

1992

Story retelling with at-risk children

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Abstract

Story retelling is a powerful learning experience for children in the classroom. It provides opportunities for them to engage in the thinking-language processes thus extending their abilities. When retelling a story, children create their own construct from a story they have listened to or read. Retellings are also useful as a source of information for teachers. When used for assessment, teachers can observe children while engaged in the process of retelling to understand their sense of story.

Story Retelling with At-Risk Children

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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May 1992

This Research Paper by: Evelyn R. Jante

Entitled: Story Retelling with At-Risk Children

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Story retelling is a powerful learning experience for children in the classroom. It provides opportunities for them to engage in the thinking-language processes thus extending their abilities. When retelling a story, children create their own construct from a story they have listened to or read. Retellings are also useful as a source of information for teachers. When used for assessment, teachers can observe children while engaged in the process of retelling to understand their sense of story.

Story retelling has much potential for at-risk children. Many of these children need a great deal of support to develop emotional-social abilities because they lack a supportive audience in their home life. Retelling a story can provide opportunities to engage in positive interactions with peers and teachers, thereby assisting in overcoming feelings of alienation and in developing wholesome self-esteem and identification with the school experience. Emerging emotional-social abilities can assist children in engaging more freely in the language processes to create their own meaning, which nurtures literacy.

Characteristics of At-Risk Children

The term at-risk has a multitude of meanings. For this paper, at-risk will be defined as those students who are doing poorly in their academic, personal, and social development

(Bartusek, 1989). Usually more than a single factor is present in their lives that threatens normal development. Some of these factors include low achievement, retention in a grade, behavior problems, low socio-economic status, and attendance at a school with a large number of poor students (Slavin, 1989).

Children at-risk will also be the students concerned teachers worry about, based on observations of children's responses to the learning environment, their achievement levels, and their interactions with peers and teachers and on knowledge of other factors (Allen, Michalove, Stockley, & West, 1991).

At-risk children are most likely to leave school with an inadequate level of basic skills. Studies of at-risk children show that by the time students are in third grade, it can be predicted with fair accuracy which students will complete school and which students will drop out of school (Slavin, 1989). Children can be at risk in one school environment and not in another (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989).

Students can be at risk socially, emotionally, and academically because of home and community factors. By in large, at-risk students come from lower income families. The families are highly mobile, non-traditional, or single parent families. Other risk factors for families are economic status, the language that is spoken in the home, and the age and marital

status of the mother (Richardson et al., 1989). Some of these students are in special education or compensatory education programs (Slavin, 1989).

Several authorities who have studied at-risk children and their involvement in the school environment conclude that they are most successful in supportive experiences that allow them to explore and discover and that keep imposed external pressure at a minimum. These children need to find out that risk-taking is acceptable and to learn resourcefulness in coping with stress and failure (Allen et al., 1991; Brown & Cambourne, 1990).

Retelling of Stories

Retelling of stories is a process that can nurture the abilities of at-risk children. It is not a new language activity, for telling about something is a long-established feature of most people's verbal repertoires. Therefore, children in a supportive environment can find retelling stories fulfilling (Brown & Cambourne, 1990).

Children should be encouraged to be active participants in the learning process by using activities that allow for experimentation with listening, talking, reading, and writing (Joint statement, 1986). Retelling can provide children with opportunities to develop their own construct and also to model language from literature experiences. These experiences can improve vocabulary, sentence complexity, comprehension, concept

of story, and oral language (Morrow, 1985; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Imdieke, 1991).

Story retelling can help children develop a positive attitude toward learning. As children engage in successful retelling experiences, confidence in their language abilities grows (Cliatt & Shaw, 1988). In studies done by Morrow (1985), children given retelling opportunities showed more confidence, eagerness, and poise in retelling stories at the end of the study. Children then become more confident when approaching tasks involving talking, reading, and writing (Brown & Cambourne, 1990).

In introducing children to the process of story retelling, stories with a strong theme and a tight plot structure are easier to recall (Guthrie, 1977). Stories that are worth telling have well developed elements: quick beginning action, natural dialogue, interesting phrases and repetition, and a satisfying conclusion (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987; Morrow, 1986). Stories lending themselves best to retelling are folk tales and legends, as these have tightly structured plots and also appeal to children. They are often humorous and have satisfying resolves--good is rewarded and evil punished (Nessel, 1985).

Since children read and write to a large extent in fiction, this genre is more easily adapted to retelling experiences.

Children have a grasp of the features of these stories (Brown & Cambourne, 1990).

Initially, the teacher may have to guide children through the retelling with prompts. This is referred to as "scaffolding." Scaffolding offers children as much help as they need to retell the story. As children discover how to handle the retelling of a story and feel more secure about it, the scaffolding diminishes (Morrow, 1985).

Teachers can use story retelling to learn more about the language of the children in their classrooms. It can be used to assess children's ability to comprehend, organize, and express language.

Retelling Opportunities for At-Risk Children

Story retelling can be done in a variety of ways to help at-risk children in a second-grade classroom--speaking, writing, illustrating, and dramatizing. Children should be given an opportunity to choose the medium for retelling a story. Several of the retelling activities involve more than one media (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Retelling Through Speaking

Children can be introduced to many pleasurable ways to orally retell a story.

