



# Storytelling

## Addressing the Literacy Needs of Diverse Learners

Susan Craig

Karla Hull

Ann G. Haggart

Elaine Crowder



**By observing the give and take intrinsic to storytelling, children learn how to build a relationship with an audience.**

Storytelling is a great way to bridge apparent “cultural divides” by encouraging many interpretations of the core story the teacher is telling. Storytelling helps children connect prior knowledge and experience with the larger world of text. It promotes reading comprehension in ways that build the capacity of all children to academically

to explore all narrative forms, while learning the rules associated with each, allows children with different storytelling histories to support one another’s path to literacy.

This teaching approach promotes a vision of diversity as a resource, by encouraging children to make selections of narrative form based on the anticipated audience, rather than reducing all experiences to the school-story format that educators so often use. Children with a wide range of oral and written abilities can participate in storytelling that can be used to bridge their diverse literacy experiences.

### Storytelling as a Bridge for Diverse Literacy Needs

Storytelling provides special education teachers with a collaborative link to the general education classroom by doing the following:

- *Providing a social context for literacy.* Bridging the distance between the narrative styles of culturally diverse children requires teaching strategies that address not only the role language plays in conveying information, but also the equally compelling

role it plays in setting the tone of everyday life. Mastering the social aspects of language, the ability to observe and adjust what is being said based on subtle changes in the listener, is a difficult one for many children (Merritt & Culatta, 1998). Storytelling helps children acquire this important skill by watching the storyteller engage the audience by changing intonation or facial expression. It exposes children to points of view other than the ones their families hold, thereby expanding the range of perspectives the children encounter.

Encouraging children to tell their own stories provides an excellent opportunity for self-expression. Storytelling relates complex causes and outcomes, at a level usually above their ability to write about them.

- *Helping children develop interesting ideas.* Oral discourse encourages children to explain their ideas in an engaging and coherent way so that they can hold the attention of their audience. Listening to the reactions of listeners to the story helps children clarify what they are trying to say.

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Teachers interested in integrating storytelling into their literacy instruction need to first recognize the linguistic diversity present in their schools.

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succeed. In short, let’s improve our storytelling skills. This article can help.

Instruction in today’s inclusive, culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms requires that teachers understand that there are many different ways of telling a “good story” besides the traditional, time-sequenced “school story” format (see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”). Having opportunities

## What Does the Literature Say About Storytelling with Diverse Learners?

**Benefits of Storytelling.** Storytelling is a powerful tool for teaching reading and writing (Honeyghan, 2000; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). A growing body of literature emphasizes the value of storytelling as a means of helping children understand classroom discourse and sense of story (Greene, 1996; Peck, 1989; Trousdale, 1990; Williams, 1991). Oral stories help children acquire the context of literacy. Children become keenly aware of the unspoken meaning of the story's words by observing shifts in the storyteller's body posture, tension, and tone of voice.

**Students with Language Problems and Learning Disabilities.** Many studies suggest that children with language problems and learning disabilities have difficulty interpreting classroom discourse rules. Those that involve responding to narrative inference questions and those that require cause-and-effect relationships are particularly difficult (Crais & Chapman, 1987; Merritt & Culatta, 1998; Merritt & Liles, 1987).

Classroom discourse refers to the rules that govern turn taking, intent, and communication behaviors in the classroom setting. Teachers structure school stories around these discourse rules. Because stories are "one of the fundamental means of making meaning pervading all aspects of learning" (Wells, 1986, p. 194), teachers need to be able to recognize differences in story structure and help their students master the "decontextualized narratives of school" (Merritt & Culatta, 1998, p. 280).

Students with language disabilities often create stories that have less content, fewer complete episodes, shorter sentence length, weaker cohesion, and a greater number of communication breakdowns than stories of their typically developing peers (Liles, Duffy, Merritt

& Purcell, 1995; McFadden & Gillam, 1996; Merritt & Culatta, 1998).

The challenge for special educators is to develop collaborative strategies to use with classroom teachers to address the language needs of these students (see box, "Collaborative Strategies"). Direct instruction on classroom discourse and story construction is a critical component to use during these collaborative efforts (Merritt, & Culatta, 1998; Norris & Hoffman, 1993).

