



Peer-reviewed paper

Children's narratives at 'show-and-tell': What do the storybooks tell us about being known, being better and being judged?

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Narrating stories about one's life to a group of people can be challenging for adults, therefore it is unsurprising that some children may experience anxiety at the prospect. Content analysis was undertaken of ten picture books concerned with 'show-and-tell'. Three themes were found that related to 'being known', 'being better', and 'being judged'. These themes are consistent with the studies of 'show-and-tell', suggesting that it is a socially complex event. However, more research is required about facilitating 'show-and-tell' in ways that are cognisant of the speaker and their narrative, and that also accounts for the interplay between the peer group and the teacher's goals.

Introduction: 'show-and-tell'

The term 'show and tell' denotes a practice whereby children are given opportunity to share an oral narrative about an object or experience (usually from their home-life) with their peers and with the teacher's support. Peers may then be invited to ask questions about the speaker's story (Barletta, 2008; Cazden, 1985; Michaels, 1981). References to this event can be seen from at least 1954 with Merville's (1954) article on the positive outcomes of 'show-and-tell'.

Teachers facilitate 'show-and-tell' in order to achieve a range of goals. For example, it can give an individual child opportunity to be the focus of the group's attention and enable them to be a 'story-weaver' (Cazden, 1985; Michaels, 1990). It may also help children share their interests and *funds of knowledge* (see Hogg, 2011) from home, which potentially promotes a better understanding of the storyteller. Another goal can include opportunity for children to identify points of similar interest with specific peers (Danielewicz, Rogers, & Noblit, 1996), thus forging connections. Finally, with careful coaching, it can assist children in enhancing their communication skills and confidence in sharing narratives or speaking to groups (Poveda, 2001).

Research aims and questions

Despite the positive nature of these goals, my own experience of teaching young children in early childhood settings is that it may be an event that causes anxiety for some of them. However, no research has been conducted in New Zealand that could confirm this. In fact, there has been very little research



conducted about 'show-and-tell' at all in New Zealand, despite it seeming to be a relatively common practice. It is possible that it has become a routine that has been inherited from previous generations of teachers and that scripts handed down operate tacitly in the minds of the present teachers (Blank, 2009). Such scripts and assumptions can be challenged through the use of provocations. It is the aim of this study to use children's books as a provocation to challenge my own assumptions, as well as uncover what messages they communicate to children about 'show-and-tell'. Books written for children are a suitable provocation because they frequently deal with commonly held concerns of children. As such, the research questions that guided this study were: (1) what do children's picture books tell teachers and children about 'show-and tell'? and (2) what practices do these messages challenge?

Search and analysis strategies

A literature search and content analysis was undertaken for picture books that could explain 'show-and-tell' to children and allay anxiety. Picture books were located by searching the children's book section of *Book Depository*, *Amazon Books*, and the W.J. Scott Library, Victoria University of Wellington. The search terms '*show and tell*' and '*show-and-tell*' were used. Overall, more than fifty books were found. Ten of these were selected for further content analysis (see Table 1.). The criteria for selection were: (1) suitability for young children aged three- to six-years; (2) the central theme of the book concerned 'show-and-tell'; and (3) the main character struggled with at least one aspect of 'show-and-tell.' The latter criterion was fairly simple to fulfil, as every book indicated at least one or more anxiety-inducing factors to do with 'show-and-tell'. This, in itself, was an interesting finding.

Analysis consisted of identifying key themes concerning children's anxiety about 'show-and-tell' within each book, and then completing comparisons and synthesis of the themes across the ten titles. A qualitative approach was taken in order to retain the complexity and richness of the various themes. As such, interpretive content analysis was conducted that initially made no assumptions about patterns or themes in the content of the books. This was consistent with the descriptions of qualitative analysis made by Henn, Weinstein, and Foard (2009), who stated that such an approach is an "enigmatic process" (p. 243), in the sense that codes and patterns cannot be identified until the researcher has seen the data as a whole. Analysis was also interpretive in that I constructed my own meaning about the content, carefully identifying the key messages and reducing them into broad themes and finer sub-themes (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

Findings

Three primary themes were found: (1) peer relations (being known); (2) competition (being better); and (3) performance anxiety (being judged). Each theme will be explained and described.



