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CHILDREN AS STORYTELLERS

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Teachers who tell stories to their students know well the values of doing so. These teachers, by carrying on one of the oldest forms of entertainment are also serving notice to their students that the pictures created by each story resides in their heads. In this age of visual media, from television to picture books, children are still given the opportunity to develop mind illustrations to accompany the narratives the teachers tell. I am always heartened when, at the conclusion of the storytelling classes, most of the attending teachers and librarians pledge to tell, as well as read, stories to their students.

An important value of storytelling is that it taps a basic element of literacy, what Applebee (1978) has called sense of story. As one gains a sense of how stories are similarly structured through hearing them told or read, s/he comes to have expectations about how any given story will progress. Knowing story structure allows one to concentrate on the events themselves, interpreting them, predicting them; in short, thinking about them, and comprehending them.

While listening to stories requires making mental illustrations and invites internalization of story structure, the telling of stories demands blending thought and language to the enhancement of both. The rewards for children who learn this art form, retelling favorite stories or creating new ones include an increasingly mature language fluency, expanded vocabulary, a bridge to their own written narratives, and the confidence to speak in front of groups.

There is no procedure to having children become storytellers, but there are principles which raise the probability that it will happen for your students. (1) Make storytelling activities fun, non-threatening; laugh with your students and have a good time. They will too. (2) Choose activities which lead to the final goal of children telling stories, but

move gradually, to build confidence based on early success. (3) Beginning with small groups, implement activities which make participation easy, before they must "go it alone." I call these the three G's of storytelling--Have Goodtimes, move Gradually, and begin with small Groups.

The Five Types of Storytelling Activities

1. Teacher-Telling Activities

Teachers who want their students to tell stories must tell stories themselves. We all love to hear professional storytellers who sing and juggle their ways through enchanting stories. But the teacher need not become a singer or juggler to tell stories. One needs to become comfortable in telling stories to kids. A few suggestions follow.

You need first to find a story you like, read it a few times, say it aloud to yourself and then tell it to the class. When you forget a part, improvise. In time, telling becomes easier and your students will look forward to hearing stories told. Stories from all cultures are available at the local libraries. Begin with selections from the following collectors: Aleksandr Afanasev (Russian Tales), Virginia Haviland (Series of stories from many cultures), Joyce Arkhurst or Harold Courlander (West African Folk Tales), Rosemary Minard (stories with girls as principal characters), Virginia Tashjian (Armenian Tales), Richard Chase (Appalachian Tales), and the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault. For a full discussion on telling stories in the classroom, see Baker & Green (1977), Farnsworth (1981), or Hayes (1981).

You need not limit stories to Language Arts class, one can create stories in all areas of the curriculum. Teachers can teach math and science concepts by embedding them in created stories. A sixth grade teacher told a continued story to social studies students which involved a long journey. The students mapped the progress of the traveler, learning geography along the way.

Another activity which teachers of second to sixth grade students have found successful might be called Round Robin Writing. Here the teacher has the students sit in circular groups of six to eight. S/he then tells a story, stopping before its resolution. Each member of each

group then writes a sentence toward a group-created story ending. It is a fun activity and serves to integrate the language arts. The student must listen to the story, read what the others in the group have written, write a sentence consistent with the flow of the story, and, teacher willing, tell rather than read the ending.

The important thing is that telling stories becomes a natural activity in the classroom. The teacher tells them, and not only in reading class. To children, storytelling should become something that they will wish to try also.

2. Student Involvement Activities

Children need to move from listener role to assume a part in the retelling of stories. This process is most likely if the teacher follows the "three G's" principles--move gradually from easier to harder demands, use group support, and keep the spirit on having a goodtime. The following describes five ways to gradually involve children in story retelling.

Sound and Motion Stories. Perhaps the easiest way for children to become involved in story is to have them respond, verbally or nonverbally, to cues within a story being told. Some stories have been invented for this purpose (See Kraus, 1971), but many folkstories lend themselves to sounds and actions which children can contribute to the telling. You simply need to provide directions for your students to supply the roar of a lion, the crying of a princess, the whistling of the wind, the galloping of horses and the like. Children may make a silent sign when they hear a certain word in the story. A little thought when preparing a story will yield a good deal of fun and involvement from your students.

Nonverbal activities. Children of all ages can learn to express themselves through body movement, gesture, and facial expressions. Children usually will respond to these activities when they are part of a group. You might begin with children nonverbally expressing simple concepts like answering a phone, being caught in an elevator, or winning a game. Charades, also, is a great activity for developing nonverbal communication skills.

Reader's Theatre. This activity calls not for movement but for oral expression. In its simplest form children sit or stand in a group and read a folkstory which has been written in play form. One child in the group acts as narrator and each child reads a character's lines. As this activity develops children learn to use intonation to highlight the mood of the story.

Reader's theatre is a valuable activity because it gives children the opportunity to practice using their voices in a strongly supportive situation. They work within a group, have a script to read from and rehearse until they are comfortable with the story's interpretation. Children quickly come to note their progress in voice communication. Some teachers integrate this activity with writing by having their students rewrite a folktale in the play format they will use for Reader's Theatre.