**Students with Limited English Proficiency.** Students with limited English proficiency may also struggle with creating congruence between the type of discourse used in school and their own family's narrative style (Kamhi, Pollock, & Harris, 1996). Their oral storytelling is often characterized by "topic associating" rather than centered around a main idea. This style often makes the transition to written text a difficult one (Kamhi et al.; Westby, 1985). As a result, teachers sometimes *mistakenly* refer these children to special education for a variety of reading and language problems, which are not disability related, but rather characteristic of different literacy experiences (Kamhi et al.). It is incumbent on *all* educators, particularly special educators, to recognize a child's cultural approach to learning as just that, as opposed to identifying that cultural approach as a language disability.

**Cultural Matters.** Different families and cultures emphasize different styles. These can range from "watching and listening" in many Native American cultures (Rhodes, 1989) to assertively stirring up family interest with exaggerated stories that earn one the right to speak, a strategy frequently found in African-American families (Kamhi et al., 1996). Children learn discourse rules at home. A family's discourse style defines its vision of the world, and gives children

the template for understanding the world around them (Cheng, 1989).

In many Eurocentric families, storytelling is much like watching television or listening to the radio. Children in these families grow up hearing adults think out loud, describing events as they happen. The narrative style of these families is similar to the "book talking," or the school discourse style used in most U.S. classrooms. This style is characterized by stories organized around specific events, with great detail given to the steps leading up to an experience, as well as what occurs after: Was the baseball game as exciting as promised? Was the movie worth the price of admission? Place and time are important in these stories, as well as an understanding of how one thing leads to another.

This sequential ordering of events has little in common with the narrative style of children raised in families with a more fluid sense of time and space: For many Latina and African-American families, storytelling is more a chronicle of relationships than a retelling of events. These stories often capture the humor of a situation or reflect an empathic understanding of another's feelings, yet sometimes lack a clear point of view. The goal of storytelling, or "Journey talking" (Williams, 1991) in this tradition is to describe experiences rather than to judge their efficacy or value. Exaggerated stories connect the listener to the beliefs or code of honor of the storyteller. Details change from one telling to another, often emphasizing events or characters familiar to the listener. Stories told in this tradition center around larger-than-life characters that represent the values and assumptions about reality that the family holds dear. These stories teach children how to behave and how to fit into their family and community.

Storytelling prepares children to understand the complex aspects of literacy, such as motive for action, author/audience relationships, and the cultural definitions of a good

story. Oral language skills learned in this way provide a springboard for the more abstract demands of nonverbal language skills associated with reading and writing literacy.

- **Encouraging role-taking and inferential comprehension.** Oral stories rely on the storyteller's voice and rhythm to convey meaning. Stories tend to be interactive, with both storyteller



**Oral stories rely on the storyteller's voice and rhythm to convey meaning.**

and audience collaborating on what's allowed: "just the facts," "stretching the truth," or adjusting the details to fit the circumstances of

the day. Details are told as they're remembered rather than in the order in which they happened. Through these stories, children co-construct a

#### **Collaborative Strategies to Share with General Education Teachers**

- ◆ Provide children with frequent opportunities to select the type of narrative they will use to retell a story they've heard or seen on film.
- ◆ Use story probes that emphasize different types of narratives. For example, ask children to give details in the story that relate to their own life or try to interpret character's reasons for doing what they did (journey talking); ask them to "spin" the same story to appeal to a different audience (embellishment).
- ◆ Let children "overhear" your thoughts. Describe what you're thinking about; talk through problems as you solve them; speculate about the causes of the day's events.
- ◆ Allow a few minutes at the end of each work session throughout the day for children to think about and discuss what they have just done, what worked, what they'll do differently next time.
- ◆ Use the arts to help children develop their journey-talking skills. Ask them to tell about what different paintings, dances, or musical selections make them think about. Encourage children to ask one another questions about the similarities and differences between their perceptions.
- ◆ Use pictures or objects to sequence the daily schedule. Review this throughout the day, using familiar rituals to transition from one event to another.
- ◆ Provide direct instruction in the what, when, and why of book talking stories. Interrupt yourself telling a story and ask an assistant or parent volunteer to summarize what you've said, using his or her own words. Model asking who, when, and what questions.
- ◆ Using a board game or recess activity, ask children to verbally brainstorm different possible moves. Predict various outcomes for each.
- ◆ Invite family and community members to share stories with the class. Encourage them to tell what they remember about being a child, coming to the United States, learning how to read. Ask the children to tape the guest storytellers, so that their stories can be listened to again and again.

