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Scaffolding A Student's Development of Storytelling With Wordless Picture Books

by *Ashley Shipp and Penny L. Beed*

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According to Kathyne Macgrath Speaker (2002), "Children involved in storytelling programs exhibit improved listening skills, better sequencing abilities, increased language appreciation and more thoughtful organization in their own writing." (p.184) As Speaker indicates, storytelling can be a very important tool for learning in the classroom. Storytelling is not only important in the classroom; it is also important to society. We all know that storytelling has been instrumental in the preservation of history for centuries. It is a means of sustaining cultural activities and beliefs. According to Seth Weaver Kahan, "Storytelling is one of the oldest and most powerful devices for building community" (Kahan, 2001, 26). I believe that storytelling can be used by students to make connections between home and school. Storytelling can help students learn about and build respect for classmates who are different from themselves. I think that if students were able to tell stories to their peers they would communicate a lot about themselves. This would be a good way for students to get to know each other and to build relationships. Students would learn how to construct and tell stories for an audience.

Because of the importance of storytelling, I (Ashley, the first author) thought it would be interesting to explore the development of storytelling skills in a very quiet first grader ("Sam") with whom I was working one-on-one in a field experience. I wondered if story construction using a wordless picture book was an activity he would have trouble doing. I chose to use wordless picture books as "props" for Sam's storytelling, because I thought the pictures and the storylines had the potential to provide structure for Sam's construction of stories. I had learned from my reading that wordless books support children who have very little experience with print and enhance their concepts of themselves as readers and writers. As they construct narratives, over time they develop a sense of story, they improve their understanding of story sequence and they expand their oral storytelling skills (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad & Zhang, 2002). In addition, Norton found that, with practice, children's stories for wordless picture books are more developed, longer and more specific than stories told without wordless books (1996).

I was also curious about the ways that Sam might respond to my support of his storytelling. Would Sam copy what I did, or would my interventions not have an effect on how he told stories? I had heard about the term "scaffolding" in my classes. I knew that scaffolding is a metaphor that refers to the "conversational moves" teachers, parents and other experts make when they are interacting with learners to enable them to complete activities which they are not able to carry out by themselves (Beed, Hawkins, & Roller, 1991). I was curious about whether I

would be able to scaffold Sam effectively. Armed with wordless picture books and my "research" questions about Sam's ability to improve his storytelling and my ability to lend instructional support, I spent three sessions with Sam. This article tells the story of that experience.

Learning About Sam

I first met Sam when I went to an elementary school in a large town in the Midwest with my university class and our instructor. Our goal was to observe the language development of one or two kindergarten or first grade students. I chose to focus on the language of one student, so I signed up to be Sam's "literacy buddy." During our first visit, we observed the language of the students in three contexts: as they interacted in a large group lesson with their teacher, as they completed follow-up "seat work" in the classroom and as they played during recess. While observing Sam, I noticed that he did not interact much with the other students in the classroom or at recess. He spoke in class only when called on by the teacher. His answers were very short and not elaborated. He participated in activities and games at recess, but he did not have one-on-one interactions with any other student. The following week, each of us began the first of three 40-minute sessions with our literacy buddies. As I suspected during my initial observations, Sam proved to be a very quiet student. In fact, Sam reminded me of myself when I was in first grade. I was very shy and did not like to talk in class. I also had a hard time telling or writing stories because I could never think of anything to say or write about. I observed the same characteristics in Sam as he worked in the classroom with his teacher.

Overview of the Instructional Sessions

For each session, I went to the classroom and met Sam, and we went to the lunchroom where we sat at a lunch table. We both faced the same direction so that we could each see our materials clearly. I audiotaped each session in order to learn about Sam's language development. Although we did a variety of literacy activities in each session, for the purposes of this article, I will talk only about Sam's storytelling with wordless picture books. I will first give an overview of our storytelling with the books in each session; then I will talk more specifically about what occurred as Sam developed his skill at storytelling.

