



The role of stories in literacy development



ECE resources

We are a story-making species. Story is how we document our lives. It is our history; it is our herstory. It is how we form our identities as families, as communities, as nations. It is how we shape what we do and it determines how we react to people with different stories. Story is communication, but it is more than that, it forms us.

Joy Cowley¹, 2018, p. 9

The above quote by renowned children's author, Joy Cowley, sums up the important role that stories play in our lives. Stories are important aspects of cultural learning through which children learn to make meaning and sense of their experiences and the world². Children are immersed in the stories that surround them from birth, or before, in their family home environments. Children learn about themselves and their identities through the stories that they hear and tell.

Stories are diverse

Stories are found all over the world, but there is no one way to share stories with children³. Stories might conjure up images of adults reading books to children, but stories can also be conveyed through oral storytelling, songs, dance, role play, folktales and legends, everyday conversations, jokes, and Bible stories. In some cultures, artefacts such as traditional carvings, drawings, textiles, and weaving are also examples of ways that stories might be shared with young children in their communities.

Stories encompass embodied, oral, and written literacies

Stories are an important aspect of literacy for all children in ECE settings. Stories are diverse and situated in culture, encompassing embodied, spoken, and written forms of making and sharing meaning. Reading books and oral storytelling are two ways that teachers can share stories with children in ECE settings. Children are also storytellers and actors, and it is important to allow them opportunities to initiate and communicate about the stories that matter to them during everyday play and conversations.

Stories might take many forms for making and communicating meaning in ECE settings, including oral, written, and embodied modes. They might include action songs, prayers (karakia), everyday conversations, mark-making and art, pretend play, animal/vehicle/puppet play, learning stories, and book reading. Children follow stories through watching, listening, and engaging in storytelling using their bodies in space as well as gestures, noises, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and words.

Storybook reading

Research has consistently shown that shared book reading between adults and children has benefits for children's oral language development, as well as their executive function skills⁴. Reading books together can support aspects of learning such as joint attention, listening comprehension, memory, vocabulary, and narrative telling and retelling, as well as facilitating social-emotional relationships. Responsive, reciprocal interactions are fundamental to supporting children's learning during shared book reading. Sharing books with children in a way that encourages conversation, or 'dialogic reading', is one aspect of rich, responsive storybook interactions with children⁵. Key features of dialogic reading include asking questions, providing opportunities to talk about the pictures, pausing to give children opportunities to

talk about the story, and extending upon their ideas. In contrast, reading books to children word-for-word without inviting children to actively participate in the story interactions has fewer benefits for children's developing oral language and early literacy.

Oral storytelling

Oral storytelling is common in many cultures of the world, and it continues to be a highly valued practice for young children in indigenous communities, including Māori and Pacific ECE contexts⁶. Telling and re-telling stories can also support children's oral language and socioemotional development. Evidence shows that stories involving talk about the past, or 'reminiscing', can also have positive benefits for children's vocabulary, phonological awareness, narrative skills, and emotional development⁷. Many children love to hear, tell, and re-tell stories about themselves and people, places, and things that they know well. Learning stories are one potential resource for supporting children to talk about their past experiences⁸, situating the child as a central character in the story being re-told.

Children as storytellers

Teachers and parents play a crucial role in reading and telling stories to children, but it is important to remember that children are storytellers too. Even before children can talk, they make signals through their embodied gestures, noises, and eye contact to tell us things. Children are competent and capable of observing and participating in stories in many different ways, such as play. Helicopter storytelling, based on the work of early childhood educator and researcher Vivian Gussin Paley⁹, is one approach to supporting children as storytellers and story actors. It incorporates embodied, spoken, and written literacies and children share their stories using whatever language they have, sometimes using only a single word and actions. Teachers invite children to tell their stories, writing the stories down so the child can later enact their stories with their peers¹⁰.

Reading and telling stories is a critical aspect of early literacy development for young children of all ages, starting in early childhood¹¹. Teachers play a vital role in providing opportunities for children to engage in stories, as well as intentionally ensuring story-sharing interactions that foster and extend social relationships, oral language, and understandings about the world through oral narratives and books.

Endnotes

- 1 Cowley, J. (2018). The power of story: A New Zealand Book Council lecture. New Zealand Book Council, Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa. (Click here to read the lecture or listen to a recording of it – scroll down the page to 2018).
- 2 Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press; Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- 3 Kerry-Moran, K., & Aerila, J. (2019). Introduction: The strength of stories. In K. Kerry-Moran, & J. Aerila (Eds.), *Story in children's lives contributions of the narrative mode to early childhood development, literacy, and learning* (pp. 1-8). Switzerland: Springer.
- 4 Dickinson, D. K., Griffith, J. A., Michnick Golinkoff, R., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2012). How reading books fosters language development around the world. *Child Development Research*, 2012.

- 5 Reese, E. (2013). Tell me a story: Sharing stories to enrich your child's world. Oxford University Press; Reese, E. (2019). Learning language from books. In J. S. Horst, & J. V.K. Torkildsen (Eds.), International handbook of language acquisition (pp. 462-484). Routledge.
- 6 Rameka, L., Glasgow, A., & Fitzpatrick, M. (2016). Our voices: Culturally responsive, contextually located infant and toddler caregiving. *Early Childhood Folio*, 20(2), 3.
- 7 Salmon, K., & Reese, E. (2016). The benefits of reminiscing with young children. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(4), 233-238.
- 8 Reese, E., Gunn, A., Bateman, A., & Carr, M. (2019). Teacher-child talk about learning stories in New Zealand: A strategy for eliciting children's complex language. *Early Years*, 1-16.
- 9 Paley, V. G. (1990). *The boy who would be a helicopter*. Harvard University Press 1990.
- 10 For an example of how this approach works in an ECE setting, read Davis, E. (2020). Helicopter storytelling. *He Kupu: The Word*, 6(3), 3-7.
- 11 McNaughton, S. (2020). *The Literacy Landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand: What we know, what needs fixing and what we should prioritise*. Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Education Scientific Advisor. Retrieved from: <https://cpb-ap-se2.wp.mucdn.com/blogs.auckland.ac.nz/dist/f/688/files/2020/01/The-Literacy-Landscape-in-Aotearoa-New-Zealand-Full-report-final.pdf>

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY**Dr Amanda White**

Amanda is a Researcher | Kairangahau at the New Zealand Council of Educational Research (NZCER). Her research interest centres on early childhood communication and literacy, including using video methods to explore children's multimodal story interactions in a culturally and linguistically diverse community. Previously, Amanda worked as a speech-language therapist with children, families/whānau and teachers in family homes and early childhood education or school contexts.