Oral Storytelling
A Cultural Art That Promotes School Readiness
Stephanie M. Curenton

Oral storytelling is the act of verbally expressing our real-life or fantasy experiences to another person. Stories help us make sense of our lives because they provide a basis for interpreting life events and sharing fantasies and spiritual faiths. Telling stories helps children frame their thoughts, emotions, and social-cultural identity.

This article explores how early childhood educators can use storytelling as a culturally sensitive, age-appropriate learning tool to promote young children's school readiness.

Viewing storytelling as a cultural art form

For centuries, people across all cultures and economic groups have shared stories that represent their feelings, fantasies, and life experiences. All storytelling involves "sense-making and self presentation" (McCabe 1997, a, 454), but there are cultural differences in the way people accomplish these two things (Berman & Slobin 1994; Wiley et al. 1998). Cultural storytelling variations not only involve how a person tells stories but also what stories a person chooses to tell (Hicks 1991; McCabe 1997a). All storytelling is rooted in a cultural framework providing the format, topic, and delivery of the story.

U.S. educators typically learn the classic European tradition of storytelling in which the formal definition of a good story is based on European storytelling traditions dating as far back as Aristotle (see McCabe 1997a). Accordingly, such stories have a clear beginning, middle, and end. They are topic centered, tending to revolve around one central event and following a linear time line (Michaels 1981).

Teachers often dismiss stories that do not conform to this definition as not making sense, but we must expand our definition of a good story to be inclusive of all cultural forms of storytelling.

McCabe's (1997a) review of cultural forms of storytelling delineates some common features of storytelling traditions in certain cultural groups, even though variations occur within cultural groups. For example, the organization of stories in the African American tradition is quite different from the organization in the classic European tradition. Rather than being topic centered, African American stories are usually based around a theme, featuring several episodes or events that illustrate the theme. Michaels (1981) refers to this storytelling tradition as topic associating. Sara's story is an example of a topic-associating narrative:

This little . . . this little girl was goin' to the store to buy some candy . . . . And when she got to the store, she say, "Why, why don't I get some fruit to eat, to eat." Den she got some fruit when she went to the fruit store. She say it was very good. But [at] the fruit store I asked my mom, "Can I have some more stuff?" Well, she say next morning. She went to school and said, "Mom, can I ask you something?" And Mom said, "Yes, dear." "Well, Mom, I need a couple

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of books for my project. And she said, "OK." And the mom went to the store and got her some books for the project. Den that's the end.

(adapted from Bloom et al. 2001, 54–55)

It is not only African American children who create topic-associating stories; kindergartners from other ethnic minority groups, such as the Gypsies in Spain, are also more likely to produce topic-associating stories

Mom: Mmm, and what else did we do?
Child: I went for a ride.
Mom: And where did we celebrate your birthday?
Child: At the park.
Mom: Who came? Did your little friends come?
Child: Yes.

(adapted from Melzi 2001, 168)

In this recollection of his birthday, the boy mentions the activities of his

Child: Um, you know. All [kids] said that they wanted [to drink it], you know.
Mom: Uh huh.
Child: And, you know, when [they] drank [it], you know. [They] said "yucky."

(adapted from Minami & McCabe 1995, 434)

Children who tell stories that do not conform to the classic European American tradition are likely to have difficulty in school because teachers often evaluate their stories negatively. For example, teachers may think African American children's stories ramble or drift off topic; they may find Latino American children's stories confusing with their many characters; or they may think Japanese American children's stories are boring or unimaginative (see McCabe 1997a). Even child therapists sometimes underestimate children's language and cognitive skills when they are not familiar with the children's cultural storytelling style (Perez & Tager

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than topic-centered stories (Poveda 2003).

