“Once there was …”: Expanding the literacies of storytelling in the early years

Julie Faulkner  
*Monash University*

Jane Kirkby  
*Monash University*

Dayle Manley  
*Department of Education and Early Childhood Development*

Julie Perrin  
*Independent Consultant*

Over the past decades, shifts in English curriculum concerns have seen considerable variance in the place of oral language in classrooms. The crowded curriculum and high stakes testing, plus rapid changes wrought by digital technologies do not support the valuing of oral capacities in schools. Many teachers feel challenged by including storytelling in the literacy programs, especially as students move through the education system. Using a professional storyteller and an academic as a critical friend, this project aimed to build early childhood educators’ understanding of the relationships between storytelling and literacy development. Positioning teachers as researchers, we sought to focus teachers on the notion of themselves and early primary years’ students as purposeful and competent storytellers. We explore the emerging confidence of teachers in this role, as well as a number of complex ways that young children engage with and re-interpret story. This process occurs in multimodal ways to consolidate and expand literacy knowledge.

Storytelling is an oral art form where a teller performs a story with a live audience. In this understanding there is no book present to separate the relationship between the teller and the listener. The storyteller holds the story in her mind and uses words and gestures to bring the story alive before the listeners. (Phillips, 2000, p. i)

**Why storytelling?**

Feeding the imagination through storytelling has dropped off the school curriculum radar, partly as a consequence of high stakes testing and the rise of digital technologies in schools. Some might argue that speaking and listening have always been undervalued in the curriculum, and the surge of new technologies has done nothing to stem the tide (Alexander, 2010; Carter, 2002;
Wilkinson, 1965). What is apparent is that, as primary students take up the pen or keyboard, opportunities to develop oracy capacities decline (Dawkins & O’Neill, 2011). Moreover, Phillips (2000) notes that “[f]or many years storytelling has been forgotten in many educational environments, as our world of visual imagery has rapidly flourished” (p. 5).

Narratives have long been recognised as central to our human experience. Stories are ‘primary’ (Hardy, as cited in Meek, Warlow, & Barton, 1978) ways to create a sense of events and exchanges, as we organise our experiences into socially meaningful episodes. To do this, we call upon combinations of prior knowledge, assumption, expectation, inference, pattern matching and metaphor. As we create different scenarios, we build understanding of narrative structure and develop deeper kinds of cultural and historical understanding.

Moreover, traditional storytelling engages young learners in ambiguous and beguiling ways. It draws upon familiar and strange forms: fables, legends, folk tales, riddles, fairy stories, myth and conundrums. These forms connect to deep memory and guide us to unfamiliar places. Told well, stories immerse young listeners in rich social, cultural, historical and anthropological content, shaped to encourage wondering. Traditional storytelling ranges across cultures and sees different narratives represent human experience. Through rich stories, students are offered access to understanding themselves and their world. What is more, storytelling can be magical and fun. As a creative form, stories value the power of the imagination to enhance life. They can be ritualised forms of enjoyment or spontaneous and playful - carefully crafted, improvised or messy.

Telling stories also develops speaker confidence. Storytelling imparts rhythm and pacing, communicating ways in which gesture and imagery work when we interact. Gesture is identified as a significant aspect of the storytelling practices that teachers employ. Using gesture has been shown to support the memory of speech (Breckinridge Church, Garber, & Rogalski, 2007) and allowed teachers to carry a story in their heads more easily. In telling stories, gesture has provided an invitation to the audience to fill the spaces left by lack of illustrations (Breckinridge Church et al., 2007).

To fully engage, we have to learn to hear the sound of our own voices as well as those of others. These are essential social skills – ones that are so often talked about as being central to human interaction. And yet, we argue, this kind of learning through story is increasingly marginalised in the crowded and assessment-driven classroom lives of children.

**Storytelling and the curriculum**

Literacy comprises reading, writing, listening and speaking, essential social skills that are so important in human interaction. Early childhood educators, such as Paley (1990), have guided the development of ‘storytelling curriculum’, which impacts positively on psychosocial development. Storytelling curriculum has also been shown to improve vocabulary usage, complexity of sentence structure and understanding of semantics (Cooper, Capo, Mathes, & Gray, 2007). Educators working with pre-school children transcribe a child’s story as it is orally composed. Howell (2011) outlines her study in which scribes recorded stories that primary children composed orally. In studies such as this, the focus is on
creating the written text, rather than using the spoken words to bring an audience into the ‘hear and now’ of the story experience. Storytelling practices, as defined by Phillips, are quite particular in their reliance on the potency of the spoken word to engage and give flight to the imagination. Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer and Lowrance’s (2004) work with pre-school children is more in keeping with Phillips’ definition of storytelling. Their research found that children’s understanding of narrative structure improved when they are told stories, rather than when listening to stories being read.

