inspire, create, and know (Raines & Isbell 1994).

Comparing reading aloud and telling stories

Reading aloud and telling stories are both effective ways to share literature with young children and to support language and literacy learning. But while story reading frequently occurs in early childhood settings and is valued as an important tool to enhance literacy development, storytelling is frequently viewed as a frill and only occasionally used in classrooms (Cooter 1991). Mallan (1996) explains that the story and storytelling are essential to human existence. The story told has distinctive characteristics that make it an excellent technique to foster oral language development and provide a rich foundation for literacy.

The experience of hearing a story told is more personal and connected to the listener. The storyteller can maintain eye contact and adapt the telling of the story to specific listeners; a story reader usually follows the text exactly and focuses her eyes on the words on the page. The language of storytelling is often more informal than printed text. Listeners, regardless of their language skills or reading abilities, can understand the story because it is communicated through words, vocal intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and body movement (Mallan 1997). For these reasons, storytelling connects to the language of the children and thereby has the potential for increasing their understanding of the story.

Storytelling promotes expressive language development—in oral and written forms—and presents new vocabulary and complex language in a powerful form that inspires children to emulate the model they have experienced. Stauffer (1980) says that the function of language is to communicate, and communication is the main purpose of language. In the personal setting of the storytelling environment, the storyteller's language and the story together establish a rapport that encour-

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ages children to connect to the story using their own language and experiences. The storytelling experience assists children in generating stories and encourages their dictation and story writing (Nelson 1989).

Teacher as teller of stories

Early childhood teachers who use storytelling effectively tell stories in their own words and adjust the tale to reflect the characteristics of their audience. They use expression, gestures, and animation to draw the children to the story and the event.

The teacher who selects and tells a wonderful story to young children provides a powerful oral language model to imitate. She plays a critical role in influencing children's attitudes toward oral language, reading, and literature (Morrow 2001). Appropriate and tantalizing tales can be told again and again. Stories that make a personal connection to the children are requested and enjoyed many times, over a long period of time.

Active listening and participation

The teacher as storyteller can help children develop critical and active listening skills. Because children acquire language through active participation, teachers should encourage involvement during the telling of the story. Many stories that work well with young children include repetitive phrases, unique words, and enticing descriptions. An example is in the telling of "How the Camel Got His Hump," an adaptation by Isbell and Raines (2000) of the classic story by Rudyard Kipling. Each time the camel is asked to work, he responds, "Humph!" He uses this interesting word again and again. After the second request to the camel, children frequently join in the camel's response, "Humph!"

> The magnetic quality of storytelling is the universal power to remember, entertain, inspire, create, and know—a personal process that connects to the language of the children.

> Drawing children into the telling actively engages the listeners, creating a shared experience that bonds the teller and listeners. This co-creation is very different from the story viewing young children frequently experience in today's high-tech world.

Some stories include sound effects or repeated phrases that children can play with or repeat during the telling. Listening to stories draws attention to the sounds of language and helps children develop a sensitivity to the way language works. Children, as listeners and participants, experience the joy of the repetitive phrase "millions and billions and trillions of cats" or the musical quality of the chant "fee-fi-fo-fum." Developing auditory discrimination connects the sounds of words, phrases, and passages, influencing phonemic awareness in a meaningful way. When children begin to "read" a familiar story, these sound phrases are often the first words of the story they identify and repeat.

Drawing children into the telling helps them understand how the story works, what phrases are repeated, and the sequence of action. Active participation in literacy experiences can enhance the development of comprehension, oral language, and the sense of story structure (Morrow 1985). Storytelling events that actively engage listeners in the making of the story create a shared experience that bonds the teller and listeners. Active listeners play an integral part in the storytelling process. By providing immediate feedback to the storyteller and sharing their observations, the children create the experience together. This personal interaction and active participation is very different from the story viewing that young children frequently experience in today's high-tech world (Hamilton & Weiss 1990). Stories presented in a visual form—through television, videos, or movies—cannot personally involve children or invite them into the story.

Active listening and co-creating with the teacher serve as catalysts for generating ideas at the intersection of the story told and children's own experiences. Follow-up discussions provide opportunities for children to express their ideas and experiences and to listen to what others have to say. Problem solving takes place in the context of the story: "Why did the little red hen not share her bread?" or "How did the Bremen musicians scare the thieves?" Children from different backgrounds and diverse cultures can share their interpretations of the story and relate them to their own experiences. They retell and recreate the stories.

Children learn through retelling

The first telling of a story by the teacher to a group of young children is an exciting introduction to the content, while retelling of the same story allows children to revisit the tale and refine their understanding. This repeated pleasurable experience helps children develop concepts about words, print, and books (Morrow

2001). Several retellings of a favorite story by the teacher or the children over a period of time allow children to clarify their ideas and pick up additional details of the content. Each retelling increases the children's familiarity with the story and offers more opportunities for their participation during the experience. These retellings also help children build frameworks, characters, and vocabulary to use when they create their own stories.

Young children enjoy and learn from a story told. But they also have the added benefit of a model that uses oral language expressively and fluently. The storyteller/teacher encourages children to experiment with telling their own stories. A story told can be an exciting and meaningful personal experience for young children that provides the incentive to retell and create stories for themselves (Peck 1989). Storytelling also increases concentration and the ability to think symbolically and metaphorically (Maguire 1985).

Storytelling encourages children to use their imagination, create visual images, and actively participate (Alna 1999), providing a way to bring children into the act of storymaking, creating stories with the teacher. It can become a cooperative adventure as a child moves from being a listener to being a participant in the telling, then to being the storyteller (Trousdale 1990).