Another difference between the classic European storytelling tradition and other cultural traditions is the number of characters involved in the story. Stories from the European tradition tend to revolve around one main character, but African American and Latino American children’s stories contain several main characters who all relate to the main story theme. The following mother-son exchange illustrates this variation:

Mom: What did we do for your birthday?
Child: I was taking a shower.
Mom: Mmm.
Child: And Dad was buying my motorcycle.
Mom: What else?
Child: And you were buying candy.
Mom: For what?
Child: To give it to all the children.
Mom: And what else did we do for your birthday?
Child: You bought me a cake.
Mom: What else?
Child: And afterwards . . . [laughs]
Mom: And afterwards, what?
Child: Afterwards they were [words unclear] me [words unclear] happy.

father, mother, and friends more than he mentions his own. Indeed, the child mentions himself only twice throughout the conversation. According to Eisenberg (1999), Mexican American mothers socialize children to create personal narratives that focus on the emotions and behaviors of others rather than themselves. Latino cultures highly value interdependence among family and friends and socialize children to think about the needs of others as much as—and perhaps even more than—their own needs (Melzi 2001).

In comparison to stories in the classic European tradition, stories told by Asian American children differ greatly because they are often very concise and minimal in detail (Han, Leichtman, & Wang 1998; Minami & McCabe 1991, 1995). Take for instance, Yumiko’s telling of her American friends’ reactions to Japanese tea:

Flusberg 1998).

Vernon-Feagans and colleagues (2002) explain that story retellings by African American children from families with low incomes are often rated as inaccurate renditions because the children embellish the tale with details or events that they think make the story more interesting. The tendency to embellish is not necessarily indicative of a child’s inability to comprehend the story they heard; instead, it suggests a cultural story-telling tradition that challenges sequential narrators to make the story better than the first version.

To form accurate perceptions of children and their abilities, it is important that educators understand the cultural differences in storytelling traditions; otherwise, children’s narrative performances may be miseducated.
How do children learn to tell stories?

Children begin to tell stories very early—around age two—and their narrative skills continue to develop throughout the preschool years (see Shapiro & Hudson 1991; Benson 1993, 1997) and beyond. The stories evolve from the one-event narratives told by two-year-olds (McCabe 1997b) into the sophisticated, evaluative, and theme-based stories told by older children (Heath & Masten 1999) and teenagers (Labov 1972).

Young children’s stories are not like long, detailed fairy tales; instead, their stories may simply be a few sentences about a past event or a fantasy (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe 1999; Curenton & Wilson 2003; Curenton 2004). In fact, not until most children reach age five do they begin to produce stories with a coherent plot structure and theme (Berman & Slobin 1994). Despite their brevity, young children’s narratives often contain a wealth of information about what the children remember, what they are feeling, and how they resolve interpersonal and psychological conflicts.

Children learn the art of storytelling through repeated verbal exchanges with important people in their lives—relatives, friends, teachers, and leaders of faith-based and other community organizations. Families tell stories at the dinner table, during bedtime, at bath time, and even in the car or on the subway or bus. By surrounding children with narrative talk and elaborating on the narratives children create, adults teach children the art of storytelling. By the time children enter school, their family, community, and cultural norms of storytelling are well developed (McCabe 1997a, b) and include a repertoire of narrative skills acquired through previous social interactions.

Several studies note cultural and socioeconomic differences in how family members interact during storytelling with their children (Heath 1994; Gleason & Melzi 1997; Wiley et al. 1998; Eisenberg 1999; Cho & Miller 2004). In Midwestern Catholic communities, for example, European American working-class mothers were direct and matter-of-fact when correcting their child’s story, but middle-class mothers avoided direct contradictions (Wiley et al. 1998). This difference is illustrated in the following exchanges:

**Working-class European Americans**

**Mom:** What did we buy in the store yesterday for you?

**Child:** Batman, da-na-na-na.

**Mom:** No, we didn’t buy Batman.

**Child:** Batman (unintelligible!)

**Mom:** No, what are you, what’d we buy yesterday in the store?

**Middle-class European Americans**

**Mom:** What was Megan dressed as?

**Child:** Um, um, a pinecone.

**Mom:** Oh, pinecone . . . you wanna “know what it . . . what another name for it is?”

**Child:** Yeah.

**Mom:** Unicorn. Megan was a unicorn because she had one horn coming out of her nose, right? She was a unicorn. (Wiley et al. 1998, 841)

Ethnic differences exist in narrative conversations even within a socioeconomic class. When I asked European American and African American mothers from families with low incomes to tell a story about a time when they did something naughty, the two groups of mothers approached the task differently (Curenton 2006a). The following two examples demonstrate some cultural differences in terms of child participation and story structure.