Illustrated Retelling. This activity is adapted from Circle Story Activity, introduced by Simpson (1981). In an Illustrated Retelling, the teacher puts his/her students into groups of five to seven. The students read a folkstory and represent its plot through a series of pictures drawn or painted on a mural. The story is then retold to the rest of the class, with each group member retelling that part s/he illustrated. Here the students maintain group support yet are not responsible for retelling an entire story, but for the less threatening task of retelling part of one. A side benefit of this activity, of course, is that it promises visual reinforcement for those children still internalizing story structure. Most importantly to our goal, children begin to see themselves as storytellers.

Acting. There are three main levels of activities in which children in some way retell a story through dramatics. You may decide to involve all children in all three types, or, keeping the Three G's in mind, may place particular students in levels according to their ease at performing. We use Grimm Brothers' tales for these activities but folktales from any culture can be found with which to conduct them.

In the first level of dramatics, one child in the group acts as narrator and reads the story. The others in the group take character parts and nonverbally interpret their actions. Like the pantomime activity described above, non-

verbal drama develops movement expression while allowing children to participate in a non-threatening situation.

At the second level, the narrator in the group does not read the story but uses his/her narration to keep the action going. The actors use both dialogue and movement. This format takes practice to coordinate the natural flow of narration and dialogue.

In the third level, there is no narration. Now the actors present a short play in which the story is retold. Children find creative ways to integrate character and plot within the framework of the story. Besides being fun, there is the value in building children's confidence to stand before their peers. Creative children may decide to construct props to go along with their skits. Teachers should remember to help all participants to know the meaning of the lines they are speaking, so they can improvise if they get stuck--a key attribute of the successful storyteller.

3. Story Structure Discussions

Involving children in telling stories includes talking about the structure of stories. It may be enough for young children to know that stories have beginnings, middles, and ends, but older children can come to appreciate what makes a good story interesting, how structure contributes to plot. As an introductory activity, the teacher should share with students the basic elements of a narrative--

1. a character or characters in a situation
2. a complication to the situation
3. events leading to a climax
4. a conclusion

When these points are understood, a discussion about a well-known story can begin, and the events mapped on the chalkboard. For example, Cinderella is the main character whose situation is forlorn and predictable until the complication of her desire to attend the ball changes her attitude. A series of events, including her attempts at dress making, the appearance of her fairy godmother, her presence and flight from the ball, leads to the climax of the slipper being placed so gently on her foot. The story's conclusion is the long familiar one of royal wedding and living happily ever after. Continue this activity with other stories your students know.

Story Chains. An excellent strategy to teach story structure is to put students in groups, wherein each group creates a character in some situation and, in story chain fashion, passes it on to the other groups for their contributions of complication, series of events, and conclusion. Four stories are created and shared in this way.

Story Flow. Children need the opportunity to see how stories, though structured similarly, can flow in many directions. As an example, let us say that two brothers are staying at home without a babysitter for the first time. Children would certainly think of complications that could arise from that situation--from funny to frightful. Each complication leads to a series of events and to conclusions real and fantastic. The activity provides a structure for children who have a chance to write their own stories.

4. Storytelling Practice

When children are comfortably involved in story, they'll need practice in actually telling stories. Remembering the Three G's, start with an activity as nonthreatening as possible. The 50-second story is such an activity.

Here you will tell a very short, unembellished story to your class. Try to limit the time to under a minute. A good example is "Why goats don't climb trees," from a gifted storyteller from Virginia, Michael Parent.

Once upon a time Goat decided he wanted to learn to climb trees. He went to Cat and asked for lessons. Obliging him, Cat gave Goat the first lesson on getting a good grip on the tree trunk with claws or hooves as the case might be. After some practice Goat got the knack of it. Cat told Goat to return on the morrow for the next lesson.

That afternoon, Cat walked by the very same spot and saw Goat teaching Dog the very same lesson he had learned on that very same morning. Cat immediately told Goat that he would get no further lessons on climbing trees. And that is why goats today still do not climb trees.

Following this short telling, place your students in pairs and give each child a chance to retell the story to his/her partner. Then suggest that each teller embellish the story, exaggerate it, describe character motives, or change

it in any way. After each child retells the story to his/her partner, ask for volunteers to tell the story to the class.

Students should have plenty of opportunity to tell stories to small groups of children before they are expected to storytell in front of the entire class. Time should be spent discussing guidelines for choosing, practicing and telling a story. Some children will be ready before others, but as in other situations, merely watching their peers tell stories will help to motivate even reluctant children.

5. Storytelling Center

The fifth type of activity is that old reliable, the center. If you are serious about your students telling stories, you will find a corner of the classroom in which to set up a storytelling center. Suggestions of how to equip the center with props include puppets, a flannel-board and flannel figures, a tape recorder with collections of stories told by the students, illustrations of stories and other artwork, collections of folkstories, collections of stories created by the students, a rug or comfortable chair. Teachers and students may think of other enhancements.

Storytelling does involve some time and effort by the teacher. Yet its benefits are great. Children who are telling stories are those who are reading them and creating them in their writing. Children learn to use their language in a fluent, confident manner through telling stories. Children who are telling stories may well seek out stories told in their families and communities and are in touch with that great cultural link between past and future. Storytelling is not a lost art; there has been a resurgence of this creative pastime in our country. Give your students an opportunity to be part of it.

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