

“Beyond Words: Storytelling in the Elementary Classroom”

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I dedicate my work to Daisy, my very much-loved Jack Russell Terrier (2000 – 2014).

Abstract

Storytelling transcends time, age, and culture with powers to help people develop socially, emotionally, culturally, and cognitively. Focusing on culturally responsive teaching practices and oral language development, Chapter 1 presents the significance of storytelling and offers curriculum connections as well as an overview of the resource created for elementary teachers. The content presented in Chapter 2 establishes that storytelling is grounded in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and James Paul Gee's notion of Primary Discourse. In addition, the chapter includes a discussion of Geneva Gay's model of culturally responsive teaching and related supportive research, as well as a review of oral language development and relevant research. Chapter 3 connects the resource to the literature findings in Chapter 2, suggests areas for further research, and includes personal reflections. The teacher resource presents research, outlines pedagogical and pragmatic considerations, and suggests activities, resources, and assessments related to the act of storytelling.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When deciding on a topic for my Master's of Education project, I reflected on my personal, educational, and professional background. Before long, it became evident that my personal experiences, learning, and teaching philosophy could be integrated into the powerful method of storytelling.

I share Vygotsky's (1978) passion for embracing differences while reducing feelings of inadequacy in children. I support social constructivist views of working to build an inclusive classroom environment founded on respect and empathy. Echoing Vygotsky's idea that thinking is social in origin, I believe we can learn from each other, with each other, and about each other. I value that cognition and culture are interwoven, and recognize that there are variations within and among cultures.

Storytelling is many things; an ancient art, a natural way of communicating, and it is through interactions with others that storytelling potential becomes apparent (Bishop & Kimbell, 2006). Storytelling also demonstrates how people as storytellers and listeners work together to make meaning. The nature of storytelling enables the storyteller to adapt to the needs of the audience, and affords opportunities for the audience to respond to the needs of the storyteller. These needs can be addressed through tone, volume, pause, intonations, timing, eye-contact, and gestures. Furthermore, it is difficult to separate storytelling from culturally responsive teaching, a pedagogy which I strongly endorse. Culture is embedded within storytelling; in fact, storytelling is a commonality amongst all cultures (Bishop & Kimball, 2006; Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003; Lewis, 2011; Lockett & Jones, 2009; McCabe, 1997; McKeough, Bird, Tourigny, Romaine, Graham, Ottmann, & Jeary, 2008). Cultures use storytelling to teach lessons and pass on information. In schools, storytelling

can be used to promote the cultivation of inclusive classrooms by including participant voice, validating prior knowledge, and offering opportunities to learn and reflect on various cultural and individual practices. Culture can be embedded in the execution of storytelling units, invitations to community storytellers, sensitivity to protocol, and the use of audio-storytelling materials.

Storytelling can also act as a window into history and enables us to learn about themselves, culture, community, and world. It is a socially engaging, enjoyable experience, and fundamental to the development of language skills (Heath, 2013).

In his explanation of primary Discourse, Gee (1989) proposes that how we act, talk, and write develops through people's earliest social interactions in the home, and that individual Discourses should be respected and appreciated. Similarly, I would suggest that cultural and personal experiences of every individual have value. Irrespective of a student's starting point, the gradual release of responsibility and zone of proximal development can be utilized by teachers to assist students in achieving academic outcomes. Teachers should work to scaffold students' learning through modeling and practice. Furthermore, I recognize that prior knowledge acts as a platform for narratives to link home and school while positively positioning students and fostering a community of learners.

Overall, the more I came to understand my learning, teaching philosophy and life experiences, it became obvious that storytelling could be one of the most powerful educational strategies to employ with today's youth. Yet, I was aware that throughout my 16 years of teaching experience, I had observed very few of my colleagues employ storytelling units, activities, and strategies in their classrooms. This awareness prompted me to want to research the benefits of storytelling in greater detail. After some initial research, it became clear that my objective would be to create a resource to inform and excite elementary teachers of the social, emotional, and academic benefits of

storytelling, as well as to share the various means through which storytelling can be implemented into current teaching practices to meet the prescribed learning outcomes.

Significance of Storytelling

“Storytelling provides us with the essential context and other important environmental or sociological conditions at the time, which are often lost in the stark and emotionless world of the written word” (Marsh, 2012, p. 57).