Feltboard stories. Characters are concretely represented by pieces that can be placed on a feltboard in the sequence of

the plot. Stories used for the feltboard should emphasize the main characters, so there should be a limited number. Children can manipulate the pieces and practice retelling before presenting the story to others. Stories that lend themselves to feltboard retelling are: Esteban and the Ghost (Hancock), The Bed Just So (Hardendorff), The Bun (Brown), Hansel and Gretel (Grimm), The Elves and the Shoemaker (Watts), Hattie and the Fox (Fox), The Most Wonderful Egg in the World (Heine), and The Napping House (Wood).

Comparing different versions of the same folk story through feltboard retelling can be fascinating for children. The stories have basically the same plots, but different motifs and settings. An example is the variants of Little Red Riding Hood--Galdone's (French), Marshall's (modern), McKissack's Flossie and the Fox (African American), and Young's Lon Po Po (Chinese).

Clothesline stories. Feltboard stories that have a limited number of characters can be used for this method of retelling. When retelling the story, the story figures are pinned to a clothesline in correct sequence. Examples include: The Mitten (Brett), The Stone Soup (Van Rynbach), Jack and the Beanstalk (Ross), and The Pancake Boy (Cauley).

Stringboard stories. This form is quite similar to the clothesline technique, only the characters are glued to oval

shaped pieces of tagboard with strings fastened to them. The characters are pulled up into view on a board as they appear in the plot. Stories that are easily adapted to this form are Ming Lo Moves the Mountain (Lobel) and the modern version of The Three Little Pigs (Bishop).

Group storytelling. Children can be seated in a circle on the floor with each child retelling a part of the story in sequence. To help with the retelling, a prop like a "walking stick" can be used. The teacher can start the retelling and then pass the stick on to the next person with s/he retelling the next part and then passing it on to the next person. Folk tales particularly suited for group retelling are: Jack and the Beanstalk (Cauley), Hansel and Gretel (Grimm), The Ugly Duckling (Moore), and Anna and the Seven Swans (Silverman).

Puppets. Using puppets often helps shy children feel more secure in retelling stories. Many sorts of puppets can be made: finger, hand, stick, and face puppets. Face puppets can be masks or even poster-size masks that represent the characters in the story. Using masks for retelling is an easy way to encourage timid children to speak. A kind of finger puppet that can be used for retelling is a walking-finger puppet. The story characters are drawn on tagboard with two holes made through a piece in which fingers can slip through for holding the puppet. These fingers then become the legs of the puppets. The folk

tales that can be easily adapted to puppet plays are: The Three Billy Goats Gruff (Galdone), The Bremen-Town Musicians (Grimm), The Little Red Hen (Galdone), and Jack and the Beanstalk (Howe).

Shadow puppets can also be constructed to go along with retelling a story. These stories can be adapted to shadow puppets: The Enchanted Caribou (Clever) and The Three Billy Goats Gruff (Galdone). Directions are included at the end of the book The Enchanted Caribou for creating a shadow play and theatre.

Prop stories. This form of retelling is done with the use of stuffed animals, toys, or other articles that represent the characters or objects in the story. The number of props for retelling should be kept at a minimum. Goldilocks and the Three Bears (Brett) can be retold with three stuffed bears and a yellow-haired doll. Stone Soup (Brown) can be retold while making real stone soup. In Ming Lo Moves the Mountain (Lobel), Ming Lo's house can be made from popsicle sticks, strips of paper, and toothpicks and then used as a prop for retelling the story.

Sound stories. Sound effects can be added to the retelling of a story. Children can decide what sounds will accompany the parts of a story as it is retold. The sounds can then be tape recorded to play back later when the story is retold to others.

These stories have considerable sound imagery: It Could Always Be Worse (Zemach), Night Noises (Fox), and Rosie's Walk (Hutchins).

Retelling Through Writing

Retelling stories in writing also nurtures children's sense of story.

Rebus stories. A rebus story is developed with pictures representing characters, objects, and settings within the text. Lionni's books Swimmy, Frederick, and Little Blue and Little Yellow make interesting rebus stories. The folk tale Little Red Riding Hood also is easily adapted to this form of retelling.

Newspaper accounts. A story can be retold in the form of a news article, for example, the emperor can be interviewed concerning how he was tricked in The Emperor's New Clothes (Anderson). From Freeman's Dandelion, the account of Jennifer Giraffe's party could be reported. A warning tale, such as Little Red Riding Hood makes an interesting news article, reporting the potential for child endangerment in the community.

Letters. Children can write a letter from the point of view of a character, for example, Dandelion (Freeman) telling about his party experience, the third little pig reporting to his mother after he outwits the wolf (The Three Little Pigs), and the little girl writing to her mother about her experience with storms while visiting Babushka (Polacco's Thunder Cake).

Retelling Through Illustrating

Children can illustrate a favorite part of the story, or they can do group illustrating, whereby, each person illustrates an important part of the story. These illustrations can be accompanied by oral or written retellings of the story.