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**Storytelling promotes reading comprehension in ways that build the capacity of all children to academically succeed.**

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world view that integrates their mental constructs into the values, struggles, and beliefs of their family and cultural group (McNaughton, 1996). The Moko Jumbi stories of the Caribbean are a good example. Moko Jumbies are tall mythical figures who dance between heaven and earth, bridging the distance between these two realities. Children are often included in the dance, raised up to the heavens so that they can understand human behavior from the perspective of the spirit world.

- *Developing literary themes.* By observing the give and take intrinsic to storytelling, children learn how to build a relationship with an audience. When classmates ask questions or suggest a direction the story might take, children become sensitive to what the audience wants. They learn what they need to explain in more detail, and that different people are interested in different types of stories. Giving children the opportunity to engage in the interplay between teller and audience prepares children for the more abstract task of writing for a faceless audience or discerning the author's tone when reading.
- *Tapping children's prior knowledge.* Culture and experience shape children's responses to classroom discourse. New information is integrated

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**Early literacy instruction should recognize the social nature of discourse and help students bridge any differences between home and school.**

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## Try This in Your Classroom

- ◆ Give students the opportunity to tell stories in many different ways for a variety of purposes: stories that really happened, make-believe stories, stories a family member told you, funny stories about a sibling or friend.
- ◆ Give students the opportunity to tell stories using a variety of materials that allow expression through art, action, and familiar home routines: stories about drawings, use puppets, make shadows with your hands, perform actions, perform a story dance, make emotion faces, make story masks, cook a food featured in a story.
- ◆ Use mime to help children retell stories using their bodies. After a classmate tells a story, decide with the class what action represents each important part of the story. This sort of discussion draws attention to story structure, making it concrete. Then pantomime the major actions in order.
- ◆ Try structuring “show and tell” to help children learn specific language relationships and themes. Have children bring in something they like doing with their feet, (hands, ears, etc.). Have them tell us what they do, why they like it, who does it with them. Have them bring in something they use to take care of a younger sibling, house, garden, or pet. (It is probably best to find out what kinds of things each child is responsible for at home before giving this assignment. That way the assignment will make sense within the child’s own world. In some cultures, for example, the idea of having a household pet seems a bit unusual, though it is commonplace in U.S. homes.)
- ◆ Retell some “well known” fairy tales with changes; for example, have Goldilocks decide to eat Papa Bear’s porridge. Challenge the students to say how this would change the story.
- ◆ Find different versions of the same story as told in different cultures. Compare and contrast, talking about why each culture has the variations it does. Role play alternative outcomes to a story and their possible consequences.
- ◆ Stop in the middle of stories and model checking with the audience to see if they understand. “Does anyone want to know more about what Johnny is trying to do?” “Do you know what I mean when I say (this word)?” “You’re frowning—can I explain something better?” Encourage children to check out audience understanding and ask clarifying questions.
- ◆ Encourage children to talk about the same experience with two different audiences. After going on a field trip to the zoo, children might share the experience with a younger class and with their parents. Beforehand, the whole group can talk about what a younger child might want to know, compared with what their parents might want to know. Afterward, they can then reflect on how accurate these predictions were.
- ◆ Use drama and role playing to help children express how characters in stories might feel. Emphasize showing emotion with face and body: raising eyebrows, frowning, making a voice tremble, swinging an arm, or hugging oneself close. Then review how characters acted, linking actions to feelings and desires.
- ◆ Draw the emotions from stories by varying color, stroke, and pressure applied to crayons; for example, anger might be represented with bold colors, and large strokes achieved by pressing hard as kids draw.
- ◆ Ask two children to retell the same TV show or movie. Keep track of which things the students remembered in the same way, and which were different. Ask each student what he or she liked about the parts they remembered differently. Then talk about how sometimes each of us sees different things when we observe something. Explore why this is, based on the children’s interests, personal experiences, home life, and culture.
- ◆ Recreate the “blind men and the elephant” lesson. Blindfold several children and let them feel different parts of an object, then ask them to tell a story about what they touched. Talk about how each person’s story was influenced by the part they felt. Talk about how knowing how the parts fit together in a whole can change the story.
- ◆ Show several students different parts of the same video (or reading different parts of a book to each) and asking each student what it was about. Then view the entire video or read the entire book and see if the topic changes.

into the child’s existing point of view. Expectations with no link to prior knowledge go unnoticed, often resulting in misunderstanding and confusion. It is therefore critical that early literacy instruction recognize the social nature of discourse and help students bridge any differences between home and school discourse rules (Au, 1993).