This qualitatively different experience of reading and telling is recognised in Waldorf practices where teachers are encouraged to engage children in storytelling experiences as both listeners and tellers (Steiner Education Australia, 2011). Ball (2013) also notes this difference, turning to the Waldorf practices to inform her storytelling in a Montessori setting. She used a storytelling basket to support development of both her own and her pre-school students’ repertoire for oral storytelling.

Storytelling has long been recognised as a valuable literacy and community practice. However, it remains on the fringe of school-based literacy learning, all too frequently being reduced to watching a visiting storyteller for a special event on the school’s yearly calendar. By contrast, the literature argues that children as storytellers are presented with opportunities to see themselves as creators of stories. They are charged with engaging an audience through the use of voice, gesture, evocative language and imagination. In Australia, early childhood education covers birth to 8 years of age. Our focus on Prep - Year 2 was in response to the limited use of storytelling when children shift from the less structured preschool setting to school environments. The challenge for teachers is to build on the work around storytelling, which is more evident in preschools (see Stevens, Raban & Nolan, 2014). The shift into more structured literacy sessions necessitates identifying how teachers can use this approach. Moreover, we wondered if we could extend children’s awareness of creative and critical thinking through narratives. Awareness of these dimensions led to our overarching research question: “How can teachers in Foundation - Year 2 classrooms use oral storytelling to build children’s literacy?”

**The study**

The study arose from a project conducted with a Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) primary school in the metropolitan region of Melbourne, Victoria. The school had participated the previous year in some storytelling workshops with a consultant storyteller, Julie Perrin, building on the school’s identification of the value of oral language development as part of the literacy program. Julie had worked in the classrooms of two of the three teachers (Sue and Fiona). The experiences, however, had not translated into ongoing practice.

**Context**

Dayle Manley, a staff member at the school, describes the school and the role of the study in relation to the teachers and the students’ literacy skills:
Our storytelling project takes place in a small primary school in an inner northern suburb of Melbourne, Australia. The school is diverse in many senses of that word, and the idea of connecting storytelling to writing, drawing and reading emerges as an investigation of how we build community and strengthen oral language. We also investigate how to build significant bridges between home and the formal aspects of student learning, in particular, reading and writing.

The school already had a strong oral language program that used the notion of student inquiry through an investigative play-based curriculum as a means to develop students’ oral language and sense of wonder about the world.

The four teachers involved in this project believe that oracy and the telling of story is at the centre of learning as human beings, and that communicating or telling our stories, our thinking – and learning is how we grow our knowledge both individually and collectively. Scientists tell their stories, mathematicians tell theirs - the compelling nature of ideas is told through story. The grand narratives of the past, the individual and collective stories that describe the human condition, our ideas and wonders are all stories.

For the young Foundation and Year 1 students in these three classrooms, the richness of story needs to be modelled, demonstrated, observed, imitated, enhanced and built upon. At school, it is the educator’s role to provide these things, as they (in a Vygotskian reading) are the more knowledgeable other. They scaffold the learning and teaching of how to tell stories and which stories to tell where.

Our research story developed with a recognition that there was a need to begin with building teacher confidence, knowledge and understanding of the art of storytelling.

Julie Perrin provided the stories, coached, critiqued, asked and answered teachers’ questions. She offered a language with which to describe the actions they were making, using a vocabulary that was developing as they storied, acting out the story as it unfolds.

We wanted to investigate how and if in storytelling we would notice changes in the ways children told their own stories, both orally and in written formats. We focussed on the vocabulary they used, stylistic devices they borrowed, and what that looked like in a range of modes. Alongside the oral telling, teachers modelled drawing, creating, story maps and so on to support writing and discussion. During the course of the project, the participating teachers engaged in an extended professional development relationship with Julie as storyteller, who regularly works with teachers in Victorian schools.

**Methodology**

Across a period of six weeks, spanning the end of Term One and the beginning of Term Two, three teachers participating in the professional development project engaged in peer observations and several professional conversations with Julie to question and strengthen their own storytelling practices. Personal
reflections were shared during a one-to-one reflective discussion with an academic critical friend. Three conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed. We analysed recordings of 3 professional conversations with teachers and the storyteller as well as a professional conversation with the academic partner (serving as critical friend).