**European American mother and son**

**Mom:** I’m gonna make up a story for you.

**Son:** I wanna go.

**Mom:** Listen, listen, listen, listen! Come on. When I was little—this is a story. OK? When I was little, we had a Wiffle bat.

**Son:** [What] is it?

**Mom:** A bat, a plastic bat and a ball.

**Son:** Mmm, huh.

**Mom:** And me and Uncle [Tom] were outside and were playing, and Uncle [Steve] wanted to play with us. He [was] too little. He would get hurt. He got mad, and he went in there in the house and told Pop-Pop. Pop-Pop come outside and he says, “You let him play. Let him hit. He’s little, but he can hit.” Uncle Tom said, “No, um, Dad, don’t let him play. He’s too little. He don’t know how to play.” So me and Uncle Tom had to stop playing, give Pop-Pop the bat and ball, and go in the house and sit on the sofa and behave.

**Son:** Why?

**Mom:** ‘Cause we got in trouble.

**Son:** But you’re big now.

**Mom:** Yeah, we got in trouble when I was little. Uncle Tom didn’t want him to play with us.

**African American mother and son**

**Mom:** Let me see . . . something that I did . . . Did I do something bad when I was little?

**Son:** Yeah?

**Mom:** What did I do?

**Son** (child stutters and mother assists him): Get, get . . .

**Mom:** Get.

**Son:** Get the pictures and door, door.

**Mom:** Door.

**Son:** And the floor, and then the glass broke.

**Mom:** Ahh. Well, I don’t remember getting a picture, but you know what? You know how you like to take things and don’t ask for them? And I told you that was stealing? I went to the store one time with my daddy.

**Family members who help children remember and reason about their stories, particularly those involving emotions and interpersonal conflicts, enhance children’s storytelling skills.**

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Spontaneously created stories, or retellings of stories, are the most accurate method for assessing children’s language skills.

Son: No, Mom, no.
Mom: No, I went to the store one time with Papa. And you know those chocolate cupcakes that look like muffins and they got the white squiggly lines on top? I wanted a cupcake. You know how I tell you no, you can’t have it? He told me, “No, you can’t have a cupcake.” I took the cupcake anyway. And I ate the cupcake. So when we got home, he said, “So where’d you get that cupcake from?” [Cause] I didn’t ask him for it. I took the cupcake. Now wasn’t that wrong?
Son: Yeah.
Mom: That’s what I tell you. Don’t take something unless you do what?
Son: Ask.

Although both mothers told of a time when they were naughty, the African American mother deliberately used the story as a self-reflective socializing strategy by making the child recall his own naughty behavior (“You know how you like to take things and don’t ask them?”). Plus, she ended her story by highlighting the immorality of her behavior (“Wasn’t that wrong?”), while the European American mother ended by highlighting the consequence of her behavior (“We got in trouble.”). These mothers both introduce new vocabulary, but the European American mother does so by introducing a novel noun (Wiffle bat) and defines the object, whereas the African American mother uses a novel adjective (squiggly) and describes the object.

These cross-cultural examples illustrating distinct class and ethnic storytelling patterns offer insight into why children from various backgrounds enter school with distinct narrative styles. Yet, regardless of cultural differences in storytelling, family members who help children remember and reason about their stories, particularly those involving emotions and interpersonal conflicts, enhance children’s storytelling skills (Wiley et al. 1998; Cleveland & Reese 2005), and parents who tell more detailed, complex stories inadvertently teach their children to create more complex stories as well (Oppenheim, Emde, & Wamboldt 1996).

How does oral storytelling promote school readiness?

To be successful in school, young children must possess cognitive and social skills that allow them to comprehend new ideas, remember key concepts, and maintain relationships with peers and teachers. Raver points out that “academic achievement in children’s first few years of schooling appears to be built on a firm foundation of children’s emotional and social skills” (2002, 4). Oral storytelling is a tool that equally promotes and masterfully synchronizes children’s cognitive and socioemotional development. It is a great vehicle for professionals to use in enhancing children’s academic achievement. In the cognitive domain, storytelling promotes children’s language and literacy; in the social-emotional domain, storytelling promotes children’s self-identity, social-emotional reasoning, and problem solving.