Storytelling underpins the relationship of humanity across time, continents, race, and ethnicity (Carter-Black, 2013). It has been described as being “central to human understanding” (Lewis, 2011, p. 505) and as a “universal meaning-making tool” (McKeough, Bird, Tourigny, Romaine, Graham, Ottmann, & Jeary, 2008, p. 148). Humans are classified biologically as Homo Sapiens and sociologically as Homo Narans, storytelling people (Marsh, 2012). Associated with oral tradition, storytelling dates back to the age of the “hunter-gatherer” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 159), and “for centuries storytelling has been used as a powerful communication vehicle” (Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003, p. 217). In the past there was an enormous reliance on the ability to share stories as an individual or as a group participant for “communication, recreation, entertainment, education, and to pass on cultural identity” (Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003, p. 217). According to Barger (2001) language skills were developed through listening to storytellers, and those cultures whose storytellers had advanced speech patterns could influence a generation of imitators (p. 159).

Many cultures, including indigenous populations around the globe, realize their history through oral tradition. Information was, and continues to be, passed from one generation to the next through stories. “People preserve what is most important to them – language, traditions, culture, and identity” (McKeough, et al., 2008, p. 150). Undeniably, with the invention and spread of the written word, oral storytelling has evolved to meet the changing needs in society. Today,

community Elders continue to reinforce cultural values by “reflecting the collective realities, experiences, and reactions” by using stories set in the past to transmit the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of their culture (Carter-Black, 2013, p. 48). Their purpose is to make the insight of the past accessible and to ensure that it is shared with future generations.

Storytelling is a “vital and unique ingredient of the human experience” (Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003, p. 217). Whether a legend, myth, folktale, fable, tall tale, or pourquoi story, narratives appeal to the emotional, developmental, and cultural aspects of learners. In fact, storytelling has been described as “a longstanding strategy for socializing the young ones in various societies” (Carter-Black, 2013, p. 42). Its purpose, regardless of the context, is the transmission of sociocultural values and norms. As is discussed in Chapter 2, the theoretical foundations of storytelling are rooted in Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, a theory that recognizes the significant influence of society and cultural beliefs on individual learning.

Gee’s (1989) concept of primary Discourse and the structure of meaning making connect to the practice of storytelling. Baskerville (2011) cites research by Collins (1999) who found that “adults and children frequently use storytelling to make sense of their world” (p. 113). Narrative being is human and human being is stories; so pervasive and powerful is this relationship that if we change our story, we may change our lives because we come to know ourselves through the world and its stories, and we come to know the world through our experiences and our stories (Lewis, 2011, p. 506).

Polletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes (2011) describe narratives as “forms of discourse, vehicles of ideology, and elements of collective action frames” (p. 112). Such thoughts echo ideas expressed by Hymes (as cited in McCabe, 1997) that “narrative is the primary means by which children make sense of their experience,” and that they “comprehend and remember stories that conform to the

structure of the kinds of stories they have heard at home” (p. 463). Michaels (1991) states that “stories are an early genre of discourse that children learn to speak publicly” (cited in McCabe, 1997, p. 454).

Storytelling is a means to embody Gay’s (2002) view of culturally responsive teaching. According to culturally responsive teaching, “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of references of students, they are more personally meaningful, have a higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2002, cited in Brown, 2007, p. 60). Baskerville (2011) believes that storytelling “offers sensitivity to students’ backgrounds, experiences and differences, privileges students’ voice, and affirms respect for the individual lived experiences” (p. 114). Davidhizar and Lonser (2003) add that, “by validating background knowledge and culture, storytelling can enhance self-esteem and teach cultural sensitivity” (p. 217). Indeed, storytelling provides “collective heritages a tangible form” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 161). According to Carter-Black (2013), storytelling offers an avenue to stimulate interest in unfamiliar cultures, increase the awareness and tolerance of others, and foster pride in one’s own (p. 47). Benjamin (2006) believes “storytelling today, as in the past, can be useful as a tool for defining, securing, and shaping people’s existence in relation to both their culture and universe” (p. 159).

