

Helicopter storytelling

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“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable”
(Augsberger, 1982, p. 12).

In this article, I talk about my experience of ‘helicopter storytelling’ (Paley, 1990), which involves a playful collaboration between myself and the children. The process is initiated before mat-time by asking children if they have a story they would like to enact. The story is limited to one A5 page and can be about anything. No story is too short. I scribe the children’s narration of their stories and the children are then supported to re-enact their stories according to their preference of characters and roles. This fun and empowering experience honours the children as valuable and unique contributors who are experts in their own stories.

Children taking the lead

I have been privileged to play with ‘helicopter storytelling’ in a variety of early childhood education contexts and to model it for interested centres. It is a respectful practice that gives children agency and a voice, and is inspired by the extraordinary writings of Vivian Gussin Paley (1990).

In practice, the stories are enacted on the same day as they are dictated and I create a small ‘stage’ with masking tape or chalk around which the children sit, one person deep. Then I ask the first storyteller to come up and we begin. When I take the dictation, I ask which part they want to play and underline it with my pencil... it may be a hidden blue Easter egg, a cheetah, a tree, the baddy, a twinkling star, or Mummy (a popular choice). Apart from their own chosen part, all other roles are played by the next person around the stage with children having the right to pass. Being a ‘story-listener’ is also a very honourable option. The rotating system of who will play which part avoids favouritism and cliques. Everyone is assured of a turn. If there are children left over as the stories end, then I simply ask the teller whether she would like further players, for example, more stars in the sky. Usually they accept the invitation.



Image 1: Playing out their part

This way of storytelling clearly appeals to the children, both the scribing and the enactment can be extraordinarily intimate moments. It reminds me of the ‘Resources for Infant Educators’(RIE) culture in which very young children learn very early on that they will have your full and undivided attention when it is their turn, and so they quickly learn

to wait. Joint attention (Degotardi, 2017) is a key feature in most of my storytelling practices, as demonstrated in the learning-story I wrote for one child after a collaborative storytelling experience at the playdough table (Davis, 2016a).

Oral literacy is the foundation of written literacy

Helicopter storytelling presents a safe and empowering way to support oral literacy (my chief passion), but it is so much more (Cooper, 2005; Education Review Office [ERO], 2017). I find that children who avoid the limelight suddenly want to participate, to be seen and heard. It is so empowering to have other people play out your story.



Image 2: Enactment

Recently, I had worked all week on a papier mâché castle, alongside a boy, Reyansh, who was helpful but almost completely non-verbal. On my last day, I asked him if he had a story and he suddenly became very verbal, needing no urging to continue at all!

Once upon a time there was a bed. It was wet. It was wet because it was in a duck pond. The bed belonged to Grandma. The bed hit Grandma so she threw the bed into the duck pond! Grandma is very small so she can sleep in the baby's bed (the baby had grown up and gone). The baby bed hit Grandma too so Grandma threw it into the water as well. Grandma told the beds, "No more hitting and no more punching!" Grandma sleeps on the floor now and is comfy.

We acted this story out for all the gathered children who appreciated it a great deal. He played Grandma with enormous relish and expressiveness (he needed help with rolling a 'heavy' bed!) Empowerment, contribution and agency indeed! His mother later reassured me anxiously that this was NOT a true story!

Reyansh needed no urging to continue but this does not mean I did not engage. Many teachers are disappointed, I believe, with stories that they are offered and this is partly because they approach the event with a 'running record' sort of approach, saying simply, "and then what happened? And then what happened?". I don't believe this is respectful. It is not how we respond to a friend over a cup of coffee. Responsive and reciprocal relationships require interaction, either verbal or with sounds or facial expressions: "My goodness! How did the bed get in the duck pond?" and "So where did the baby sleep then?" and so on. One needs to show curiosity, interest and to engage wholeheartedly.

Cooper (2005) gives many wonderful examples of how our engaged, informed and interested interaction can extend learning:

Teachers can play an important role in helping children expand vocabulary, sentence length, and expression. ('I don't understand, Kayla. You say first the princess spun around in the air and then you say she didn't change because she became a Shrek princess. How do you become a Shrek princess? What's a Shrek princess? Tell me more.') (p. 239).

Teachers can also help a struggling or shy storyteller through the right choice of questions or demonstration of interest:



Image 3: What picture do you see inside your head?

Teacher: Spiderman came. Okay, I'll write that. Is there more?

Child: (silence)

Teacher: Hmm . . .What picture do you see in your head? Does Spiderman come by car, like Batman?

Or a cape like Superman?

Child (amazed): No, teacher! He uses webs. On his hands.

Teacher: Oh, okay. Well, I'm glad you told me. Let me write that down. Spiderman used his webs to do what?