Findings

Although two of the teachers involved had participated in some storytelling professional development in the previous year, they all identified that they would like further support in building their ability to select, practise and tell stories. This uncertainty of teachers in relation to storytelling has been reported on in literature (Mottley, & Telfer, as cited in Miller, & Pennycuff, 2008) and became a significant part of the research design and approach.

During the feedback sessions, Fiona reflected on the challenge she felt in moving into the storyteller role in her classroom. Although she had seen Julie in action in her classroom as a visiting specialist the previous year, she did not readily adopt the approach. She considered what had shifted for her:

I guess I didn’t follow through with it after that term. I didn’t think it was something that I could have done. I guess just knowing that it was okay. Like that was part of literacy.

Taking on the mantel

The role of the storyteller and the relationship of the storyteller to the listeners emerged as one of the key characteristics in the study. How the teacher might build and sustain effective literacy practices through storytelling began with the confidence and efficacy of the storyteller persona. The participants needed to define, through a number of processes, ways in which this role differed from that of the teacher.

First, the classroom needed to be transformed, as the storyteller put it, “from the ordinary to the fabulous.” Spatially, this was achieved through allocating a corner of the room to storytelling, to create a “ritual space”, and marking the space with a “beautiful cloth”. It created “a sense in which you invited the children to come over from this teaching space to enter that [new] space.” The storyteller, however, sits behind the cloth, which creates a special boundary. A small number of props are used as visual complements: for example, a basket, a bell, a candle blown out at the end of the story. Aurally, the voice is used with expression and added to gesture to create a further compelling invitation into the storytelling space. Rachel claims “I am quite a loud person – I purposely change my tone and really drop it to be quite soft … and really use the expression on my face just to change – just to set – just, you know, to set the scene. To take on the mantel ...” She further notes the importance of using particular linguistic cues to begin a story. Thus, the presence of the storyteller was signified in a number of verbal and non-verbal ways, as summarised by Julie Perrin:

You’re telling with absolute beautiful aplomb and expression.
You’ve all got great facial expression, beautiful clear gestures,
lovely vocal contrast … you probably need to know that, like most humans, we need to inhabit, we need to kind of stretch between what we naturally do and what we have to take ourselves to.

These forms of “honouring the role of the storyteller”, as Julie puts it, are iteratively signalled through vocal cues (whispering, repeating a phrase and chanting), prompts (hand gestures, pictures) and gestures, such as rounding off for bread, squaring off for butter and shaping a beehive for honey (Breckinridge Church, Philip Garber, & Rogalski, 2007). Julie explains it thus: “you hang up this banner, play this instrument, you say these words, and they’re all part of helping them cross the threshold of what this … [what] Margret Read MacDonald calls the threshold between the ordinary and the fabulous”. Storytelling features, like chanting, rhyme, rhythm and pacing, further enable novice storytellers to move from the teacher to a storyteller role, while cueing and engaging young listeners. Strategies employed to practise stories, such as ‘passing a story’ and ‘stepping stones’ were also employed as explicit approaches to building narrative assurance (see Kirkby, Faulkner, & Perrin, 2014).

Respect for the storyteller is counterbalanced by the storyteller’s relationship with the listener, articulated by Sue as “a really important space where you respect me as a storyteller. I respect you as a listener by telling you a good story.” For Julie, a ‘good’ story to tell is one “that has a sense of landscape, or visual journey that you can go through.” With practice, as all these elements combine, performance and narrative skills build in the teachers. This process was enhanced through peer support where colleagues watched each other tell stories and discussed responses and questions afterward. In this way, the role of the storyteller is rehearsed, naturalised and shared.

**Storytelling and the development of literacy skills**

Listeners readily participated in storytelling through their anticipation of story, active involvement in the telling and retelling, as well as their engagement beyond the narrative through re-enactment, drawing and writing. However, there were persisting teacher concerns about the curriculum value of storytelling early in the project.

Rachel was keen to know how she might measure the literacy impact of the oral approach, implying that she had seen constructive effects but did not know how to record them or identify causality. Sue remained keen to have a rubric and an identified structure.

Fiona felt that, as she shifted her position from teacher to storyteller, she gave greater attention to the structure and intent of the story:

> I had never done much of [storytelling] before and it was a bit foreign to me. I was used to telling my [own personal] stories, not other people’s stories, it is different. I guess you want to acknowledge that it is someone else’s story. You want to do the best that you can to tell their story. I know you turn it into your own but, I don’t know…
Narrative features and patterns

The teachers identified some children who became bored with repetition, while others eagerly anticipated the retelling of a story. Julie Perrin argued the importance of repetition for children to become their own storytellers. Moreover, a literacy link between oral and written narrative lies in the ability to recognise generic patterns:

The other thing you need to do if you’re going to be a good storyteller is to see the patterns in the stories. You know, we’re living in a culture where we’re watching news stories all the time on television, but what we really need is to see the patterns underneath them. And if you listen to a story more than once, you’ll start to see the patterns.

