

Enhancing children's oral language and literacy development through storytelling in an early years classroom

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Most young children, from various sociocultural backgrounds, love to hear and tell stories. Taking examples from an early years classroom in a Western Australian public school, this article explores how students' oral language and literacy development can be enhanced through storytelling. Within this context, an oral story is any text that is imaginative, a retelling of a story or a recount of an experience (Fellowes & Oakley, 2010).

Storytelling in the early years classroom provides opportunities for students to meaningfully use their oral language within the school environment. This can become a bridge for young students bringing students' home language and literacies into the classroom (e.g. Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011). Having students use their oral language, and contribute their ideas in the classroom can help create a sense of belonging for students, regardless of their backgrounds. A sense of belonging is one of the key goals of *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). *The early years learning framework (EYLF)*, supports students' learning as it contributes to students feeling valued and safe in the classroom environment.

Providing opportunities for students to use and develop their oral language also facilitates the development of their early literacy skills (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Peterson, McIntyre & Forsyth, 2016). Storytelling, as a context in which students use their oral language, supports students' emerging literacy development in particular ways. Through telling stories, the storyteller uses vocabulary that provides detail and explanation not normally needed in everyday conversation; that is, storytelling provides practice in using explicit and decontextualised language, usually required for writing (Raban, 2018). Storytelling, being an oral recount or narrative, facilitates students' developing knowledge about

these text structures (Scull & Mackenzie, 2018), and these are often the first text types that students learn to write. Scribing stories that students tell facilitates students' understanding of how written language works; that is, written language remains for future reference (Raban, 2018).

Some contextual notes

In my school, a public primary school in regional Western Australia (WA), assessments showed that many students in the early years of school, (Kindergarten through to Year 1), presented with significantly different oral language abilities and skills when compared with students in previous years. Recognising the impact of these differences upon students' literacy development, the school implemented a focus on oral language in the early years of schooling. It must be noted that Kindergarten in WA public schools begins when children are 3½–4½ years of age at entry. Governed by the *Schools Education Act 1999*, but funded through Universal Access, Kindergarten is non-compulsory and comprises 15 hours per week. Compulsory full-time schooling begins in WA in Pre-Primary, being the year prior to Year 1.

The oral language abilities of my Kindergarten students ranged from minimal to very competent. Some students were learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D), including Indigenous and migrant families. Some had diagnosed speech and language delays, with a few undergoing assessments for Autism Spectrum Disorder. What follows is a description of how I used storytelling as a strategy to facilitate the students' oral language and literacy development in my Kindergarten classroom, while also catering for the diversity that existed within the group.

To begin ...

From the beginning of the year, I became a storyteller in my classroom. I regularly told short stories 'from the filing cabinet in my head', that

often included the students as characters. My ideas were based upon children's storybooks or recounts of an experience, often with elaboration. Many stories were told during rest time, during which I encouraged the students to close their eyes and picture the story's events. This engaged students' visual imagery skills, an important reading strategy (Annandale et al., 2004), and thus supported students' emerging literacy. At times, I drew the story in a story map (Annandale et al., 2004), further facilitating literacy development.

Scaffolding students' developing storytelling

I supported the students' use of oral language, and developing storytelling skills, in a number of ways. It is acknowledged that what students produced in these various learning experiences described below are not complete stories. However, the strategy of storytelling overall provided for scaffolded opportunities for students to meaningfully use, and develop, their oral language, and literacy.

In the beginning, students contributed to my stories by expressing their ideas either during the storytelling itself or at the end of the story. Their ideas were valued by me. If students contributed during storytelling, I incorporated some of the students' ideas into my own story as it unfolded. When students shared ideas at the end of the story, I often retold the story with their contributions included. For example, while telling a story about some children who found a box in a cave, I asked the students to visualise what these children might find in that box, asking about the colour and what they did with it. On completing my story, I encouraged the students to relay their ideas, using a wand as the talking stick. I retold this story later in the day with some of the students' ideas included.

My students regularly used my stories as a springboard for ideas to develop their stories. For instance, following my story about two children in a cave, I asked the children to think about what they would do and see in a cave, using their imagination. Essential think time was provided. Each child then relayed their ideas in small groups, to an adult who scribed. Scribing acknowledged and valued the students' ideas and, as this modelled writing for students, further supported emerging literacy development.