Child: To come through the window. The bad guy was there (Cooper, 2005, pp. 239-240).

Trisha Lee's book, *Princesses, dragons and helicopter stories: Storytelling and story acting in the early years* elaborates on this story telling/story enacting technique. She recounts a story of a girl who was a selective mute. After watching for weeks or even months, she approached the teacher and 'told' her story that was just one word, "Princess". The girl came into the taped area and moved like a princess, "her head held high, the image of a princess who chose not to talk" (Lee, 2016, p. 28).

Whanaungatanga and agency

Two-year-olds will often have one-word stories. 'Mummy' is a favourite and they come up to the mat and become the most important person in their lives. It is easy to interpret how the whole process of helicopter storytelling upholds the four principles and five strands of *Te Whāriki* with equal vigour and authenticity. "In an empowering environment, children have agency to create and act on their own ideas, develop knowledge and skills in areas that interest them and, increasingly, to make decisions and judgments on matters that relate to them" (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017, p. 18). Trisha Lee (2016) explains an important aspect of the enactment stage of the process: that of the child's ability to interpret:

I ask the first child in the circle, "Would you like to be the cat in Tawera's story?" and if they agree and stand, I try hard not to demonstrate how a cat might move. Instead I frame my question with a particular focus on verbs: "Can you show me how a cat might move around the stage?" or "Can you show me how Spiderman shoots his web?" or even, "Can you show me how a bed might stand on the floor?" which supports them to know what to do yet leaves the door wide open for any interpretation. And I might choose a number of people to 'become' a hospital or a carriage.

Lovely chance coincidences happen: A T-Rex (played by the first child in the circle) fell out of a tree (another child) and was taken to the hospital (another) by his Mum (yet another) and Dad (the storyteller had chosen to play this role). The T-Rex saw a Doctor (another child) who checked him out with great professional solicitude. Later I discovered that the Doctor/child's mother IS a Doctor! (Her son had certainly been watching!) The story dictated that it was 'only a scratch' and so the T-Rex was sent home and all ended well. The principle of Whanaungatanga is unquestionably honoured (MoE, 2017).

Once upon a time, there was a girl. She was playing. She went to school. Afterwards, she went home. Mummy was there and they ate lunch together. The end. (She played the Mummy and really enjoyed seeing herself at school playing with other children on stage!). I was impressed by her story because I had not previously met or talked to her, or even knew her name. It was the second week of helicopter storytelling and she had not taken any on a part during week one. She now obviously felt reassured and intrigued by what she had seen. It was terribly noisy where we were and I could barely hear her! English is her second language, but she was determined to be heard and understood so she had to repeat some phrases for me four or five times. She would not give up. This is how I know it is important:

Once upon a time there was a star. It was twinkling in the sky. It flew away. It shot into a crocodile house. There were five crocodiles inside. The star turned into a monster (and escaped). The end.

Unanticipated gifts of honouring what matters most to a child

One of the unanticipated gifts of this process is the opportunity for the children to observe the dictation process. The older children watch with considerable fascinated curiosity as I sound out each word as I write it down. Given that pencils are going to be their primary writing implements at school, it is wonderful to model the power of writing in such a meaningful context. Simply discovering that spoken words can be recorded in written squiggles that are still readable hours later is a major step in wanting to become a writer (Cooper, 2005). This correlation is magic of the first order and it is modelled rarely in these digital days.

The fact is the very structure of stories and storytelling makes the experience a vital, fertile opportunity for young children to learn many things directly and indirectly about language, print, and narrative, three critical components of early literacy development (Cooper, 2005, p. 237).

This remarkable process honours children's stories, and allows the children's voices to be heard. It also gives us a window into the world of the child's thinking and working theories (Peters & Kelly, 2011). Observation of children at play also tells us that storytelling comes naturally (Gottschall, 2012). A sense of narrative seems to be hardwired in from birth and we adults also spend most of our own lives immersed in story of some sort (news, gossip, songs, novels, TV, advertisements, phone calls, and so on) It is wonderful for a child to experience his/her story being valued, recorded, heard, shared and replayed for others. That is what is so special. Paley (1990) insightfully comments, "it is play, of course, but it is also story in action, just as storytelling is play put into narrative form" (p. 4).

In helicopter stories, the child is the expert. No one else knows whether the egg will get found, whether the boy will be hurt when he falls from the tree, or where Grandma will eventually sleep. It is the child's story. There are no attempts to correct grammar, elicit justifications or make judgments on content. One must engage with the same respectful curiosity and interest as when a friend tells you about their weekend. Whatever the child says, goes (Almost... but that's another story!)



Image 4: Storytelling comes naturally

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