Storytelling helps teachers do this by encouraging children’s use of oral language and by building their awareness of the cultural variations in how

stories are told. For example, “Cinderella” is a story told in many Western cultures. Being singled out by a powerful authority figure is the story’s dominant theme. In Ireland, however, the country’s long-standing history of matriarchal rule is



**Storytelling is a powerful tool for teaching reading and writing.**

### Teacher Reflections to Discuss with Your Collaborative Partners

- ◆ Am I bringing a variety of story styles into my classroom? Do students find at least some that are familiar and make sense?
- ◆ What happens when I give children the freedom to tell stories however they like? Are they attentive, involved? Can my students represent the story in a number of different ways?
- ◆ What opportunities for interacting with stories do children currently have in my classroom? Are the stories oral or written? Which kinds of stories do I feel more comfortable with, and why? How about my students?
- ◆ How have my efforts to implement interactive teaching strategies worked? Are the students learning to ask what, when, who, and why questions? What is the balance I want to achieve in structuring ways to learn school-style storytelling while also affirming the variety of storytelling styles in my class?
- ◆ How many of my students seem to enjoy changing stories around? Are there some who resist doing this? Why might they not want to change stories? Do parents at home insist on regular routines, or insist that you have to be accurate to real events when telling a story?
- ◆ Are my students able to adapt stories to the needs of various audiences? Are they beginning to check in with their audience to see what they understand?
- ◆ Can my students identify emotions and motivations in stories? Can they explain why various people have different perspectives?
- ◆ Are my students able to talk about feelings of being misunderstood? What seems to help resolve culturally based misunderstandings? How effective have my efforts to increase awareness been?

acknowledged by changing the title to “Cinderfella” and making the orphaned child a boy, sought out by the reigning princess.

### Getting Started

Special education teachers interested in integrating storytelling into their literacy instruction need to first recognize the linguistic diversity present in their schools. This awareness forms the basis for collaboration with general education teachers to create classroom environ-

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### Storytelling helps children develop interesting ideas.

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ments rich in their potential to promote many kinds of oral discourse (see boxes, “Collaborative Strategies to Share with General Education Teachers”, page 48 “Try This in Your Classroom”, page 49 and “Teacher Reflections to Discuss with Your Collaborative Partners”). Effective collaboration helps teachers distinguish between reading problems and valid responses to story themes (Goodman & Buck, 1997), an important step in avoiding unnecessary referrals to special education.

As students make the transition from oral to written literacy tasks, teachers can help transfer literacy skills to new formats by providing direct instruction on the similarities and differences between story forms from various cultures.

### Final Thoughts

The diversity in our classrooms challenges teachers to learn more about the variety of literacy styles and how to distinguish these from reading and language problems. This heightened understanding can help teachers develop new strategies for helping children use their different literacy experiences to acquire the skills necessary for school success. Storytelling offers a rich opportunity to learn more about the narrative style and story grammar children are used to and how closely they approximate traditional classroom narratives. By telling stories and encouraging children to do the

same, teachers can help children share and appreciate unique styles and perspectives as well as build bridges to the written word.

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**Susan Craig**, (CEC New Hampshire Federation), Director of Special Purposes, AGH Associates, Inc., Hampton, New Hampshire. **Karla Hull** (CEC Chapter #187), Associate Professor, Valdosta State University, Georgia. **Ann G. Haggart**, (CEC New Hampshire Federation), Executive Director, AGH Associates, Inc., Hampton, New Hampshire. **Elaine Crowder**, Associate Project Director, Education Development Center, Newton, Massachusetts.

Address correspondence to Susan Craig, AGH Associates, Inc., P.O. Box 130, Hampton, NH 03843 (e-mail: [craigsus@juno.com](mailto:craigsus@juno.com))

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