Storytelling

A Foundational Pillar of Literacy

by Anne McKeough

Stories fill every comer of our lives. They come to us unsolicited as we overhear a conversation on the bus, and shock us as we listen to the evening news. We surround our children with stories, reading storybooks to them and encouraging them to read good literature, in the hope that they will visit-in their imagination-a world beyond ours. And most of us also tell them stories about our childhood adventures and their escapades while in diapers, yet, when we think about how to nurture their literacy, we usually think only of formal literary stories.

Although I would never dispute the importance of printed literature, it is not the sole foundational pillar of literacy. As Canada's renowned novelist Margaret Atwood has noted, literature has roots in the "kitchen stories" that we adults tell children, or that they hear us telling each other while they play or dawdle within earshot. These oral stories, told within the family context, promote emerging literacy in that they shape a child's sense of what makes a good story, they provide a model of how events are woven together in story form, and they potentially shape the child's own life story. What I'm suggesting here is that parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles have, at the tips of their tongues, a second source of literacy support. Along with reading storybooks, they can offer children a "literacy boost" by telling them family stories.

Telling Our Stories to Children

Although reminding parents to tell their family stories to the kids might seem too obvious to mention, storytelling is becoming rarer in many homes, either because parents are too busy working (see Transition, June 1996 and September 1997), or because they don't connect storytelling with literacy. And parents are not alone in missing the connection. Not long ago I suggested to a group of kindergarten teachers that they might encourage parents to share family stories as a way of preparing their children for formal reading instruction. One rather irritated veteran asked, "What can children possibly learn about reading from hearing about old Uncle Joe?" I answered by telling a story from my own family history, using it to illustrate how hearing family stories can prepare a child to read. Before starting the story, I set the scene:

Growing up in rural Nova Scotia, I was different from my friends because my grandfather-Papa, we called him-was neither Irish nor Scottish nor French. Papa was Maltese. When I was a child, my mother told me this story about him:

> Papa was born and raised in Malta, a tiny island in the Mediterranean Sea. When Papa was in his early twenties, he decided to immigrate to Sydney, Australia. Now, Papa was a skilled tradesman, but apparently not very knowledgeable about world geography. He didn't know there was more than one Sydney in the world, so, when the ticket agent booked his boat passage for Sydney, Nova Scotia instead of Sydney, Australia, he didn't notice.

> Papa had been at sea for two weeks and had gone halfway across the Atlantic Ocean before he discovered that his destination was very different from the one he had intended. By then it was too late to do anything except make the best of things-which Papa did. He got a job, married a Scottish lass named Cassie, and was soon raising a family in Nova Scotia.

So, how did hearing this story help me in my move towards literacy? First, like all good stories, oral or written, this one made me question my assumptions and move beyond my existing views. I remember thinking about how Papa must have felt when he realized his mistake-desperate! But, I reasoned, if a mistake that was so big and so terrible could turn out OK, surely there was reason to hope that my mistakes wouldn't be the end of me.

When I asked my mother why Papa's parents didn't tell him it was the wrong Sydney, her answer-that they probably didn't know-puzzled me. How was it possible that grownups would not know something? Later I realized that, if the mistake hadn't been made, I might not exist. What if that ticket agent had asked Papa, "Which Sydney?"? I wondered if I was meant to be, or if my existence was just happenstance.

Wondering about oneself, and about real or imaginary story characters and their (mis)adventures, as I did, is the "stuff" of enjoying and learning from stories. The ability to question the meaning behind a story is a skill children need if they are to embrace reading. Without it, reading is a grinding task that offers little enjoyment at best and much torment at worst.

A second way the story about my grandfather helped me move towards literacy was by giving me a model of how stories are organized. This is important because research has repeatedly shown that, if children are to understand an oral or written story as it unfolds, they need a "story schema"-a mental blueprint of what to expect. Without a schema, they can't distinguish which parts of the story need special attention.

Children construct their sense of story through multiple exposures, especially when accompanied by thoughtful discussion. Gradually they become aware, at some level, of the features that all stories have in common. Parents who make storytelling a part of everyday life not only increase their children's exposure to stories, they also allow children to see that "real" life and "book" life have some things in common. What better way to prepare children to read than to give them permission to use all they know about living when reading?

The Four Features of a Story

In his book, Acts of Meaning, the eminent American psychologist and educator, Jerome Bruner, tells us there are four features that define narrative and comprise a well-formed story schema:

First, stories are "sequential"; that is, they tell of events occurring over time. When children listen to a story, they have to be ready to move through time with the storyteller; otherwise the events will be an incomprehensible jumble. As mature storytellers and listeners, we take this knowledge for granted but, like most things, it must be learned. The story about my grandfather is a good example of this first feature of narrative. It begins when he was a young man deciding to leave Malta; continues with his voyage across the Atlantic to the wrong Sydney; and ends with him managing to have a good life in his new country, despite his unsettling beginning.

Bruner calls his second feature of narrative "particularity," meaning that stories focus on particular events and individuals. Again, while this might seem obvious, it must be learned. When young children tell a story, they can rarely stay with the main point. They tend to drift in an entirely different direction and end with something unrelated to the story's beginning. And when an adult's stories are boring, it's often because they digress. A good story is about something in particular, like the story of my grandfather's mistake.