‘Developing their ear’ and listening for patterns is augmented by a host of other literacy dimensions. Rachel explains her visual strategies for skill-building:

I told my own story, Hansel and Gretel. And throughout the week and the following day, we did a storyboard and we were reflecting on elements of the drawings that they were adding to the storyboard. That there were some parts missing and, or beginnings and endings not being fluid or sequenced.

So today I just got the cards out and we sat in a circle and I didn’t put any pictures on the story cards... and I first demonstrated how I would start to tell part of the story and they came and joined in and did it from start to finish, a really good job and they really listened to each other and were really adding, just letting them tell it … they were letting people tell, even though some people were, might have been condensing some parts of the story. One even said ‘you don’t have six pictures like our storyboard, there’s only five story cards …

Using other forms of creative arts to re-vision the story (in this case, storyboarding) allows Rachel to rehearse and extend the children’s understanding of story. The narratives are becoming integrated into the students’ artwork and creative processes. Rachel asks children to explore the visual ‘gaps’ creatively:

… then I said (whispers) ‘Now go and draw what the gingerbread house would look like’… and they were really quiet about it. But I thought even I would have loved them to have been able to make a gingerbread house. You know, to actually get a box …

As Rachel chunks the narrative and uses art to imagine, the students reconstruct their own interpretations. Rachel consistently uses active verbs to describe the students’ learning – in her reflections, they are listening, reflecting, sequencing, adding, condensing, telling, gridding and mapping versions of stories against each other in ways that inspire her.

The teachers recognise that it is generative to build on student strengths and allow them to choose their own mode of response to a story. For instance, Sue
observes that "Lewis is ... is a drawer. He’s an artist. He doesn’t often get words down." Similarly, Sophie is identified by an unidentified female teacher as using storyboarding to extend the narrative:

Sophie’s storyboard of the boy who turned himself into peanut was really good, very very detailed. She was one of the first ones to finish telling it though. So she’s not interested in retelling it so much as ... she’s telling it through art.

Listeners demonstrate their comprehension in multimodal and agential ways (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). This enables them to transpose content selectively to a different mode, creating a new text from the original.

Moreover, teachers identified awareness of engaging an audience through several samples of children’s written work. Phrases such as, “Hi, I’m (child’s name) and I am going to tell you a story” suggest that the children understand that someone will be ‘listening’ to what they are going to say.

Fiona commented that students in her class became increasingly interested in telling their own stories. She provided a story basket for them to use but it was not long before some created their own props and engaged in quite complex group storytelling.

They made a koala house and then they used that to build up on their story. So they’ve got puppets in there, as well of koalas and wombats and possums and they’ve got some gum leaves and they’re just telling a story around that. They’ve been doing that for over a month now. So they just keep going back to it. They were reading a story about koalas and they are doing some writing on it. But then once we started doing storytelling they wanted to bring that in.

I let them use the rain stick and my scarf, they even do that. And they set it all out in front of them.

**Transitions**

All three teachers recognised the importance of transition into and out of the story, and questioned how they could position the children as intent listeners. The professional conversations with each other and Julie provide opportunities for them to explore the value of verbal cues. Sue shared an early experience:

And the kids were really, really engaged. And then I stopped and I did snip, snap, snout and we stopped and the kids just kept looking at me. And I was kind of like, Yeah, I don’t know what we do now. And they were just staring at me and then they just burst into applause. That was really nice but I am not trying to do a performance.

Like her colleagues, Rachel first began by using storytelling as a standalone experience and found the transition in and out of the story space awkward.
Working with the storyteller Julie, Rachel put in place rituals that helped move between the different classroom roles both she and the children adopted:

… and I think having an actual physical ritual. We dimmed the lights and turned off the lights and sat down…. Actually physically taking something off yourself, you’re physically moving a rope…

She further observes the affective power of the narrative arc; it has a distinctly calming impact on the children, if marked by a closing ritual:

I just wanted to make that smooth transition to ending it and that softness … Let it come. Let it go. And now I want you find yourself a quiet spot on the floor and you’re just going to lie still and we’re going to listen to some music…. And I wanted to get that in place.