Posters and murals. Children can experiment with a wide variety of materials to make posters and murals. Collage works which involve using many different kinds of materials, such as yarn, watercolors, fingerpaints, sponges, felt tip markers, charcoal, pipe cleaners, colored tissue paper, wallpaper, and scraps of fabric, make challenging experiences. The multi-media in the illustrations for Swimmy (Lionni) can be recreated using a sponge cut into a fish shape, doilies for seaweed, and strips of Kleenex for the jelly fish. Examples of works that can serve as models for collage are Ehlert's Color Zoo and Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf, Lionni's Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse, and Keats' The Snowy Day.

Book design. Children can incorporate the elements of book design into their retelling of stories. It can be done on individual sheets of paper or in book form. Book jackets can be made to illustrate an important element or part in the story. The book jacket should be eye catching and offer an invitation to read the book. Children can use the jackets as they orally

retell a story. The book jackets can be laminated and placed on library books that have no jackets.

Illuminated letters can be used in children's written retellings. A letter can be enlarged and then illustrated to portray an important aspect of the story. Examples are Beauty and the Beast (Brett) with an illuminated "O" at the beginning of the story decorated with a rose; Petrosinella (Basile) with parsley intertwined in the "P" on the title page. Other works with illuminated letters are The Twelve Dancing Princesses (Mayer), Pumpkin Pumpkin (Titherington), and The Devil and the Three Golden Hairs (Hogrogian).

Many illustrators frame their illustrations with borders. In the retelling of simple folk tales through writing and illustrating, the text and drawings can be framed with interesting elements of the story. Examples of borders and frames can be found in many folk tales: The Glass Mountain (Hogrogian) with marbled borders in colors symbolic of the mood of the story and Little Red Riding Hood (Hyman) with borders that accompany the illustrations depicting the sequence of the story. As the story unfolds in Lobel's The Rose in My Garden, the images are portrayed in the upper right-hand corner of the border.

Filmstrips. Parts of a story can be illustrated on small strips of paper and viewed through a shoebox. Examples of

stories suitable for this retelling experience are Little Red Riding Hood (Hyman) and Ming Lo Moves the Mountain (Lobel).

Mapping. Mapping a story shows the progression of the characters, or motifs, through the different settings in the story. The Three Little Pigs (Zemach) lends itself well to mapping.

Chalk talks. Some stories lend themselves to retelling by chalk talks. Simple illustrations are drawn on a chalk board, overhead, or chart paper. When retelling the cumulative tale I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly (Westcott), a figure of a woman with a large body can be drawn. As each character is swallowed, it is drawn in the body. Other stories that work well for chalk talks are The Fat Cat (Kent) and Liang and the Magic Paintbrush (Demi).

Nesting dolls and boxes. Nesting dolls and boxes can be used for retelling stories in which characters are presented in a definite sequence. The characters of a story can be drawn on tubes of paper or on boxes of increasingly smaller sizes. Example stories for this form of retelling are The Enormous Turnip (Parkinson) and The Cat's Midsummer Jamboree (Kherdian & Hogrogian).

Story cloths. On a piece of material, large enough to throw over the shoulders, elements of the story can be drawn or pieces representing the elements can be sewn on. As the story is

retold orally, the images in the sequence can be pointed out. An African tale that can be retold in this manner is Rabbit Makes a Monkey of Lion (Aardema).

Origami. Another form of story retelling can be done with origami--Japanese paper-folding. Stories selected for this form need to focus on one image constructed during the retelling, for example, the fish in Swimmy (Lionni) and the crane in The Grateful Crane (Bartoli).

Peep shows and dioramas. Peep box shows and dioramas are three-dimensional scenes constructed in a box. Peep shows have a hole for viewing the scene with another hole to let in light. A diorama is developed in a box with one side open. Stories suitable for these include: Roxaboxen (McLerran), Tar Beach (Ringgold), and Matthew's Dream (Lionni).

Transparencies. Children can retell stories by using overhead transparencies. Children can use a wax pencil or marking pencils to draw elements of the story as it is retold orally. Children can also use pieces of acetate outlined in the characters' shape with simple features drawn on them to place on the overhead when retelling the story. Books that can be adapted to this kind of retelling are: Asch's Bear Shadow, Burningham's Mr. Gumpy's Outing, and Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar.

Retelling Through Dramatizing

Children can retell stories by acting out the story. Children can assume the role of different characters and act out their parts with the dialogue they have constructed, not memorized. Folk tales are excellent for dramatization. Simple costuming and props can be added to enhance the retelling. Narrative pantomime is a form of dramatization involving one person reading or retelling the story while the others portray the actions of the characters without speaking. Example stories for narrative pantomiming are The Chinese Mirror (Ginsburg), The Night Flight (Ryder), Hildilid's Night (Ryan), and Old Lars (Magnus).

Summary

Retelling stories is one means by which at-risk children can improve thinking-language abilities and can develop social-emotional abilities for engaging in positive interaction with others. By developing a wholesome self-esteem and overcoming their feelings of alienation, at-risk children can identify more closely with the school experience.

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