Third, stories involve characters' "intentionality." That is, they not only describe characters' actions, they also show us the intentions that motivate those actions or that arise in response to events. In Bruner's book Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, he describes these two aspects of narrative as "the landscape of action" (the events in an external, physical world), and "the landscape of consciousness" (events-such as intentions, thoughts, feelings and beliefs-in an internal, mental world). The story my mother told me offered an excellent model of intentionality. My grandfather's actions were motivated by his intention to immigrate to Australia, and the thwarting of this intention was what gave the story its "punch." Such models are essential to literacy development since young children typically describe the landscape of action in their stories long before they successfully integrate the landscape of consciousness.

The final feature of narrative that Bruner discusses is "canonicity and breach" --exploring and making comprehensible events that deviate (breach) from standard or "canonical" occurrences. The Sydney story certainly exemplifies this final feature of narrative. It recounted a very unusual event (immigrating to the wrong continent), and brought it into the realm of the plausible.

Family stories are a rich source of knowledge about the world of narrative texts. Although they are spoken, not read, they share many features of printed text, helping a child to understand how stories are organized and crafted. And family stories have the added value of being intrinsically motivating since they are, in a way, about the child's own self. They establish and explain both the child's sense of belonging within the family, and the family's uniqueness in a world full of families.

Children Telling Their Own Stories

Of course, adults are not the only ones with family stories to tell. Children have a multitude of stories, just waiting for a chance to be told. Telling their personal stories allows them to bring some order and understanding to the jumble of people and events that crowd their busy days. It allows them to organize their thoughts and to practice expressing them in a form that's comprehensible to others. But their stories are not always happy ones, as was the case with a four-year-old I'll call Geoff who participated in one of my research studies:

> **Geoff:** There was a little boy. Then he hit the ball with [a bat] and it goes into the garden. And then he hit the flower [with the ball] and it was dead. Then [he] tells his mom to get the ball out of the garden. And he tells his mom to get the ball and the mom gets mad and locked him in her room.
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> **Teacher:** Oh, my goodness. How does he feel?
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> **Geoff:** Terrible!

Geoff's story might well have been based on a troubling personal experience, and using story form may have allowed him to re-explore the event. Referring back to Bruner's four features of narrative, Geoff's story includes a temporally ordered sequence of events, focuses on a particular character and occurrence, considers (with the help of the teacher) the main character's internal mental state, and explores what is, in the child's view at least, a breach from the canonical. He may have been unaware of what he was doing, but Geoff used his experience to think about story form, and used story form to think about his experience.

Lest I give the impression that personal storytelling is an appropriate teaching and learning tool only for the very young, here is 17-year-old "Catherine's" story, taken from the research of my former graduate student, Diane Salter.

> **Catherine:** I remember that every year since I was born we would load up the van and the four kids from my family and head out to my grandparent's farm, which was a two-day drive from the Northwest Territories to Saskatchewan.... Besides our family, all the relatives-aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters-would all head out there too. There were 12 grandchildren altogether, but then add in all the aunts, uncles, etc....
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> It was great, every year we would arrive and everyone would be waiting on the front porch to greet us once more. They would be the best summers that anyone could ask for.

The baseball games, running in the fields, going baiting, playing tag around the house with a wet ball, or hide-and-go-seek in the barns at night. There were also those warm summer nights when the house was so packed with parents that all us kids would go outside and sit on the huge front lawn and talk about the good old days, or that day, or what pleasures tomorrow will bring us.

This continued for 15 years of my life. . . but after that some of us could not make it down in the summer because of jobs and such, we started to slowly disintegrate one by one, but the wonderful memories of 15 wonderful summers will always be there.

Dr. Salter: What is the most important idea in this story?

Catherine: Just relationships, I think, between your cousins and grandparents, and the importance of memories. The memories will never fail you. If something goes bad just think of a good time and it will make you happy.

Dr. Salter: What does the story mean to you?

Catherine: A lot! It's really -- like, the story and the memories of it are. . . really important to me. They mean everything to me. The whole story's about memories, right? And it's just important to everybody to have memories....

Catherine's story appears to serve as a catalyst, allowing her to generalize beyond her earlier experiences and to reflect on the nature of human existence. Her interpretation of the events moves far beyond the experience of spending summers on the farm, and even beyond the closeness she felt with her relatives there, although these experiences are clearly very meaningful to her. She sees the story as a testament to "the importance of memories," both for herself and for "everybody." Like four-year-old Geoff, Catherine uses story form to think about her experiences, albeit in a more sophisticated fashion.

The Medium and the Message

People are natural storytellers and stories are a natural way to initiate children into the world of literacy. J\1though becoming literate entails much more than hearing and understanding family stories, storytelling is part of a strong foundation that parents can lay. Family stories can introduce children to culturally specific story patterns; they offer children a model of human behavior and so ready them for the content of storybooks. Family stories inform, socialize, and help us communicate our thoughts and feelings, much as written stories do.

But, in my view, the power of family stories extends beyond learning about story organization and anticipating story content. When we tell our children our family stories and when we encourage them to tell us theirs, we are allowing them to discover not only that they know how to tell a story; but also that they have a story to tell. In short, they discover that they have both the medium and the message. Knowing this allows them to identify with authors who tell their stories in written form, and gives them an authentic reason for entering the literate community.

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