On another occasion, after reading the book *Uno's garden: Counting book* by Graeme Base (2006), I told a story about children in a garden who found flowers and fairies, using the strategy of text innovation (Annandale et al., 2004). After thinking about what they would find and do should they come upon a garden, each student engaged in a form of text innovation and created a story. This was scribed by

an adult, read to the student and later illustrated by the student. The sample here is from a student with EAL/D who began the year with minimal English.



Figure 1. EAL/D student's scribed story of an imaginary garden

Throughout the year, students were encouraged to talk about their drawings, be these in response to a story or free drawing. This often elicited a story of some form. Once again, students' stories were regularly scribed, so acknowledging and valuing the students' developing oral language, and authorial skills.

Figures 2 and 3 are from a student with a diagnosed severe language delay. Storytelling went beyond the listening and speaking modes. We regularly acted out stories, often to music. Learning experiences that utilised music and movement provided for holistic and playful learning, these being central practices of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Furthermore, such learning experiences engaged various other communicative modes and learning domains, such as physical, further supported comprehension and facilitated learning across the curriculum. For instance, extending upon our work on *Uno's garden: Counting book* by Graeme Base (2006), we pretended to grow into a tree to music. The educational assistant watered us and ensured the sun shone (Science links). When grown, we blew in the wind and storm and birds visited us to play. On another occasion, I played some soft music and we explored a forest, finding caves and tall trees. Afterwards, students were encouraged to share what they saw and found, with some finding treasure and others finding fairies.

My intention is to further develop students' oral storytelling, and literacy development, in various ways. For instance, retelling stories, with and without pictorial support, would further develop students' narrative structures. Acting out the story prior to retelling would aid comprehension, and support the retelling. Class stories, in which students each contribute their ideas and illustrations, would develop knowledge about narrative structure, concepts about print and book structures.

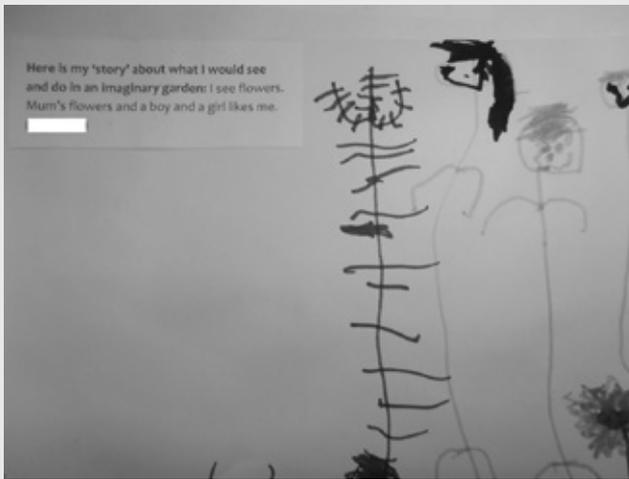


Figure 2. A story about the garden, as described above

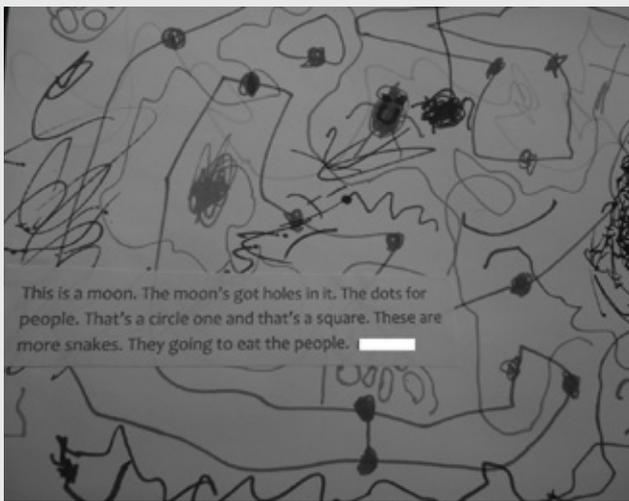


Figure 3. A story from their free drawing

The results to date

Through this guided and scaffolded approach, students from different cultural and language backgrounds, quiet introverted students and students with diagnosed language delays participated and contributed their ideas. Their oral language abilities improved markedly and, through embedding other strategies, such as text innovation and modelled writing, within the storytelling, students' emerging literacy development was further facilitated.

In a busy, curriculum-focused environment, the strategy of storytelling has allowed me space and time to stop and listen to students in meaningful and purposeful ways, while still facilitating their learning. Moreover, through their stories, the students were valued for who they were, their ideas were valued and their confidence in the classroom grew. They belonged.

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