Table 1. Selected books and plot

Author Book Title	Plot
Bracken & Bell (2012). <i>Too shy for show and tell.</i>	Sam holds a great degree of anxiety about 'show-and-tell'. This book catalogues the strategies he uses to overcome his fear of speaking at 'show-and-tell'.
Carlson (2012). <i>Henry's Show and Tell.</i>	Henry feels sick when he has to do 'show-and-tell'. His lizard escapes and in the pandemonium of capturing him, Henry forgets his fear and delivers the best 'show-and-tell' he has ever done.
Chapra (2004). <i>Amelia's Show and Tell.</i>	It is Amelia's first day of school, and when she sees the basket of 'show-and-tell' objects, she worries that she has brought the wrong kind of thing.
Clement (2005). <i>Louisa May Pickett: The Most Boring Person in Class.</i>	Louisa May Pickett brings very interesting things for 'show-and-tell' and earns the reputation of the most interesting person in class. Her reputation is threatened when other children become more innovative.
Jacobs (2013). <i>Show and tell, Strawberry Shortcake.</i>	One of the Berrykins does not know what to take to 'show-and-tell' that will gain approval from the other children, so enlists the help of Strawberry Shortcake and her friends.
Johnson (1999). <i>My Mom is Show and Tell.</i>	David takes his mother for parent-show-and-tell day. On the way, he reminds her of everything she should not do when she gets to his class.
Moon (1988). <i>Something special.</i>	Charlie cannot think of what to take for 'show-and-tell', but eventually decides on his baby sister.
Munsch & Martchenko (2001). <i>Show and Tell.</i>	Ben wants to take something very special that will impress the other children, so he plans to take his baby sister.
Sutherland & Weller (1992). <i>Jason goes to Show and Tell.</i>	Jason looks forward to sharing his Teddy Bear at 'show-and-tell', but in his excitement, he leaves the house without it.
Wells (2011). <i>Yoko's show-and-tell.</i>	Yoko has a special toy that was sent to her as a present. Even though it is precious she takes it to school for 'show-and-tell'. It has an accident on the way to school.



The first theme, 'peer relations' was concerned with the relational bonds and understandings between children about each other. For example, in one of the books, a young giraffe named Sam did not initially speak at 'show-and-tell'. Therefore, children did not know about his likes and interests (Bracken & Bell, 2012). Similarly, in another book, Amelia as the new girl, is worried that her object for 'show-and-tell' will not appeal to the peer group. As such, it might compromise her ability to fit in (Chapra, 2004). These ideas relate directly to 'being known' by others in the group.

Concerns about competition were evident in several of the books (Clement, 2005; Jacobs, 2013; Moon, 1999; Munsch & Martchenko, 2001). The primary concern was the main character's ability to choose a story or object that would impress the peer group. This was particularly evident in Clement (2005), where Louisa May Pickett had earned the reputation for being the most interesting person at 'show-and-tell' for three years in a row. However, this reputation became threatened when other children contributed to 'show-and-tell' in increasingly creative ways. The implication inherent in such a theme is that there was a way to measure a 'good' story or object. Furthermore, this focus suggested that some children needed to have 'show-and-tell' topics or objects that were better than their peers'.

Public speaking is known to be an anxiety-inducing prospect for many adults (Botella, Hoffman, & Moscovitch, 2004); therefore, it is unsurprising that it could have a similar effect for certain children. Fear of speaking in front of a group of others was described in the books as causing stomach aches (Bracken & Bell, 2012; Carlson, 2012) or generalised worry (Chapra, 2004; Johnson, 1999). Furthermore, fears that the main character would say something that others would laugh at were expressed (Bracken & Bell, 2012; Carlson, 2012; Chapra, 2004; Johnson, 1999); hence, this theme can be described as 'being judged'.

Discussion: The teacher's facilitation

It is important to note that the books included in this present article are fictional and do not describe real children or their 'show-and-tell' experiences. Nonetheless, insights from research studies demonstrate that the themes raised by the books are worthy of our consideration when facilitating the sharing of children's narratives at 'show-and-tell'.

In the first instance, the practices surrounding 'show-and-tell' are complex and communicate to children appropriate topics for sharing. As such, they construct a framework of public and private domains (Gallas, 1992; Poveda, 2001). For example, in Gallas's (1992) study, a child shared news about a father's drug addiction and in Poveda's (2001) study a child talked about her father's imprisonment. When sensitive topics such as these arise, teachers must balance children's right to privacy versus their right to speak about their lived experience in authentic ways. Decisions that determine whether a sensitive topic can be shared or not may be incremental to the construction of notions about 'public' and 'private' narratives, and children may be required to learn the difference.

Teachers might enact constructs around children's choice of topic, even when it is not considered sensitive. For example, Rubenstein Reich (1994) suggests



that teachers dismiss any topics they feel are unsuitable. This might be particularly relevant where a teacher feels that the topic choice is 'silly' or fantastical (Gallas, 2001). Similarly, teachers might appropriate children's narratives for their own agenda (Poveda, 2001). For example, a child shared a narrative about nearly being hit by a car while crossing the road. Rather than hearing the child's intention to communicate a frightening experience, the teacher took over and instructed the children on road safety (Poveda, 2001). Given the complexity of unwritten norms about the acceptability of different topics, it is perhaps unsurprising that children's anxiety about narrative focus is a prevalent theme in the story books.

