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### Tātai Aho Rau

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#### WHERE DO STORIES LIVE? BUILDING ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH STORYTELLING IN AN EARLY YEARS CONTEXT

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eFellow's Research Paper

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## The background story

This year I have been fortunate enough to undertake a research project at [Mairtown Kindergarten](#) as part of my [Dr. Vince Ham eFellowship](#) through [CORE Education](#).

The research began in January 2016, but the real story began further back in June 2015, when I had the opportunity to visit the [Opal School](#) in Portland, Oregon. What an amazing school this is. The school is situated in a children's museum, and they teach children from 3-11 years. However, what stood out for me was that they teach all ages using a play based curriculum. They draw heavily on the arts and they utilise the power of storytelling.

One of the things I learnt from the teachers at the Opal School was that they felt the craft of writing is a demanding challenge for children of all ages, yet they observed that when they offered arts and materials to children in a playful manner as part of their writing environments, something special happened. The children became more engaged, time on writing tasks increased, and interest in writing was also much higher.

On leaving the Opal School and returning to Mairtown Kindergarten, I knew I had to look at utilising some of the learning I had experienced within my own community. Winning the Dr. Vince Ham eFellowship became the perfect opportunity for me. I had the support to research into how the arts and creativity could play a role in encouraging engagement in storytelling in early childhood, and to explore if storytelling in this manner could enhance oral language skills.



*Figure 1 - Classroom at the Opal School, Portland, Oregon for senior children (11 years)*



## Why was I so interested in oral language development?

Firstly, preschool and early school years are crucial for the development of children's oral language, and that strong oral language development at an early age means the likelihood of a child becoming strong in literacy is very high<sup>1</sup>. Basically, oral language is what gives children the foundation for their literacy development.

The second reason stemmed from speaking to local new-entrant teachers, and their suggestion that more students than previously are entering school (at five+ years) with inadequate language skills, meaning their oral language knowledge is not established enough to support the curriculum and aims of the teachers at school. When I think about how children entering school are expected to become fluent readers and writers within a relatively short time frame, I realise this is extremely difficult and demotivating for students without well-developed oral language skills. Furthermore, children cannot be expected to be fluent thinkers – a real necessity in today's world – if they do not have the oral language skills to support their thinking.

The Children's Commissioner states that handing the power over to children to tell their stories freely and democratically, whilst also knowing that someone is listening and cares, helps them become capable, confident, included, and responsible members of our broader society, increasing their sense of belonging in the community, and promoting good citizenship, agency and self-advocacy skills<sup>2</sup>.



*Figure 2 - Two children work together on a story that they titled 'A story about scary dinosaurs'*

Here are my reasons for encouraging oral language, but why did I plan to use storytelling in order to do this? I have always loved stories; we share stories with friends and colleagues and I believe storytelling and story making is a fundamental aspect of communication in today's world. Jerome Bruner goes further when

<sup>1</sup> G. Shiel, Á. Cregan, A. McGough and P. Archer, "Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)", *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)*, Research Report No. 14, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> 'State of care – 2015: What we learnt from monitoring Child, Youth and Family', *Office Children's Commissioner*, August 2015.

he tells us that we learn spoken language so we can share our stories<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps a little naively I also believed this would be simple; did not all children enjoy telling stories? Wouldn't this come naturally to them? Here was when my research took an unexpected turn and I encountered my own assumptions head on. Let me explain this in a little more detail.

The first cycle and methodology of my research was going to be relatively simple. I was going to provoke the children's ideas with creative resources, encourage storytelling, watch the oral language skills of the children increase and job done! My research would be complete. Of course, this is not how it happened at all. What I did not factor into my methodology was 'misunderstanding'. As the teacher, I had the assumption, along with my colleagues, that the children had a clear understanding of what stories were. They had an understanding, but this was very different to mine, and I did not realise this until I wondered why I couldn't encourage the children to share any of their stories with me. Was my research project going to fail at the first hurdle? Desperate to bring things back on track I began to talk about stories with the children; What are stories? Where do you find stories? This is when our joint misunderstandings became apparent. The answers I was getting from these questions were always the same. No matter who I asked or how many times I asked, I was told stories are in books, the bookshelf and the library. After lots of reflective thinking (and a fair bit of panicking) I decided that what I needed to was something actually quite simple; I needed to ask the right question. The right question turned out to be '*Where do stories live?*'.



