Guest writer for this issue’s column on Using Children’s Books is Dr. Ann E. Fordham, Assistant Professor in Reading and Early Childhood Education at Shippensburg University.

Dr. Fordham brings to her teaching a background rich with experiences in the development of literacy skills and attitudes among primary grade children. In this article, she describes how teachers can help create appropriate early reading content by developing teacher-written narratives. She distinguishes these narratives from what we typically consider to be stories and introduces a technique that will help us influence children’s reading, writing, and oral language abilities.

THE BENEFITS OF TELLING PERSONAL NARRATIVES

By Ann E. Fordham

Come in and enjoy listening to some stories in a first grade classroom. Take a chair near the children who are seated on the carpet. Observe the inviting, well-stocked library area with a wide variety of attractively displayed children’s trade books and student made books. Note that, in this classroom, books and stories are given prominent place and honor. The teacher reads daily to the students and provides time for them to read individually and in groups. In order to further extend story awareness, there is also a time for telling stories, or more precisely, personal narratives, accounts based on the students’ actual experiences. Both teacher and children make up and tell narratives. The purpose of this article is to describe their storytelling efforts and the resulting benefits for the children. Let us listen now as the teacher gains the attention of the group by telling them that she has planned a story for them about the morning they made applesauce. Her story begins...

**Applesauce**

One morning Mrs. Lockett’s class made applesauce. The children peeled the apples. Mrs. Lockett helped to cut them up and to take out the stem, core, and seeds. Next they put some water and the apples into a large pot and cooked them slowly. Then they added some honey and mashed them.

“**When can we eat the applesauce?**” the children asked Mrs. Lockett.

“Well!” she said. “Yum!”

The children respond to their teacher with pleasure and excitement about the story she has fashioned especially for them. They are delighted to hear a story about themselves, with their very own actions, words, and feelings expressed so well by their teacher. Such a story addresses the young child’s interest in self and the familiar environs of home and school. Thus, pleasure and enjoyment are important benefits for children as they listen to these tailor-made narratives.

**ORGANIZATION OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND STORIES**

Personal narratives, such as the applesauce story, have a simplicity of organization that is not only appealing but also particularly suitable for young children. The organization of personal narratives can be a simple sequence of events. The essence of personal narrative is a recounting of true events as they originally occurred along with an evaluation of these events by the narrator (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Thus, the structure of
personal narratives reflects a sequential unfolding of events.

In contrast, stories are typically thought of as fictional and include the features of setting, characters, and plot with problem, goal, and resolution. These elements of problem, goal, and resolution constitute a complexity of organization that is difficult for young children to manage, as evidenced by their retellings of fictional stories. The organization of personal narratives and stories overlay when a narrator is recounting events that, in fact, do include a problem, goal, and resolution. Inclusion of these elements in a narrative depends entirely on their occurrence in the actual events being recounted. For example, in the narrative about the applesauce, there is an absence of problem, goal, and resolution. These simply did not occur in the situation being recounted. Thus, the organizing principle for this narrative is the temporal sequence of events involved in making applesauce.

Although there are differences between the two, both story and personal narrative do have in common the hallmarks of beginning, middle, and ending. These are the unique features which children need to apprehend about story and narrative organization. These features of beginning, middle, and ending are apparent in the story of making applesauce. The beginning occurs in the opening sentence, a concise summary statement of what the story is about. (The class made applesauce.) This opening makes reference to important concerns like who (Mrs. Lockett's class), when (one morning), and where (in the class is inferred). The middle of the narrative is a development of what happened. Therefore, the sequence of events that occurred in making the applesauce is recounted. The ending is an evaluative note sounded in the final word "Yum!" informing the listener of the worth of the experience. The applesauce was delicious, and that judgment is an important part of the narrative. Without that final "Yum!" or some other kind of value judgment, the story would lack emotional appeal, and the listener would be left with a feeling of "So what?" (Labov, 1972, p. 95).