For the first session I brought the wordless picture book *The Story of a Farm* (Goodall, 1989). Before I asked Sam to tell a story to accompany the pages in the book, I let him quickly look at the pictures, and we talked about what he saw on the pages. Then Sam went back through the book to tell his own story. The only time I spoke was to provide questions to help guide him and occasionally to encourage him while he was telling his story.

I began the second session by telling Sam a story using the wordless picture book *Shrewbettina's Birthday* (Goodall, 1998) in order to model telling a story with descriptive language. Then I gave Sam John Goodall's *The Adventures of Paddy Pork* (1968) and asked him to look through the book and then to tell the story. While he was telling the story, I said as little as possible. I only commented when he was unsure of something or when the pictures confused him.

For the last session, I brought the book *Frog Goes to Dinner* by Mercer Mayer (1974), and I again modeled storytelling, this time adding dialogue between the characters in the book. Then I had Sam look at the book *A Boy, A Dog, and A Frog* (1967) by the same author and we talked about how dialogue could be added to this story. I asked him to tell a story to go with the pictures, adding dialogue between characters. Finally, I had Sam look at a book that he had read during our second session called *The Adventures of Paddy Pork* (Goodall, 1968). I asked him to retell the story, adding dialogue between the characters. During this last session, I said almost nothing while Sam was telling the stories. I only commented when he looked at me expecting a reply or response to something he had said.

After all three sessions, I went back and transcribed the parts of the sessions that involved the storytelling. Next, I read through the transcriptions several times looking for changes in the content of Sam's storytelling. I also made note of the number of turns Sam and I took during the time he was telling his story and how the number of turns changed as Sam became more familiar with the storytelling process. Then I transcribed my own storytelling and instructions to compare the elements of my stories to Sam's stories.

I next read more about scaffolding to help me look closely at my teaching interactions. I learned that the purpose of scaffolding is not only for the child to increase performance, but also for general cognitive growth to occur over time. The amount and type of support that the adult gives is contingent upon his or her estimate of what the child is capable of doing at that moment with that task; this careful matching of the adult's response to the child's level of performance is one of the hallmarks of scaffolding (McDonnell, Friel, & Rollins, 2003). Levels of scaffolding range from very specific (e.g., demonstrating and thinking aloud) to less specific (shared participation, prompting the child to use a specific strategy, asking guiding questions) to very general (inviting participation). "The important thing to note about the levels is that in the earlier stages teacher participation is high and student participation is low. Gradually the balance reverses until student participation is high and teacher participation is low" (Roller, 1996, p. 75). Sensitivity to the child's emerging skills is crucial. Sometimes within one session or interaction, a teacher might find the need to adjust the level of support more than once, based on the child's responses. If the child seems unable to respond when the support is less specific, the teacher provides more support. As the child becomes more able to assume the responsibility for the task, the teacher draws back. After learning more about scaffolding, I again looked carefully at our interactions. I thought about my own thinking and intentions as I made decisions about what to do to help.

In the following sections, I will describe what happened in each session as Sam learned about storytelling in terms of my thinking, decision-making and scaffolding.

Sam's Storytelling in Session 1

During our first session I had handed Sam a wordless picture book and asked him to tell the story as he went through the book, in order to assess his storytelling abilities. I discovered that he was not very familiar with how to tell a story using a wordless picture book. In particular, Sam had a lot of difficulty coming up with ideas. He seemed very uncomfortable with the idea of telling his own story to accompany a wordless picture book. He was very unsure and looked at me for guidance and help many times.

During this session, Sam told his story through the use of short phrases. He identified who was in the picture and what they were doing (e.g., "guys trying to get water") and sometimes he mentioned only what they were doing (e.g., "feeding them"). He did not give the characters' names; instead he referred to the characters as "them," "guys" or "they." Also, he did not mention characters' emotions or use any dialogue. He simply described briefly what was happening on the page. One time near the beginning Sam said, "I don't know what to tell about this page." Therefore, I increased my level of scaffolding by asking questions, since Sam was having trouble developing ideas for his story. I began asking questions to get Sam to say something about the pictures in the book. (e.g., "What's he doing with the pigs," and "What's happening here?") This ongoing questioning provided a guide for Sam by giving him ideas of how to use the clues in the pictures to put together a story.