Language and literacy knowledge and skills

Storytelling prepares children for school because it allows them to use a sophisticated form of communication—decontextualized talk—that is not bound by the immediate context. Decontextualized talk is about objects, feelings, and ideas experienced in the past or expected in the future, whereas contextualized talk is only about the present. Decontextualized talk is important because it promotes higher-order thinking such as reminiscing and planning. Regardless of whether children relate their fantasies or real-life personal experiences, their stories tell of events that either have happened or may happen. Decontextualized talk is specific and grammatically sophisticated talk that sets the foundation for school achievement and literacy (Current & Justice 2004).

Oral storytelling also allows children to listen to decontextualized speech, which in turn facilitates their comprehension skills. Comprehension of oral stories is related to general cognitive, language, and emergent literacy skills (Snow et al. 1995; Paris & Paris 2003). Spontaneously created stories, or retellings of stories, are the most accurate method for assessing children’s language skills (Bishop & Edmundson 1987), grammatical skills (Current & Justice 2004), dialect (Craig, Washington, & Thompson-Porter 1998), and narrative construction and memory skills (Fletcher et al. 1997). They are a
Developing a positive identity

Storytelling also fosters school readiness by promoting self-identity. Through stories about past experiences, children learn to create autobiographical narratives, explicit stories about events that occur in one's life (Welch-Ross 1997; Nelson & Fivush 2004). These narratives, which help us form our adult personality, provide insight into the quality of early parent-child relationships (Cassidy, Cassidy, & Shaver 1999).

Although autobiographical storytelling helps all children develop a self-identity, there are sociocultural differences in when children begin to tell their autobiographical narratives. For instance, among an indigenous New Zealand people who encourage talk about the past and about early memories, the children tell autobiographical stories sooner and more frequently than do the children in cultures that do not emphasize early memories (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer 2003). Another study (Cho & Miller 2004) found that European American children from working-class communities tell three times as many autobiographical stories as European Americans from middle-class communities.

There are also cultural differences in how children talk about themselves when telling autobiographical stories. In their stories, both African American (Sperry & Sperry 1995) and Latino (see McCabe 1997a) children talk about family members and friends more often than do European American children from middle-class homes. European American children—especially girls—from working-class families also tell stories that feature friends and family members frequently (Ely et al. 1998; Curenton & Wilson 2003). On the other hand, in general most European American boys' stories tend to involve powerful and/or frightening characters who are in conflict or who perform some heroic act (Sperry & Sperry 1995; Farver et al. 1997). When children tell stories in which they describe themselves and their past events in relation to other people, they are demonstrating their sense of being integrated with and connected to a larger social network—this helps them form a positive self-identity.

When parents and children create autobiographical narratives, it promotes not only identity development but also an understanding of family history. Family storytelling provides a "scrapbook of family history," (Fiese & Sameroff 1999, 3) with the narratives representing past interactions, memories, and rules about appropriate behavior. In the study (Curenton 2006a) in which I asked parents to tell of a naughty childhood incident, a mother, grandmother, and child had the following exchange:

**Mother:** Let me tell you a story, okay?
**Grandmother (says to child):** Listen to...
**Mother (interrupting to begin her story):** When I was a little girl...
**Grandmother (continues):** ... the story.

**Mother:** You wanna hear this part? All right. Me and your grandma, your uncle, Richard, and your aunt, Eileen, went to the grocery store. And your grandma told us to hold hands... and to stay together. Well, we didn't do that. Your aunt and uncle ran one way, I ran the other way. And your uncle took off! So 5 to 10 minutes later we were crying, looking around, trying to find our mama. And we couldn't find her. So...

**Child (turns to ask Grandma):** Where you was?

**Grandma:** I was looking for them!

**Mother:** Richard goes up to the counter and Richard says, "Can somebody help me find my mommy?" And the lady said, "Well, what's your mommy's name?" And he said, "Lucy." And he said, "I got two sisters too." So they started looking around, and we was going through each aisle. And me and Eileen found each other; then we finally found your grandma. Richard was hiding. But the moral of the story is that when Mommy tells you to do something, then you supposed to do it, right? So if we would've stayed together behind your grandma like she told us to, then we wouldn't have lost her, right? See, we would have been all right. We wouldn't have had to go look and be crying and all upset, right? Don't you do that to me sometimes?