TELLING NARRATIVES

Awareness of the differences and similarities between personal narratives and stories is useful for teachers. It is helpful to know the simplicity of telling a sequence of events in a personal narrative versus the complexity of recounting a fictional story. Yet the point is not to tell young children about these distinctions or to teach them to recognize them. Instead, the point is to encourage teachers to tell personal narratives to children. By telling narratives, teachers demonstrate their form and content. Children recognize the familiar content of teacher-made narratives, and, given opportunity and assistance, they can make up similar stories.

Thus, hearing personal narratives benefits children. They develop a sense that affirms, "We can do that too!" The teacher bolsters the children's feeling of confidence by providing time each day for a few students to come forward and share a story of their own. In preparation, she has talked with them about making up stories from the events in their daily lives. She has told them that everyone has experiences that make good stories. Also, she tells them that making up these stories takes planning and thinking. Before calling on anyone to share a story, the teacher says: "Did anyone think about and plan a story for today?" The students understand that it's best not to volunteer if you aren't prepared. In response to their teacher's question about having a story to share, a few students volunteer. Among them is a little girl named Suzanne who comes forward and sits on a small chair facing her classmates. Once she has their attention, she begins her story...

"Yesterday my dad and my brother went hunting. My mom and me stayed home. The horn got stuck on Dad's truck. Every time he opened the hood the horn started up. He had to pull out the wires to get the horn to stop."

"I'll bet that was a funny sight!" responds the teacher with a broad smile.

"It was. We laughed. And we have a new puppy, too," adds Suzanne.

"That's really neat! That would make another story by itself," affirms the teacher without encouraging her to continue. With this comment, the teacher is directing Suzanne towards the realization that stories are distinct from conversation in which one may ramble from one topic to another. Stories deal with a specific topic and stick to it.

WRITING AND DICTATING NARRATIVES

Telling personal narratives leads naturally into writing narratives. Teachers can write class-experience storybooks. For example, the applesauce story could become a big book using enlarged print with the children illustrating each page. The class would then have a collection of teacher-written experience stories to add to their library. These could serve as models for personal narrative and be read frequently to the children.

Children may also benefit from dictating narrative accounts of their experiences. Group dictations of shared events provide opportunities for teachers and children to experience the writing process and the creation of narratives together. Teachers can be alert to incidents which lend themselves to story. The following is an example of a group-dictated
narrative based on a humorous class experience:

The Coca Cola Drill by L's Children

When we were at rest time, Mrs. Gilchrest heard a tiny beep, beep, beep. She thought, "Fire Drill."

She whispered, "Children, line up quickly and quietly. Seth, hold your shoes."

We lined up quickly and quietly. We opened the door. It was the coke truck backing up. Beep, beep, beep. That's what Mrs. Gilchrest heard.

The End

The process of creating this narrative involved the teacher and children's recall of the experience. Their recollections were first listed on chart paper. Next the teacher provided guidance so that the narrative would reflect the events that occurred and have a beginning, middle, ending, and evaluation. Guidance occurred in the form of questions that would direct the children to attend to important features of narrative organization. Such questions might include:

- What would make a good beginning?
- What was the first thing we did?
- What happened next?
- Which are the most important things to include in our story?
- Are there some things we can leave out?
- How do we want to end this story?

Dictated narratives can become part of the children's early reading material. Such material has the appeal of familiarity of content and simplicity of form. Also, these dictated narratives can serve as models for children to tell and to write more stories. Thus, the benefits for children of telling personal narratives are multiple: pleasure, appeal of relevant content, simplicity of organization, development of confidence, stimulation for dictations and writing, and creation of early reading material.

References


Bibliography

The following short list cites some children's books whose themes center around pleasures, problems, and other noteworthy events in children's daily lives. These books, appropriate for the primary grades, are fine exemplars for children and teachers working together on developing their own narratives.

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