Moreover, storytelling can offer numerous opportunities for cognitive growth (Lockett & Jones, 2009) and provide experiences that motivate and drive academic achievement (Gay, 2010). Fettes (2012) observed that through storytelling opportunities, students “develop greater oral fluency and sense of agency as learners” (p. 32). Research findings have also revealed how storytelling can increase retelling comprehension (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004). According to Isbell et al. (2004), storytelling can provide a conceptual framework for language, increase attention span,

enhance vocabulary, nurture visualization and imagination, heighten writing skills, and raise interest in reading. Davidhizar and Lonser (2003) believe storytelling can be used to develop critical thinking, and model positive behaviours and communication skills (p. 217). Storytelling can also provide authentic opportunities to identify and practice expressive features such as pause, repetition, volume, timing, gestures, and body language (Eder, 2007).

Most importantly storytelling can make listening and speaking enjoyable (Bishop & Kimball, 2006). Davidhizar and Lonser (2003) state that storytelling “offers a humane approach that responds to the emotional needs” (p. 217) of the participants. It can captivate and engage, and connect home, school, and community (Hare, 2012; Reese, 2012). Storytelling can also assist in the development of social etiquette skills (Lockett & Jones, 2009). Uniquely, the storyteller and the listener have a reciprocal relationship created through gestures, eye-contact, and vocal participation. Unlike a story reader, the storyteller is engaged in the moment, considering and adapting to the context of the situation.

Like Marsh (2012), I believe “there is a lot to be learnt from this tried and trusted form of passing on one’s cultural heritage to the next generation” (p. 57), and I am pleased to learn that others recognize that storytelling is a valuable strategy. As “one of the oldest methods of making sense out of experiences, of preserving the past, and constructing a future” (Peratta, 2010, p. 30), it is undeniably important. Through my research and personal experience, I recognize that the magical powers of storytelling cannot be undervalued, but rather should be embraced whole-heartily to act as a building block for students. Nkanishi and Rittner (1992) stated, “as a universal mode for the expression and transmission of culture, the inclusion of storytelling presents a unique perspective from which to begin the process of developing cultural awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and, ultimately, a viable set of cross-cultural practice skills” (cited in Carter-Black,

2013, p. 47) indicating the relevance of implementing storytelling activities in literacy programs. In essence, I propose the use of storytelling as a practical strategy for increasing the effectiveness of oral language development, cultural awareness, and sense of belonging.

Curriculum Connections

“The resilience of storytelling over the course of history suggests that it is a powerful teaching/learning strategy and therefore should be a common commodity in the K-12 classroom, particularly with regard to language arts” (Roney, 2009, p. 45).

Meeting the demands of the British Columbia Ministry’s English Language Arts (2006) (hereafter referred to as ELA) curriculum may be challenging for some educators. However, the act of storytelling can provide a means to meet the needs of all learners, promote inclusion and diversity, address requirements communicated by the local and Aboriginal communities, while sharing the responsibility of language learning with the student’s home environment, all of which are components of the British Columbia’s Kindergarten to Grade 7 ELA curriculum document (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006). The content of the document explicates the connections between reading, writing, and oral language and communicates how academic and social competences are reliant on spoken language competence. Sections in the document convey information about the importance of the gradual release of responsibility model, and about students beginning school with differing exposure to literacy and vocabulary knowledge. Storytelling activities also envelop the principles of child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practice developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYA) (1996, p. 30). The principles cited in the ELA document that connect to storytelling include the following:

- Development and learning occur and are influenced by multiple social and cultural

contexts....

- Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experiences as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them. . . .
- Children develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel psychologically secure.

(British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 30)

Another aspect in the ELA Kindergarten to Grade 7 curriculum document that connects to storytelling activities is the opportunity for choice in the exploration of topics to meet certain learning outcomes (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 11). Such choice can be incorporated into storytelling activities as they provide a powerful avenue to address needs that are relevant, local in context, and of particular interest to students. Additionally, content in the Ministry of Education elementary ELA curriculum document stresses the importance of the entire school community working towards oral language learning by making connections between what is learned in and out of school. Storytelling tasks complement the notion that language development, through narratives, begins in the home and can be broadened at the school level by offering storytelling experiences (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14).

Another key component of the Kindergarten to Grade 7 ELA curriculum document is the stated goal of “ensuring that the cultures and contributions of Aboriginal peoples in BC are reflected in all provincial curricula” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 13). Content in the ELA document communicates the importance of partnerships between school, community, and local Aboriginal groups, stresses that cultures and contributions should be addressed in ways that reflect Aboriginal concepts of teaching and learning accurately and respectfully, and overall conveys the