

CHAPTER 2

I Need People: Storytelling in a Second-Grade Classroom

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"I've got a joke," says David, a handsome, 7-year-old African-American boy. He smiles at his audience of classmates sitting on the floor before him, 2 months into their second-grade year. "Is it one of your long ones?" someone asks. "Yeah!" David replies. The audience shifts into more comfortable positions, settling in for a long story with obvious delight.

During this performance, I, the teacher, remain unsettled. The unspoken, but firmly rooted rules of sharing time have been toppled by a 7-year-old, and I'm not sure what I should do about it. Some of these rules, such as the appropriate length of a share and acceptable topics, were formed in the children's early years of schooling and came with them as they entered my second-grade classroom. Other rules were negotiated as this new class came into contact with my expectations and practices, for example, the acceptability of jokes as a topic for sharing time. I had agreed that we could share jokes. However, David's jokes did not fit into the category of jokes that I or his classmates expected.

I brought my discomfort to the BTRS. They responded with curiosity and great interest. My contact with the teachers and university researchers in the group helped me to recognize that David's jokes represented real intellectual work on his part, and provided me with the support and the courage to allow David to continue with his storytelling. This was fortunate for David, the rest of the children in the class, and me, as oral storytelling became a lively and important part

of our curriculum for the rest of the year. This is the story of what I learned from David and his classmates.

SHARING TIME

Sharing time is a very common routine in many elementary classrooms. At first glance, it appears to be fairly simple and straightforward: Children take the sharing chair in front of the class and tell a story to their classmates, often an account of a family event or a sleepover with a friend or the demonstration of a new toy. Teachers shape it in various ways in order to reap the many potential benefits for the individual child and classroom culture. Sharing time may be one of the few times in a busy day when a child can choose a topic and create a fairly lengthy oral text on it (Cazden, 1988). And by listening to these stories, teachers can gain insights into the experiences and cultures of the children in their classroom that can provide guidelines for developing relevant curriculum (McCabe, 1997). The intermingling of individual children's stories during whole-class, sharing-time events creates a shared imaginative world specific to that classroom culture and to which each child has contributed as a storyteller and audience member (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Through the act of telling a story or listening to the story of another, children acquire skills in crafting and listening to lengthy, complex, and interesting texts. In addition to the development of oral language abilities, these skills also carry over to facilitate the development of some reading and writing skills. It is for these reasons that oral storytelling has been a favorite classroom activity for me and the children in my classes throughout the years.

However, there are many features of sharing time that are both well accepted by participants and at the same time highly implicit. I was not the only one who recognized that, despite the storytelling expertise being displayed by David, certain rules about this well-routinized classroom event were being broken. In the beginning, David's attempts at jokes were met with many grumbles from the audience. The unwritten rule about length appeared to be "speak for less than 2 minutes," for at that point children began to look at me to intercede, many even mumbling, "When is he going to be done?"

The next few sharing times were begun with my stating that children could speak for as long as they wanted during sharing time. Eventually the children relaxed their view of the acceptable-length-of-share rule, and they began to look forward to David's jokes.

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I present this excerpt from a story David told during this time, in order to provide the flavor of his stories. The story to this point has three girls following a mysterious old lady throughout a village, and uses lively rhythmic language to chronicle the movement of the children, such as in these lines:

So they ran down the street
Up the corner
Past the railroad track
Down the village
Until they saw her again.

And later in the story:

So they ran past the . . .
Past the woods.
They ran past the garden.
Through the woods
Back home.

David relates the first face-to-face meeting of the girls and the woman this way:

They ran back to the village.
And she (the old woman) was still there.
Kate had a fish hook to get her by a mile.
And so she threw it.
And she turned into something.
She turned into an eagle.
Kelly screamed like nobody you ever heard before.
She screamed so loud the earth began to shake.

All of David's stories were filled with similarly wonderful uses of language and imagery. His style was fueled by and organized around the delighted responses of his audience, who would laugh, boo, hiss, or respond verbally at appropriate points. Kate and Kelly were both characters in the story, as well as characters with the names of children in the classroom. David's technique of including the names of various children in the plots seemed to create a shared investment in the jokes and their outcomes. I wondered if by calling these "jokes," David was highlighting the importance of direct audience reaction to his stories, an important aspect of the telling of the kind of jokes I was used to.

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As Christmas vacation approached, the class had developed a satisfying interactive rhythm during these stories, with David as storyteller (no other child had attempted to tell a story) and the audience as comfortable, involved, experienced respondent. We could have continued quite happily in this relationship for the rest of the year, but David wasn't finished developing the genre. He challenged the inviolable conventions and pushed through unseen barriers again in a way that was the next obvious step, but that I would never have seen on my own.