**Child:** Yes.

Understanding emotions

Storytelling promotes school readiness because it also provides children with a safe place to process emotions. Parents spend a great amount of time talking about emotions to their children, even children as young as age two (Brown & Dunn 1991; Dunn et al. 1991), and as a result most preschoolers can talk about the four basic emotions: happy, sad, mad, and scared (Flavell & Miller 1998). British preschoolers from working-class families can provide clear, elaborative explanations for their own emotions as well as the emotions of their parents and friends (Dunn & Hughes 1998).

As preschoolers mature they begin to view emotions as the result of interpersonal interactions (Curenton & Wilson 2003). For example, when I asked a four-year-old boy to explain why Martha, a puppet, might be mad, he said, "Because her brother spilled his juice and ate all her food" (Curenton 2006b). Similarly, when talking about his anger, another four-year-old European American said, "I was living somewhere in Greene County. My dad said I can't play with two boys who have bikes and that they play mean" (Curenton 2006b).

As a vehicle for processing emotions, storytelling can help children resolve internal psychological conflict (Smith & Celano 2000) and can solidify parent-child bonding (Etzion-Carasso...
With the aid of puppets or dolls, older preschoolers can create sophisticated stories that demonstrate the complex lives they often lead. Here's a story by Terrance, a five-year-old African American child in Head Start, who was asked to talk about a time when he felt scared. His story shows how he subdued his fear because he felt protected by his father.

One day I went to sleep and a man [came into my house]. [He] had a knife, and I was scared. Yeah, but my daddy was home. And I told my daddy, and I ran up there with my daddy. And my daddy turned around and [punch him in the] side. My daddy got strong muscles! He might beat him up! And he's big; my dad was big. He reaches way up there.

(Curenton 2006b)

Storytelling also facilitates young children's social-emotional development because it helps them learn how to take the perspective of others. A child's ability to narrate events and engage in storytelling is linked to his repertoires of social knowledge (Hicks, McCabe, & Peterson 1991). Storytelling allows children to reason socially, to get inside the mind of imaginary characters and think about what the characters might think, want, or believe.

Some researchers believe that children's perspective-taking abilities and their narrative skills are linked (Austington 1990). I (Curenton 2004) found that African American preschoolers who passed a social perspective-taking task created coherent stories; Benson (1997) reported that European American Head Start children talk about characters' thoughts and feelings when they tell an oral story using a wordless picture book. Here, Shelby, an African American kindergartner, and her mother have a joint storytelling interaction in which Shelby highlights a monkey doll's wants, feelings, and thoughts (Curenton 2006c):

Shelby: There's a monkey, and he was bad because he . . . because he wanted some monkey lotion. But he didn't get any, so he was sad, and

then he wasn't. He was happy because his mamma bought it. She didn't forget.

Mom: He thought that his mom was going to forget the lotion?

Shelby: But his mamma didn't.

Mom: So that made him happy when he got the lotion? Good. That's a good story.

Using storytelling in the classroom

In light of the evidence concerning how oral storytelling promotes children's school readiness, teachers can give children many opportunities to both produce and listen to oral stories. Here are several teaching strategies that enable teachers to incorporate storytelling in culturally and developmentally appropriate ways.

Group time

Telling and listening to stories during group time allows children to use and comprehend decontextualized talk (Michaels 1981) to produce and hear stories of many different cultural traditions. Sharing stories or autobiographic narratives promotes not only the teller's skills but also the listening skills of the other children in the group. Teachers can facilitate the sharing of autobiographic narratives simply by asking children questions about what they did the day before and inviting individuals to share a story about themselves.

Most children love to share stories about what they have done and are often extremely creative in doing so. Christine Readdick, a former educator at a college laboratory preschool, remembers four-year-old Edward, a European American from a Southern working-class family, who would earnestly clap his hands and snap his fingers and sing his story every morning during circle time: "Oh, I woke up this morning. And I walked downstairs. And I sat in Grandpa's lap. And I ate a pancake. And I got dressed. And I came to school" (Readdick, pers. comm.).