Figure 3 - A story being created through loose parts

At the time, I had no idea just how important and relevant to my research this question would be. We worked on this question for days, weeks and months. Even now I still revert to this question when I engage in storytelling with children. The children certainly grabbed this question with both hands. What I noticed was by slowing things down and letting the children focus on this question in a collaborative manner they

<sup>3</sup> J. Bruner, "Life as narrative", *Social Research*, Vol. 54. No. 1, 1987.



were able to unpack and explore their ideas together of what stories were, and to clarify their understandings. The children needed to understand what stories were, before they could recognise that what they were saying, drawing, creating, or thinking was a story. As a kindergarten teacher, I knew we were getting collaborative understanding when one morning a girl excitedly ran up to me, *'Christine, I had a dream last night and when I woke up I thought, I think my dream could be a story!'*



*Figure 4 - Explaining and retelling a story, created through a drawing to a close friend*

I'd like to share an example of this deepened understanding with a conversation I heard a group of children discussing independently, without any input from me. The question they were discussing was of course, where stories live?

**Max H:** *Stories come from my mouth, some come from words, some from pictures.*

**Wolfgang:** *Stories aren't just in books, they come from Lego as the Lego is magic.*

**Amaya:** *Stories come from inside of me.*

**Sadie:** *Yes, you can get stories in your dreams, because I've had them.*

**Sienna:** *Hmm, you see stories in your dreams and then you think about them. I can tell stories with a picture or even clay. Your brain gives you the ideas, the picture and sculpture gives you a little bit more of an idea for a story.*

**Max C:** *Stories are also in your imaginations.*

**Sadie:** *That's in your brain Max! Or they can be real, like real life stories, not made up. My story about James lives in my heart cause it's a special story.*

This thoughtful conversation highlights the deepened and rich understanding the children have come to about stories, through just one simple question. Perhaps not so surprisingly, it was at this time that story

telling really took off at Mairtown and the children began to share their own stories, with the knowledge that they were stories. They also began to utilise many of the creative resources on offer to them in the environment from Lego, collage, clay, music, drama, songs, maps and blocks, the possibilities for story making were endless.

## What changed?

One hurdle I have encountered is interpreting the data from my research. Due to the fact that this is action research, is based on narratives and is qualitative, and because we do not test in ECE, it is very hard to definitively state that storytelling has improved the oral language skills for our children. Nevertheless, I would like to share my observations that arose from my data analysis.

Firstly, I noticed how children were exploring and experimenting with language more. They began to use many descriptive words and words they may have heard from friends or peers, these being new words for them. I saw how the language used in stories was very different from the language of conversation.

A second observation was that as children told stories, and began to do so on a regular basis, they became more expressive. Expressive both verbally with words and language, and non-verbally with gestures and facial expressions for instance. Alongside this, the more stories children told, the more their confidence increased and the clarity of their voice improved. As they gained more confidence, interestingly I noted how this supported children in taking some risks with their stories. Children began to try out words and ideas that they may not have been quite brave enough to do at the very beginning of this research.

Storytelling has become a part of who we are now at Mairtown. It is firmly embedded into our curriculum because we have seen the benefits it adds to our programme and to the children's learning. An example of this is a boy who sat down at a table which had been set up with a mathematical provocation. Due to the fact our children are now very used to creating stories, this child didn't see it as a mathematical provocation, he saw it as an opportunity for storytelling. He went on to tell me a wonderful story about an ant meeting a cricket and a rhinoceros beetle, who became friends. *'But oh no! They came across a tornado, got ripped apart and died!'* One interesting thing to note about this particular child was that at the beginning of my research he would only tell a story about one-two sentences long. However, this detailed story was over a minute and a half.

## Surprises

I believe all researchers encounter surprises, and I was certainly no exception. I encountered findings I didn't think I would, and I learnt a lot about myself as a teacher.