I NEED PEOPLE

One day, after taking the sharing seat at the front of the room, David announced, "For this story I need people. Who wants to be my story?" Before this, David had used some unwritten yet democratic method for choosing classmates to be characters in his stories. Since children often begged him to be included, I assumed that, when David said he needed people, he was just being more visible about this process of choosing characters. I thought he wanted them to escalate the bids for inclusion. But he had something different in mind. The children he chose, two boys and a girl, were instructed to stand and act out his story. As David told the story, his chosen peers performed for the whole class. This served to accentuate the issues of anger, humor, and other emotions expressed in the story. In addition, it elevated the audience response and engagement to a new level.

As an example, David told the following story in January, soon after he had transformed his storytelling into a participatory activity. After spending several minutes choosing his actors and giving them brief stage directions, he began his story.

David: Once upon a time there lived a royal prince. He liked his palace . . . castle. One day another prince, . . . well, Bill's the prince.

Bill: Well, where should I go?

David: Anywhere. Then the prince had come and seen what his royal palace was like. And then another . . . another. . . . There was a king who came. . . . He had a great . . . he had a great king hat. And he always wore boots . . . every single day. And there was another boy. There was a little boy who . . . who had . . . who never, who didn't have a family. The prince had come out. . . . The prince came out and said to

the boy, "Well, are you hun . . . do you have a father and mother?" And the boy . . . the little boy said no . . . And then all of a sudden this horse . . . this horse trotted along. (Jason, playing the horse, crawls on all fours and makes loud horse sounds.) The horse was very excited. Because today was his birthday. He always [unintelligible] (Lots of noise from Jason. David is hard to hear.) And the royal prince said to him, "Heel boy heel." And Ja . . . and the horse stopped. Like a thousand dollar bills. Like a cannon ball. The horse was very un . . . This was very bad for the horse. The prince was put on punishment by the kind, by his, the prince's father. One day a prince came. She had polka dots on.

Child: Princess, you mean.

David: And she always weared polka dots because she liked polka dots a lot. The horse was very excited to see her. (lots of horse noises from Jason) He went over to her and pretended like he was a dog. (Jason makes horse noises.)

Girl: You're acting like a dog, horse.

Jason: Thank you.

David: And the horse stops. (loudly) And he flabbergas, he was flabbergasted! Another prince came. She had—wow—you could talk about her! She had some wild pants on. (lots of laughter) I mean talking real wild. And Duncan, the king, Duncan, he was the one who had brown [unintelligible]. He said to her, "Well young lady. What's your name?" And the prince said, "I don't got no name." (said with speed and weird intonation) (lots of laughing and talking in audience) And the horse said, "She gots a name. (again, with strange intonation) Her name is Philadelphia." (lots of laughing and talking) And then along came a big, big . . . big, I mean talking some big time . . . giant. (more laughing) Jason the horse was so afraid he ran, he went galloping away. (scared horse noises) Like a runaway hamster. (Jason makes more noise, runs around wildly.) Stop. Cut. Cut it.

Jason: Daniel who was . . . very the brave person . . . to fight this king . . . to fight this dragon. He had a sword. But he didn't fight with the sword. He fights with words.

Daniel: Hallelujah. (points fingers at girl playing the giant/dragon; lots of laughing)

David: He said hallelujah every time to the giant. The giant got bored and said, OK, OK come on come on. Stop this non-

sense. (Daniel continues to repeat hallelujah.) And then the prince, the knight stopped the nonsense. So along came her brother. He was so big. Hey dude, what's up? Bill, you're not the giant.

Bill: I'm not?

David: He was actor Daniel. (Lots of commotion. David's narration hard to hear. Some sort of fighting is going on.) Then the giant had no more brothers. The End.

Although the story is somewhat difficult to follow from the transcript, it was coherent and very much appreciated when actually presented to the audience of second graders. "I need people" stories became an immediate hit, but they remained a genre unique to David. His classmates continued to describe a weekend trip, discuss an upcoming slumber party, or talk about other real-life events in routine ways when it was their turn to share.

I was curious to know what other children would do with this genre, or whether other genres might develop if other children felt free to produce fictional narratives during sharing time. In the middle of January, I announced that we were no longer having sharing time, but storytelling time. Children could tell any kind of story they wanted, true or made-up, in any way they liked. Sharing time immediately changed. Although some children continued to tell narratives of real-life events, most began to tell fictional stories. Some told what we called "sit and tells," where the storyteller tells a story to an audience seated before the child. However, most children told "I need people" stories, with classmates performing the story as it was told. This genre was always signified by the child taking possession of the sharing chair at the front of the room and announcing, "I need people." By the end of the year, David's classmates became experienced "I need people" storytellers, with almost every child in the class, including the children who rarely spoke voluntarily, producing one of these stories at some point during the second half of the year.