**Curation and modification**

Over time, Rachel noted that the children would comment on changes she, sometimes inadvertently, made to the story. Six weeks into the project, she was using the oral story form to provoke discussions around curation, or selection and ordering of events, a form of critical literacy (see Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997). Just as there is a place for critical approaches toward the relationship between reading and viewing, so too there is potential for analysis between the oral and written forms. In particular, young children can be encouraged to consider the illustrator’s interpretation of the story, as well as their own and those of others.

Fiona also began choosing her own stories and telling them first:

I’m really looking at a book and then telling a story. [The children are saying] – I didn’t think [the character] would look like that, visualising it differently.

In this project, we also considered the taking of someone else’s story and telling it to be an act of carrying. The story is open to modification but is not the teller’s own creation.

Sue explained how she had used storyboards to help children to identify the sequence in the story and then tell it to a partner. Some children’s responses to the task suggested an increased awareness of audience and confidence in holding attention:

And they were really slow and I could see their hands going. And there’s such a difference in the way the children perceive how you tell a story. … And a lot of them who were telling it with hand movements, they didn’t even look at [the storyboard]. They didn’t need to, they understood the patterns, how the story worked.

Fiona also worked with storyboards in her classroom and encouraged the students to retell. She shared her delight with the progress of one English as an additional language learner:
Her oral language, just in the past two months. She wasn't even talking to me - now, she's talk, talk, talk. Won't stop talking. It's quite beautiful.

Quite early in the project, one teacher recounted watching a young girl during school assembly. The child’s hands were moving in recognisable gestures used during a previously told story, which led the teacher to think that she was engaged in her own private storytelling session. Although the child imitated the gestures used by the teacher, these are “a creative reworking of the impression he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desires” (Vygotsky, 2004, pp. 11-12).

Several examples of children carrying stories into their homes were also shared in the professional conversations. One parent told teachers that their child had set up a physical space for telling stories and had introduced rituals to signify that a story was being told. While children may act out a story in their play, using the plot and appropriated language to guide them, this action suggested a quite deliberate act by the child to position herself as a powerful orator. It also indicated how the storytelling was moving beyond the classroom walls.

**Conclusion**

The persistent problem of lifting performance in literacy requires both new thinking and learning from best practice internationally. The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010) in the UK gives significant attention to the importance of high quality classroom talk in raising standards in the core subjects as typically measured in national and international tests. Oracy, the ability to express oneself fluently and grammatically in speech, features in high performing systems such as Finland. Its effective development flows on to other literacy domains – reading and writing, as well as soft skills, such as problem solving and communication.

The ‘balanced approach’ to literacy development reflects the need to provide a crafted programme that integrates a range of instructional modes.

A balanced literacy approach is flexible, and that flexibility empowers teachers to tailor what they do for each child each day...Because not all children, tasks, and teachers are the same, teachers must have a full repertoire of strategies for helping children develop literacy and a clear understanding of how and when to implement each strategy (Siegel, as cited in Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 30).

The findings of this small study affirm that this balanced approach should also include the time-honoured traditions of oral storytelling, a practice that is known to impact positively on children’s oral language and story comprehension development (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004). This professional development project provided support for three F-2 teachers as they developed confidence in their own storytelling skills and began to craft a place for oral storytelling within their literacy program.
We asked how teachers in Foundation - Year 2 classrooms might use oral storytelling to expand children's literacy knowledge. Two findings from the study suggest that productive strategies can impact favourably on oral, as well as written and visual capacities in young learners. First, the teachers themselves need to draw from a range of strategies to enact and project the role of storyteller convincingly. The relationship between storyteller and listener is multidimensional and requires modelling, defining, exploration and rehearsal to develop. Second, this enactment can lead to the building and expansion of literacy skills and knowledge as students transpose their storytelling to written and pictorial forms. Shifting from oral language that is readily understood to more abstract written literary language, a child often uses illustrations to make meaning of the text, as found in this study. In oral storytelling, gesture, along with tone, can provide the prompt for this meaning-making when oral language is decontextualised and often highly stylised. When children tell stories, gesture allows them to suggest the mental images they have to the audience, and indicate those for which the listener can add meaning.

In all these ways, storytelling invites listeners and tellers to be creative and critical participants in meaning-making. It is not, however, an ad hoc process, as the teachers in the study have demonstrated. Learning to tell stories well is as important as learning to actively listen, engage and interpret.

The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of Julie Perrin in supporting the project and providing expert knowledge for this paper. They also wish to thank the teachers themselves, who with enormous goodwill and a passion for their work, embarked on this journey to tell stories.

References


Kirkby, J., Faulkner, J., & Perrin, J. (2014). ‘Once there was a …’: Reclaiming storytelling in the middle years. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 22(2), i-x.