Firstly, through their stories I discovered more about the children, their passions, their interests, their worries; the things that delighted them as well as the things that scared them. Knowledge of our children is such an important aspect of any teacher's role, and this discovery really excited me. When I knew what motivated a child's interest and supported them in this interest, they would share stories with me about that interest. This in turn enabled me to find out more of their other interests, and a cycle began. I realised that through their storytelling I was able to see the uniqueness of each child at Mairtown more than I had ever done before. I was developing a much deeper connection with the children through their stories.

As time progressed, I also observed that children started to use stories in different ways. Their stories went from the imaginative to the real, and sometimes a combination of both. Many children began to share very personal aspects of their lives through their stories, which again deepened my relationship with the child and their whānau. Some of the themes in the stories were repeated, for instance characters getting lost, friendship worries, and many stories about death. This led me to wonder if the children were using stories to make sense of their fears, friendships, fantasies, anything that was on top for them. I soon recognised that not all stories were good! Stories were 'truth and life', children poured themselves, their hopes and their worries out through their stories.

Here is an example of such a story. This particular girl arrived at kindergarten one day, gathered some pens and paper and began to draw a series of pictures. After a short while she stapled the pictures up, came to me and said 'I have a story, will you write my words'. Here is her beautiful story, 'Once upon a time, my little boy called baby James got sick and died. Baby James was my brother. My little brother was in a little bed, he had a lovely little dream, he was sad because he missed his big sister. He has a blanket and a pillow...James lives in heaven, that's where babies go when they die.'



Figure 5 - One of the drawings of James

This story, I feel, enabled this child through her drawings, which came first for her, to put into words some of what she remembers about her brother whilst allowing her to freely express her feelings for him. When I shared this story with the mother, after some tears, she told me it would have been James's birthday that week.

This leads me onto one of my second surprises. I learnt a lot about myself as teacher. As in the words of Stephen Covey, I learnt to listen 'with the intent to understand not with the intent to reply'<sup>4</sup>. This really was significant learning for me. When I reflect on the very beginning of this research I was a teacher who asked questions, the right questions I believed, but the children's storytelling has taught me that perhaps I was not such a good listener. As the children's stories started to flow, I found that I didn't know what to do with all their ideas and stories. At times when children shared personal thoughts with me I was unsure of how to act. Did I reply or comment, did I try to solve the children's problems, what should I do? In the end, I observed the other children, and took their lead; my role then became clearer. I saw how other children asked questions when they wanted clarification of a story, how they were non-judgmental, how they empathised (often with a small gesture), but they also moved on from the story quickly. The children sharing their stories were doing so in a social way, they wanted others to be part of their story, to listen, but that's all. They did not want someone to have an opinion, to solve or fix things for them. This may have even changed the content of the story totally. As Peck states, true listening requires a setting aside of oneself<sup>5</sup> and I learnt that if my mouth was open, I wasn't listening.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The seven habits of highly effective people: restoring the character ethic*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Peck, *The road less traveled: a new psychology of love, traditional values, and spiritual growth*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.





Figure 6 - Puppets are a natural storytelling resource

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shared the beginning, and the middle of my story. Now it is time to share with you the end of the story and sum up, or rather leave you with some things to think about, some of the things I learnt about storytelling through my research.

Firstly, honour stories for what they are, as they are wonderful learning opportunities, a way in which children can expand their oral language and literacy skills, but they also allow children to share a little bit of themselves with you. Stories enable us all to make connections, to bring us together, to learn about each other's cultures and values. Through stories we become more knowledgeable individuals.

Be a good listener, listen with the intent to understand, not with the intent to reply.

Enter each story with a child assuming you have something to learn, be open and be prepared to be amazed, because I can guarantee you will be.

Use the arts, they are a wonderful medium for children in terms of remembering, giving them ideas, and sometimes just taking the focus of other eyes directly off from them. As I heard a teacher at the Opal School state, *'The arts nurture images, images nurture words and words nurture stories.'*

As a last point, remember when a child finishes a story, think of them like the authors that they are, with many more stories to tell.

Finally, I'd like to finish my story with a beautiful quote that I discovered in the middle of my research. This highlighted for me that there is more to stories than meets the eye. 'If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> B. H. Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.



## References

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