David, however, remained the master. He developed a style that was theatrically and linguistically engaging. He played with multisyllabic words, often taken from our curriculum, and made them seem new and delightful. For instance:

"And the horse stops. He was flabbergasted!"

"And her name is . . . Philadelphia."

He also created imaginative similes, often making connections between events in his stories and classroom events. For example:

"And the horse stopped . . . like a thousand dollar bill like a cannon ball."

"And the horse was so afraid he ran . . . he went galloping away . . . like a runaway hamster." [The classroom hamster had recently escaped.]

He also creatively integrated content from our classroom curriculum into his stories, demonstrating a deep understanding of that content. For instance, the story printed earlier was told just after a unit on Dr. Martin Luther King and included the following lines:

"Daniel who was very . . . the brave person . . . to fight this king . . . to fight this dragon. He had a sword. But he didn't fight with the sword. He fights with words."

LEARNING FROM STORIES

David's ability to integrate aspects of school, home, and familiar literature into his stories was highly developed, reflecting a depth of understanding that other school activities did not highlight. With time, the other children began incorporating some of these stylistic devices into their oral and written stories as well, and their stories became much richer and more complex as a result. The rest of the class members were improving their linguistic and narrative skills thanks to David. But they also were contributing to David's acquisition of other ways of telling stories, ways that were important to school success.

David's stories were very loosely constructed. Events did not necessarily follow one from the other, characters would be introduced and then never mentioned again, and some problems might be established but never resolved. It may be that the looseness of his narrative structure was necessary to allow the imagery, metaphor, and linguistic play to come to the forefront in his storytelling. But a tighter form of narrative construction would be required in many future school activities, and David had not yet displayed an ability to produce this kind of story, even though I had attempted to help him develop tighter story construction during our individual writing conferences. However, many of the other children in the class were pro-

ducing stories with a more central organization to their plot, and David was not only hearing this type of story organization from them, but also acting in the stories.

Many of his classmates' stories related to an issue that apparently was very important to these children, that of gender relationships. Can boys and girls play together? Are there activities that are only for boys or only for girls? These were important concerns for these children, and these themes continued to arise in their "I need people" stories until the theme almost became a cliché. The movement in narrative form and in content development that characterized the week-to-week progression of the "I need people" form seemed to become stuck. David helped bring closure to this line of story when he one day produced a marvelously tight, carefully crafted story in which the boys end up playing Barbies for the rest of their lives and the girls are left playing Nintendo forever. He apparently had become impatient with the gender relationship theme, and he cleverly resolved it by deftly using the more tightly constructed narrative genre that many of the other children regularly used.

David's "gender story," told in March, on a day when torrential rains had created a flood in our classroom, follows:

David: Once, there was three girls named Jamie, Jessica, and Joanna. One day, they went over to the boys' house. Who is there, you little rats? And they said, Me, just us. And the girls said, Okay, will you let us in? And they said, Why? Because we don't want rain coming in this house. We don't want any rain coming in this house. And the girls went back to their house. And they played Barbies. (laughter) So they went over the boys' house one last time. And it was [unintelligible] ing [unintelligible] too. And knocked on the door. And they said, Who's there? They said, Can you let us in? And the boys said, Yes. And the boys stayed at the girls' house for the rest of their lives.

Children: Playing Barbies?

David: Playing Barbies. (lots more laughter)

By developing ability in another style, which was more centrally organized, David was again regaining control of the themes and style of the storytelling experience. But the result was also that David was guided into learning a more mainstream, school-based way of narration, one that he had found difficult to acquire in the context of the typical school curriculum.

CONCLUSION

David is a gifted and persistent storyteller, who most likely would have found some other way to make his stories heard if I had thwarted his attempts to manipulate sharing time to meet his needs. But what about the other children's powerful voices that are yet to be heard because there is no existing public space for their yet unknown way of making sense and reasoning? I thought that I had created a classroom that would encourage these myriad ways of making sense. But after watching David persistently pursue a new genre of storytelling for this classroom, pushing through unwritten rules and constraints, I realized that the type of talk that was allowed in the classroom was constrained in ways invisible to me as the teacher. What other constraints are operating in my classroom that are still unknown to me, effectively inhibiting children's full use of their endowment of language and reasoning skills? My work as a teacher must include developing my receptivity to the countless ways that children think and express their sense making to others. I can't know how all children talk, or how they think, because in listing the ways I think they do this, I immediately exclude the ways that are not on my list. Instead, I need to develop structures and an openness that somehow will allow these different ways to appear, and to feel welcomed in the classroom, which should result in a richer experience for all the children.