After children tell stories, it is important for the teacher to ask ques-
stories, which tend to be longer and more sophisticated than the stories children produce alone (Nicolopoulos & Richner 2004).

Teachers can begin group-authored stories during group time and encourage children to take turns adding to them. Margie McCants, at the Gwen Cherry Child Development Center in Tallahassee, Florida, transcribes her class’s group-authored stories on large paper. Here is one:

**Teacher:** Once upon a time...

**Child 1:** There was a bat named Lily, who flew up to the trees to rest for a minute.

**Child 2:** When she started flying, she saw pumpkins.

**Child 3:** She flew back to her house and rested one more minute.

**Child 4:** When it was day, Lily flew to her friend.

**Child 5:** They went to her house. They played and went to sleep.

**Child 6:** Soon it was wake-up time, and they went outside to play.

**Child 7:** Then the rain came down.

**Child 8:** They stopped and saw another bat. Her name was Beau.

**Child 9:** Their dad said they had to come home. Then they flew off again to her own house.

**Child 10:** The other bats flew on to their houses and saw another bat named Matthew.

**Child 11:** He got stuck in the shark’s mouth. The shark sunk.

(McCants, pers. comm.)

Such cooperative learning activities require the children to tune in to the same imaginary world and take turns building on each other’s creativity.

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**Pretend play**

Pretend play is another avenue for fostering children’s storytelling abilities. In dramatic play, children use their language skills to create imagined worlds populated by characters and bounded by plot. They also polish their social perspective-taking skills by talking about feelings and thoughts (Hughes & Dunn 1998) and using more decontextualized language as they play (Pellegrini et al. 1997; Pellegrini et al. 1998), key skills needed to be a good storyteller. In addition, pretend play allows children to collaborate on group-authored stories.
Adult: Oh, look at those frogs. What do they look like?
Shelby: Standing frogs.
Adult: Look at their faces. Are those frogs happy?
Shelby: They’re sad, and these frogs are happy.
Adult: How do you know?
Shelby: Because these two got a sad mouth, and he got a happy mouth.
Adult: What about these frogs? What are these frogs doing?
Shelby: Looking at the other frog that’s not green. And the frogs, the two frogs not happy and one frog is smiling. One frog is sticking its tongue out at the other frog, and the other frogs are not. They’re going across here and the rocks. It’s raining. And one frog is getting drowned. And all of the frogs is not happy. Two of them is getting drowned by the rain . . . and they’re all not happy.
Adult: Why aren’t they happy?
Shelby: Because it’s raining, and they don’t like rain.

The adult prompts Shelby to talk about each page and asks questions that lead Shelby to comment on the characters’ thoughts and emotions. It is adult attentiveness and active engagement via questioning and feedback that help children become better storytellers. This type of feedback is best given and received one-on-one, with the adult’s questioning and feedback matched to the child’s abilities and interests. For teachers to understand young children’s stories, they may need to rely on contextual clues from the book as well as knowledge of a child’s personality and their shared experiences.

In the classroom or at home, adults should attempt to interact with each child regularly on a one-on-one basis with a picture book. The more often children engage in such emergent reading tasks, the better their language skills become.

Puppet/doll play

Another way to encourage storytelling is to ask children to create fictional stories with puppets or dolls (Murray et al. 1999; Curenton & Wilson 2003). One study (Kim 1999) found that children are better at retelling stories when they use dolls or puppets than when they use pictures of scenes from the story. Dolls and puppets allow children to tap into their pretend-play skills.

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Dolls and puppets allow children to tap into their pretend-play skills.

Teachers can begin a story with a generic yet emotionally salient opening. During an interview with children, I introduced them to two dolls: an elephant, who makes angry grunting sounds, and a monkey, who asks what’s wrong. My scenario prompted Shelby’s story about why the elephant was angry (Curenton 2006c):

**Monkey:** What’s wrong? What’s wrong?

**Elephant:** I wanted to get an elephant a computer, but I didn’t. I [sup]posed to get it for my birthday.

**Monkey:** Why don’t you use mine?

**Elephant:** Cause it doesn’t get an elephant sticker on it. I wanted the elephant computer. I don’t want no monkey computer. I’m not a monkey. I’m an elephant. I want an elephant computer, and I want it now.