It took Sam about fourteen minutes to tell his first story. Sam and I took 165 turns while he told his story, and between each of the turns there was a long pause. I always paused for a while before I asked Sam a question to prompt him, and he thought for a while before answering the questions or prompts.

Sam's Storytelling in Session 2

Because Sam struggled with telling a story using a wordless picture book during the first session, I decided to provide more specific and concrete scaffolding by modeling storytelling in the second session. My goal was for Sam to be able to tell a story using descriptive language and sentences instead of relying only on phrases. For the modeling, I selected the book *Shrewbentina's Birthday* (Goodall, 1998). I named the main character in the story, and I used descriptive and complete sentences when I was telling the story. For example, I said, "Sara was sleeping all nice and soundly, and then her alarm went off, and she realized it was time to get out of bed." I also used some shorter sentences (e.g., "She washed her face," and "She began cleaning"), hoping that Sam would notice the use of complete thoughts. After I told the story, I gave Sam the book *The Adventures of Paddy Pork* by John Goodall (1968) to look through to get ideas for the story that he would tell.

This time when Sam told his story he used much more descriptive language than he had used in Session 1 (e.g., "big bad wolf" and "He's running through the woods."), and he did not need as much help thinking about what to say. He also made more use of complete sentences in his storytelling ("Then the big bad wolf is going to a house. Then he makes him go inside. Then he lets him sit on the chair, and he looks mad. Then he's knocking over the chair, and he's trying to get him." He seemed to connect the ideas on each page into more of a story line, using keywords such as "then" (see examples above.)

In this second session, Sam still used basic information to describe the pictures; however he described most of the pictures with more than a few words. For example Sam said, "He is walking with his mom. And he looks back at the people with the circus," and "And then he follows the circus." Sam also identified some of the characters' emotions and feelings in his storytelling (e.g., "Then the big bad wolf comes out and he's mad," and "He's sad because he can't get home.").

During this session, Sam did not give the characters' names, except for the wolf whom he called "the big bad wolf." When Sam was previewing the book, he said that the wolf reminded him of the wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*, and this is where he got the name for the wolf. Even though the title of the book was *The Adventures of Paddy Pork*, Sam only once referred to the pig in the story as "Paddy;" otherwise he used general terms such as "the pig" or "he."

This time, Sam appealed very seldom for help. He had something to say about almost all the pictures. There was only one time when Sam paused and thought for quite awhile; at that point, I asked a very specific question to try and help him come up with something to say: "Could he be explaining that he is lost or asking for help? He looks pretty sad, doesn't he?" This prompting helped and after he was done telling the story, we talked about how he incorporated the new elements, and I told him how much he had improved.

It only took Sam about five minutes to tell this story. Our interactions consisted of only 29 turns. Many times I rephrased or repeated what Sam said to encourage him to continue. Sam spent less time thinking, and he had many ideas for almost every picture. I did not have to prompt him as much as I did the first session. There were fewer pauses, and Sam's story was much smoother for his second storytelling.

Sam's Storytelling in Session 3

Since Sam improved dramatically the second time he told a story, my goal for the third session was to introduce Sam to the idea of using dialogue in a story. I decided I would use very specific scaffolding by modeling and then think aloud and talk with Sam about what I did to make it explicit. Finally, I would encourage Sam to try it on his own with very little support from me. Before Sam took his turn, I told a story using the book *Frog Goes to Dinner* (Mayer, 1974). I modeled the use of dialogue between characters and how to include information about what the characters were thinking or feeling. For example, I said, "When I saw that, I yelled, 'Wait that's my frog.'" I also said, "I'm getting all dressed up, ready to go out for dinner tonight with my parents. But sorry, guys, you have to stay behind because I can't take you to a family restaurant."

Then after I told the story, I talked to Sam about the dialogue between the characters. I explained to him that with wordless picture books he can add what the characters are saying into his storytelling to make it more interesting, if he would like. I also explained that he did not have to always say exactly what was happening in the pictures; instead he could tell what he thinks the characters would say in that situation. Before Sam looked at the book, I told him to think about what the characters might say and some of the things he would say if he were in the situation the character is in.