It is clear that norms not only govern topic choice at 'show-and-tell', but they set parameters on suitable narrative styles as well. As a language event, 'show-and-tell' is not replicated anywhere else in society (Barletta, 2008; Murphy, 2003), therefore any norms around effective speaking are likely to be highly context-specific. Evidence suggests that some teachers might prioritise Western ways of narration that follow literacy norms (i.e. the narrative has a beginning, middle and end). Furthermore, it seems frequently expected that the narrative is a factual recollection of events or description of the object (Barletta, 2008; Gallas, 1992). Where language performance is the primary focus, teachers may interrupt children to correct their speech. Not only might this exacerbate individual children's anxiety about their performance, it potentially detracts attention from his or her meaning, thus diminishing the social richness contained within the narrative (Barletta, 2008; Gallas, 1992; Poveda, 2001).

The children's peer group

'Show-and-tell' is a ritual that is closely linked to the culture of the early childhood setting; however, it also likely intersects with the children's peer culture. Children's peer culture contains its own ways of being and doing that are separate to, but influenced by, the adult world. It also contains its own unique set of norms about individual children's social status within the group. Moreover, the peer culture communicates to individual children which artefacts are considered of value (Corsaro, 1985). This is highly relevant when children bring artefacts such as toys from home for 'show-and-tell'; some will most probably have higher value to the peer group than others. Furthermore, its possible specific children with high social status within the peer group could influence which toys are considered valuable.

The relationship between 'show-and-tell' and peer culture is evident in studies where children are enabled to speak in naturalistic ways without excessive adult intervention. Where adults are able to hand over some of the control to the peer group, children may exhibit higher levels of humour that specifically appeals to the peer group (Danielewicz et al., 1996). Furthermore, they might build on each other's narratives, as opposed to each individual child telling a distinct and separate story (Murphy, 2003). Finally, children might share narratives that are rich in imaginative detail, exaggeration and recreation (Gallas, 1992).

The peer culture is also made evident when individual children's competitive behaviours are seen. For example, some children may strive to outdo each other in the provision of interesting, important or cherished objects and experiences. Subsequently, children might feel anxious where there is pressure



to achieve the approval of the peer group about their contribution. Some children might also feel pressure to ensure that their narrative is judged better than those of their peers in order to elevate their own social status within the group. This, in turn, potentially impacts their participation, and therefore their ability to share their lived experiences with the wider peer group through narratives (Alsafi, 1994; Danielewicz et al., 1996).

Some children may possess socially competitive skills for controlling 'show-and-tell' interactions, whereas others might struggle to be heard, especially when their dialogic styles differ from the norm (Skånfors, Löfdahl, & Hägglund, 2009; Williams, 2001). Such competition might be organised around individual children's social status within the group. In other words, where a child has many friends, they are likely to garner support when sharing their narrative and the peer group is likely to be highly engaged in what the child has to say. By contrast, a child who has less social status might experience disruption or disengagement by others (Danielewicz et al., 1996). Further, Norris (2001) suggests that competition can also occur along gendered lines. In her study, the boys dominated and supported the narratives of other boys but ridiculed those of the girls.

Despite these complexities, it is likely that there are benefits to carefully facilitated 'show-and-tell'. In the first instance, it promotes some opportunity for children's narratives to be shared in order for teachers to understand aspects of children's peer culture. For example, Dickie and Shuker (2014) studied teachers' attitudes to children's pop-culture in literacy experiences at school. Some of the study-participants reported that space devoted to children being able to communicate interests from their own lived experience gave teachers opportunity to come closer to the children's world. Similarly, Emilson (2007) argues that teachers must come close to children's worlds if children are to have any agency in the educational setting. Both of these ideas relate to *Nga Hononga - Relationships* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Nonetheless, if enhanced relationships are a goal of 'show-and-tell', it is not enough to merely create space for children's narratives; rather, it must be facilitated in such a way that power structures between children and teachers, and between individual children and the peer group are taken into consideration.

Conclusions

'Show-and-tell' is a socially complex event that consists of unwritten rules about acceptable topics and objects for sharing with the wider group. Further research is required that can assist teachers in promoting children's authentic voice and lived-experiences without allowing children's disclosure of sensitive topics to place them in emotional detriment. Furthermore, when competitive behaviours are evident within the peer group, especially those that relate to individual children's social status, there are real implications for relationships and potentially group cohesiveness. Teachers must weigh up whether their primary goals for 'show-and-tell' are based on building a sense of community versus promoting children's language skills.



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