**Monkey:** I got an elephant sticker on mine. It’s for elephants and monkeys.

**Elephant:** I want my own, so I don’t have to share. You just try to be nice to me. I want my own, and I want it now!

**Monkey:** Why don’t you just borrow mine?

**Elephant:** I said I want my own!

**Monkey:** Why don’t you just calm down and borrow mine?

**Elephant:** I said I want my own!

**Monkey:** Well, OK. Your mommy don’t want to buy it. Maybe your dad don’t want to buy you one either.

Later, during a conversation with the storyteller’s mom, I learned that Shelby had been disappointed on her birthday when she did not receive the computer she wanted. So she projected her own emotions in her story, allowing her to work through her anger. She was able to represent another role—a voice of compromise and reason—by having the monkey doll suggest sharing the computer.

Children do not always project their own conflicts in their stories. Sometimes they use a story simply to demonstrate their creativity. For example, I showed Enrique, a Mexican American child in a Head Start program, an elephant doll who is screaming and a monkey doll asking what’s wrong. Enrique picked up the story: “She [the elephant] fall down there.” I scaffolded by asking, “Why did she fall?” At this point, Enrique waxed imaginative: “Because she fall down and broke her hand. And she fall in the water. And there was a shark and a fish too! And then he [the shark] eat them. He eat ‘em all. That’s why she has no hand.”

Enrique’s story is an example of how children’s stories are sometimes purely imaginative, not necessarily a reflection of a real-life event.

**Incorporating media tools**

Children often enjoy hearing stories on audio, and many popular children’s books are available on tapes and CDs. Audio versions of stories allow children to hone their listening skills as well as their visual imaging skills; they must use their imagination to create representations of the characters and scenes. To hold young children’s attention, effective audio stories have sound effects, music, and individual characters’ voices instead of just a narrator reading a text (Ritterfeld et al. 2005).

Unfortunately, the majority of the commercial audio recording options expose children only to the classic European storytelling tradition; but teachers can incorporate cultural diversity by asking parents to record their oral stories. With the parent’s permission, these tapes can be shared with the class, exposing children to stories by families of different cultural backgrounds.

The following story was recorded by a rural African American mother for her child’s class (Curenton 2006a):

One time I can remember they had some puppies in the woods. . . . We went down there and got them. We already had seven or eight dogs, and we went down there and got these dogs. And [my parents] were like, “Carry them back! Carry them back!” So we were crying, and we had to take the puppies back in the woods. So after everybody had . . . you know . . . we snuck around, and . . . I wanted that puppy so bad! So I snuck down in the woods and got the little puppy, and I brought him back up and tried to hide him. I brought him in my room and tried to hide him and sneak him food to feed him and stuff like that. And [one day] I went downstairs to do something—my grandmother’s room was upstairs—and I left the door open or something. But the little puppy came out and like took a crap on the floor and stuff! And that’s how I got found out. And so we had to take the
puppy back down. I didn’t get a spanking or anything, but just [took] the little puppy home.

Another media technique is to ask children to dictate a story, with an adult transcribing it on paper or using a computer (Nicopoulou & Richner 2004). Three-year-old Hannah, a middle-class European American, dictated her first story to her mother:

I had a little lamb, and it didn’t care. It didn’t play basketball, it didn’t play with pencils. All it did was sit by me. And her name was Ashley Bumpkin. The end.

(C. Readdick, pers. comm., October 21, 2005)

Such activities facilitate a child’s understanding of the connection between oral and written language; the child witnesses her oral narrative transformed into print.

Because children learn best through concrete experiences, it is important for teachers to follow up these recorded and dictated stories with visual and motor exercises, such as drawing pictures about what happened in the story or acting out the story plot.