Children can retell stories with a partner, a small group, or a family member. It is important to value and encourage these early efforts of storytelling. But, as with other beginning experiences, it is appropriate to allow children to progress at their own pace. Avoid pressuring the child to tell the story to a large group or to give a perfect performance. The process of organizing and telling the story is most important at this point of development. Some children will want to tape record their story and listen to it privately.

Scaffolding

Teacher scaffolding can provide verbal support for a child's emerging attempts to develop a story. Treating the child as a valuable participant during the telling and encouraging contributions during the process foster early language development (Trousdale 1990). During the retelling process, teachers may need to ask questions that encourage children to continue. Some helpful prompts include, "What happens next?" "Then what did they do?" "What did he say?" or "And then?" Asking a question about the story content can also work, if a child is unable to continue.

Encouraging comments can help the reteller expand his ideas and move to the conclusion of the story. Drawing pictures to use as cues and acting out the story also support the child's retelling. These methods allow children to talk about the story, recall the sequence of events, and use the vocabulary of the story. Interactive storytelling expands children's comprehension of the world as well as their growth as storytellers and as storywriters (McGee & Richgels 2000).

> Retelling stories encourages children to use their imagination, expand their ideas, and create visual images as they transfer the plot to a new setting, include different characters, or add new voices.

Retelling and comprehension

Young children's first attempts at storytelling are often the retelling of stories they have heard; stories of great personal interest are the foundation for their earliest trials. In the child's first efforts, the beginning, words, characters, and voices tend to be very similar to the original telling they heard.

Children's next stage of telling often involves transfer of a storyline they know to a new setting or the inclusion of different characters. For example, the little red hen becomes a little boy who asks his friends to help him make a pizza. The storyline is based on the child's experience with the original story, plot, and sequence of The Little Red Hen; the framework of the familiar story is the basis for the retold story. In storytelling, young children say, "This is how I interpret what is in my mind." Paley explains that "young children do not pretend to be storytellers: they are storytellers" (1990, 17).

Children as creators of stories

As children become more confident in their oral abilities and understanding of stories, they will want to select new stories for telling. In addition to stories about things they have experienced and the people in their lives, children can use story collections and new books to expand their repertoire.

Young children create visual images and use their imagination to determine the story setting, characters, and happenings. The story becomes personally meaningful to them because they have been involved in the process. Children who are emotionally connected to their stories become motivated to master the goals of emergent literacy. They have the desire to communicate both orally and in written form. In this way, they share and preserve their stories to revisit (Brand, Trostle, & Donato 2001).

Young writers often draw their stories. The storyteller is both author

Jerome's Story

Jerome is talking with a friend in the library area of his kindergarten classroom. He begins, "I am going to tell you a story… Once upon a time, there was an old man who lived in a shabby house on a high, high hill. One day he walked to the market to buy a fish for dinner. He picked out an enormous grayfish and put it in his basket. On the way home the enormous grayfish jumped out of his basket and jumped into a river and swam away. So the sad old man went home with no money and no fish. His wife was not very happy with him. She told him that if the fish jumped into the river it must be magic. She told him to go back to the river and ask the magic fish for a new house with two rooms. And he did."

This is the beginning of a very complicated storytelling by a five-year-old boy. His story continued until the entire sequence, including five requests to the magic fish, were related to his attentive friend. He even included the moral, "The man went home and found a shabby hut—because he asked for too much."

Jerome's complete story is over 500 words—a very fluent retelling that clearly demonstrates his desire to communicate his ideas. He included many of the conventions of story that he had experienced when his teacher told "The Magic Fish." Last week Jerome heard the story for the first time and this week it was retold. Today, Jerome became the teller of the folktale, and soon he will be telling and writing his own stories.

and illustrator (Gillard 1996). Other children who dictate the events to a teacher later draw, scribble, or produce letters on the transcription. A familiar story serves as a beginning framework for writing of stories and for later original creations. Stories told include descriptions of the setting, detailed information about the appearance of the characters, and a clear sequence of action. These add enriched language that can be reused and variety in the rewriting of the story. Because stories told frequently include a narrative, children also use this more advanced element in the telling and writing of their stories (McGee & Richgels 2000).

As children begin to communicate their stories orally, they want to record their treasures, dictating to the teacher or writing independently. They can read the written versions to a friend or take them home to share with families. The oral transcript consists of the words the children used in their telling, which makes the story an easy text to read. A collection of stories told in a classroom and transcribed is a wonderful addition to the literacy center, where children can "read," enjoy,

and admire the stories—providing additional support for everyone's efforts.

Circle of Storytelling

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Conclusion

Young children who experience wonderful stories told by an enthusiastic teacher benefit in many ways related to language and literacy development. They experience active involvement in the creation of a story. They build comprehension of the story and discover the conventions of literary form. They empathize with and discuss the feelings of the characters and the dilemmas they overcome. And they listen to language and experience the power of the spoken word.

One of the greatest outcomes of storytelling is that it inspires children to create their own stories. This experience adds new dimensions to language and literacy learning. Children can communicate their stories in oral and written forms and read and collect stories to tell and share with friends and adults. They analyze stories and determine ways to enhance their presentations. They create patterns of words and repetitive passages that invite others into the telling. And they "write" their story so it can be enjoyed again and again.

A story told by the teacher and retold by children is a powerful literacy tool for the early childhood classroom. Storytelling provides a pleasurable literacy connection that has the power to positively impact children's attitudes toward stories throughout their lives.

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