Sam appeared to understand and seemed eager to tell his next story, which was *A Boy, A Dog, and A Frog* (Mayer, 1967). In his story, he incorporated the emotions of the characters. As an example, Sam said, "Now they're mad," and "Now he is walking away, and the frog is sad. But the boy isn't sad, he's mad because the frog wouldn't come." Not only did Sam include the characters' emotions; he also interpreted their thoughts as well. Sam had confidently told this story in three minutes; his interactions with me involved only five turns. I spoke twice, one time

to reassure him and another time to clarify what he said. Otherwise, Sam told this story without any prompts.

However, Sam did not include any dialogue in his story. At this point, I realized that Sam wasn't quite ready to include dialogue on his own. I would need to become more specific again in my scaffolding of his use of dialogue. I decided that, since I had already modeled and explained dialogue to him, it was time to participate with Sam in learning how to incorporate dialogue into a story. We talked more about dialogue, and together imagined what we could write if we were asked to write text to go along with the story. For example, I asked Sam what he would say if he was in the main character's situation, and we both thought of some dialogue for the situation in the book. I then provided guided practice by asking Sam to look through the book again and tell me places where he could have added dialogue and what he would have said. He was able to do this. On one page Sam said the dad could say, "I want you to come home with your dog to sleep," and "Come home." After having clarified more about how to incorporate dialogue into storytelling, giving some more examples, and working through the book together to add dialogue, I asked Sam if he would like to retell *The Adventures of Paddy Pork*. I was eager to observe whether his storytelling would change. While Sam was retelling this story, I provided very minimal support for him, responding only when he asked for guidance, to see if he could incorporate the elements of a story into his storytelling by himself.

This time Sam included a great deal of dialogue between the characters. For example, he said, "And the big bad wolf is saying, 'Come to my house.' He's saying, 'You can go inside.' Now Paddy is saying, 'WHOA.'" Not only did Sam add dialogue for Paddy; he had the wolf saying some things as well. Sam also assigned specific names to the characters. He referred to the pig in the story as "Paddy" or "he" instead of "the pig." Sam also reported characters' emotions and thoughts in this version (e.g., "He's sad," and "Who's at the door?"). In addition Sam's storytelling was more efficient. It took Sam about four minutes to tell the story (as opposed to five during the previous session), and our interactions consisted of nine turns. I spoke mainly to encourage Sam (e.g. "Very good.") and to clarify a point he was making ("What did he get hit with?") This time Sam's turns were longer and contained many more complete sentences.

Discussion

I was very surprised by the results. In fact, I was amazed at the change in Sam's storytelling over the course of the three sessions. I expected some change, but not such a dramatic difference. For the first session, I suspected that Sam might struggle a little with this new task, storytelling, but not as much as he did. I quickly learned that I needed to adjust my assistance and become more interactive to support him in his storytelling. The first time I helped, I provided less specific scaffolding by asking questions about the pictures and the action. This enabled him to tell the story, but I realized that he would not be able to do this on his own without more concrete support. In the second session, I provided the most specific level of scaffolding by modeling and offering as much explicit explanation as he seemed to need. In response, he was able to incorporate descriptive dialogue into his story. In the third session, after I modeled and explained the use of dialogue, I expected him to be able to incorporate dialogue into his storytelling. However, Sam did not include any dialogue in his story after we talked about it. So I participated with Sam and together we developed dialogue for each page of his story. Finally, I was able to move back to

more general questioning and encouragement, as he assumed the responsibility for telling a new story with dialogue.

The transcriptions of the sessions showed differences in the length of Sam's utterances during his storytelling. A glance at the first session's transcriptions revealed that most of the responses were very short, and if they were long it was because I asked several questions in a row before Sam responded. The transcriptions of the second session showed that Sam's responses were longer and that I intervened less often. However, the third session's transcriptions are very different from those of the other sessions. After I modeled and provided guided practice on how to include dialogue and descriptive language when telling a story, Sam was able to talk for quite a while before I ever said a word. He was much more independent in his storytelling.