The classroom techniques suggested here are culturally sensitive, age-appropriate ways to engage young children in storytelling. The techniques are multifaceted and grounded in the idea of preparing the whole child for school—giving children language and literacy knowledge as well as social-emotional reasoning skills and a strong sense of social and cultural identity.

exposure to a variety of stories strengthens all children’s storytelling abilities. Because children learn this oral narration art form through interactions with their family and others in their cultural communities, teachers must be prepared for all children’s stories to be different. Oral storytelling is an art; therefore, just as with finger paintings, no two children’s stories will be the same.

References


Cleveland, E.S., & E. Reese. 2005. Maternal structure and autonomy support in conversations about the past: Contribu-

The Building Blocks of Education

Early childhood educators must learn to view oral stories as an art form that enables children to express their individuality as well as their social-cultural heritage. Even though there are cultural differences in how young children tell stories, educators and caregivers must remember that for young children the social cognitive process of creating a story is more important than the actual outcome.

We must remember that the storytelling craft is polished and refined by the opportunity to narrate, and that


Correcciones

Young Children, Julio 2006

P. 85, col. 1: substitute the diagrams below for Situation 2b and Situation 2c.


P. 91, col. 3, second paragraph: the second sentence should read, "It started in the informal daily evaluations conducted with her teaching assistants as they sat in a circle to think through the day and plan for tomorrow." In "Linking Research to Best Practice," by Thelma Harms and Rebecca Tracy.

de NUESTRO PRESIDENTE (continuación de pág. 4)

Podemos crear currículos y estructurar ambientes de instrucción de modo que apoyen y estimulen el pensamiento matemático.

Los cambios pueden obedecer a razones buenas... o no tan buenas. En relación con las políticas, por ejemplo, los estados pueden reestructurar las categorías de certificación docente para reflejar las etapas de desarrollo de los niños de varias edades, como hizo el estado de Nueva York hace dos años. Las nuevas categorías básicas de certificación son Nacimiento a Segundo Grado (Primera Infancia), Grado Uno a Grado Seis (Infancia) y Grado Cinco a Grado Noveno (Infancia Media), junto con certificaciones para materias específicas y otros factores de la instrucción.

Aunque sean buenos para los niños y educadores, los cambios de certificación no son fáciles de implementar. Por ejemplo, cuando se efectúan cambios en la certificación docente, las universidades tienen que responder con una revisión de sus programas de formación docente y los cursos ofrecidos. Sin embargo, estos cambios reflejan nuestro conocimiento que enseñar a niños durante su primera infancia es una labor distinta de la de enseñar a niños mayores.

Por otro lado, ciertos cambios no son tan buenos. Como profesionales con un compromiso para actuar a favor de las necesidades, los derechos y el bienestar de todos los niños pequeños, tenemos el deber de oponernos a tales cambios. Por ejemplo, si un estado se propone a eximir más tipos de programas de las regulaciones de cuidado infantil, tal cambio dejaría sin protección de daños a los niños que asisten a programas no regulados. ¿Qué tal si un estado o distrito escolar quiere dar un examen a todos los niños de tercer grado, por ejemplo, y decidir si los alumnos pueden pasar al siguiente grado dependiendo de los resultados de esta evaluación que no se diseñó para tal uso y que mide sólo un aspecto de lo aprendido? Nuestra preocupación es que tal propuesta fundamenta decisiones importantes en el resultado de una sola medida de las habilidades y conocimientos de los niños.

Una realidad que enfrenta a los educadores es la demografía cambiante de los niños pequeños en los Estados Unidos. Se encuentran más niños y familias que hablan idiomas distintos del inglés, y asisten a nuestras clases más niños que representan a muchas culturas diversas. Para ser educadores excelentes y efectivos, necesitamos aprender sobre el desarrollo del lenguaje, conocer las muchas culturas de los niños y las familias de nuestros programas, y adaptar nuestras prácticas para servir mejor a los niños.

Como profesionales de la educación de niños pequeños, tenemos la responsabilidad de mantenernos al día con las buenas prácticas y de tener una actitud abierta hacia los cambios. Necesitamos la capacidad de distinguir entre los cambios buenos y los malos y de actuar en consecuencia, celebrando y respaldando los cambios provechosos a la vez de resistir y trabajar por alterar los cambios que no les sean provechosos a los niños.