The content of Sam's stories also changed considerably as the sessions progressed. At first, Sam offered only short phrases to describe what was happening or to tell in general who was in each picture. His responses for each picture did not lengthen during the second session, but he added more descriptive language. Following some modeling, explicit instruction, shared participation and guided practice in the third session, Sam added dialogue to his storytelling. He also included descriptions of characters' emotions and thoughts. Sam began to put himself in the book and to look deeply at the pictures instead of looking at only the main event on each page. By explaining one aspect of storytelling at a time, by scaffolding in response to his needs and by allowing Sam the opportunity to practice what we talked about, I provided Sam the opportunities to change and learn new things about telling stories. Through this process, I realized how much finely-tuned scaffolding depends upon careful observation of the child's needs. I also realized how well scaffolding can work to move children forward in their learning.

Children's learning about storytelling takes place when they listen to storytellers and also when they participate in dialogue about storytelling. Through the dialogues, the "more expert" partners (often adults, but not always) provide scaffolds for the learners (Many, 2002). Scaffolding can positively affect children's ability to construct stories. It enhances their understanding of story events and character motivation (van Kraayenoord & Paris, 1996). It helps them to see that stories are constructed of a sequence of events. I believe it is quite possible that Sam's ability to tell stories for wordless picture books changed so much because I modeled and explained the different aspects for him, and I guided him as he tried to apply those ideas to his storytelling. I wonder if Sam would have changed the way he told stories as dramatically if I had provided a different type of instruction for him. My guess is that his stories would have changed, but not to the extent that they did.

Storytelling will certainly be a component of the literacy instruction in my future classroom. According to Kathryn Mcgrath Speaker (2002), storytelling is a good way to work on a variety of skills with students. As researchers van Kraayenoord and Paris (1996) discovered in their work with young children's storytelling, the activity can be used in on-going monitoring of children's literacy development. Children's retellings of stories reveal the extent of their understandings. Storytelling can reveal a great deal about students' listening skills.

In addition, storytelling with wordless picture books will be a part of my future curriculum. I agree with Crawford and Hade (2000), who call these books "invitations to which readers can

respond by bringing their own background knowledge, personal experiences, and social histories to bear on their readings of the visual signs presented in the illustrations" (p. 66). Children of a variety of ages can learn a great deal from well-designed experiences with wordless picture books.

I did answer my original questions about the extent to which Sam would be able to engage in storytelling and the ways in which he would respond to my support and my examples. I learned about the development of Sam's storytelling skills, and in addition I learned about the effects of both scaffolding and teacher research. The process of analyzing the lessons has shown me the importance of collecting data about my teaching. Looking back at the transcriptions, I was able to critique my responses and study the instructional decisions I made. I was also able to look in depth at the changes that occurred in Sam's storytelling over time. Most importantly, however, I learned about the strong connection between my teaching and Sam's learning. After providing different levels of support for Sam, I observed that he was able to include different elements into his storytelling that he did not include at the beginning of our sessions. The changes that occurred in Sam's storytelling showed me the power of scaffolding and the influence it can have on students. This experience has impressed upon me how important classroom discourse can be to the learning of my future students.

However, my reflections about the experience have raised new questions. First, because I was able to work with Sam only three times, I was not able to assess whether his improvements in storytelling will transfer to other wordless picture books in the future, to his ability to give oral accounts of his experiences or to his writing. It is possible that he was learning more about the task expectations and my expectations than about storytelling. It would have been instructive to follow up on his progress. Second, I used a variety of levels of scaffolding with Sam, based on his responses. I realize that this study is limited by the fact that it involved only one student participant. I wonder if other students would have responded the same way to the scaffolding I provided. I also wonder if other students would show the same results if scaffolded at only one level: for example, with only modeling or only explicit instructions. These are questions that merit further research. As a future teacher, I believe that time, experience, and action research will help me pursue the answers to these questions.

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