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Storytelling and play as a way to help children and adults internalize the values of environmental awareness

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**Storytelling and play as a way to help children and adults internalize
the values of environmental awareness**

by

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Mentor:

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Abstract

This thesis is an empirical study to find out if storytelling can be used as a tool to develop environmental and ecological awareness in an early childhood program. The role stories play in helping children learn lessons, values and character building will be considered by a review of current research as well as traditions and cultural practices.

This thesis will also discuss the importance oral storytelling has on the language, and neurocognitive development of children, and why it is important to the development of literacy skills. Examples from the field and my personal storytelling experience will be included, along with stories teachers can use when creating their own curriculums.

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I. Introduction

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“If not now then when?” – a saying from the Talmud

Issues of environmental advocacy have become increasingly salient in my own thinking about the role of educators in their work with young children and school communities.

For the past three years living in New York City and pursuing graduate studies, I began to see that ideas encountered in coursework might help me to address the practices I encountered in my work as an assistant teacher in a Head Start center. Here are some of my personal field notes from that setting:

“Every day, I witness students taking food at breakfast, lunch and snack, not eat it, and as required by Head Start program guidelines, instructed to throw it in the garbage. I also watch as teachers, myself included are asked to throw away rubber gloves, plastic drinking cups, utensils, paper, and other recyclable items. This situation is repeated several times a day by four classrooms the average number of students being ten per class five days a week...”(12.12).

As I watched and by default participated in these activities, I realized that we are teaching children at the age of four and younger to waste food and basic materials. If you don’t want it just throw it away! This is the message we are giving them. The question that kept going through my mind is ‘where do we think all this garbage is going? And do we really understand how long some of this garbage will stay in the earth?’ Is there a way to help our students understand the value of not wasting food? In the course *EDUC535 Science for teachers* (Ostenfeld, 2011), we discussed ways in which some environmental curriculum may inadvertently instill anxiety in children about the fate of our earth. We also considered ways of teaching ecological awareness to students without frightening

them. The key question of this thesis is: Can storytelling be a tool to develop environmental awareness in early childhood classroom?

As a literacy specialist I am very interested in storytelling and its positive effects on children. A colleague of mine presented me with the opportunity to volunteer to read to several kindergarten classrooms during story time, at an independent school in East Harlem. I really enjoyed this weekly activity, and the children were well engaged in the stories and told stories of their own. Later, I was asked to facilitate a five-week storytelling workshop with children (ages 5 - 8) for an afterschool program in New York.

My firsthand experience showed me how much children love hearing and creating their own stories; which they do quite naturally. Having had positive experiences telling stories with children, I wondered if I could do it in the Head Start center and if four-year olds would understand the message I wanted to convey. In the Fall of 2012, I enrolled in EDUC 573 *Storytelling with Children* (Jaffe) in hopes of learning more about storytelling, and how to improve my storytelling techniques. Through this course, I learned a great deal about the oral tradition of storytelling, its origins, its uses, and the positive effect it has on children as they develop their language and literacy skills. During my storytelling course, I learned that people are naturally hardwired for stories, and that storytelling has a positive effect on the neurocognitive pathways of the brain. I also learned that storytelling helps in the development of both language and literacy skills.

Oral stories have been told all over the world for thousands of years. Stories are told for many different reasons and fulfill multiple functions. In addition to entertainment, stories are told to pass on a people's history from one generation to the next, and to impart morals, and values. Etiological or origin tales carry social messages through metaphor - often misinterpreted as pre-scientific thinking (Levi-Strauss, 1978, 1995). Bearing this in mind, I began to wonder whether I could use stories to help my students understand the concepts of caring for the environment and not wasting food.

Up until I field-tested the idea that storytelling might be an effective way to raise ecological awareness; I had only read stories from books to the children. When I tried out my first story at the Head Start center, some of the children wanted to know where my book was. I explained that I wasn't going to use a book. I had just learned the story of "The boy who turned himself into a peanut" - about a young boy who decides to try and outsmart his father. He hides, and after a series of events, the father finds his son in a peanut and the astonished boy never tried to outsmart his father again (see Green, 1979).

Before I began, I told the children would have to pay close attention and use their minds to make the pictures. As I told the story and reached the part where the father wakes up from his nap, and can't find his son one child asked, "Why didn't they call the police?" This child used his background knowledge and asked the question based on what might happen in the same scenario today. Once I saw how engaged this student and the others were in the story, I was even more motivated to explore whether or not storytelling would be an effective tool to raise ecological awareness and reduce waste in our classroom.

II. Background research

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Before stories were written in books, audio recorded, or seen on the big screen, people told each other stories' at home, in large community gatherings, one-one, or in small group settings. Storytelling is a universal phenomenon that crosses all cultures. In his article *The secrets of storytelling: Why we love a good yarn*, Hsu (2008). States:

Storytelling is one of the few human traits that are truly universal across culture and through all of known history. Anthropologist find evidence of folktales everywhere in ancient cultures, written in Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Chinese, Egyptian and Sumerian. People in societies of all types weave narratives, from oral storytellers in hunter-gatherer tribes to the millions of writers churning out books, television shows and movies. (Hsu, para. 4)

Aubrey Davis, storyteller and author of several picture books had this to say during an interview with Gillian O'Reilly:

Humans are storytelling creatures. We communicate our experience through stories. We are predisposed to tell and listen to them, and to learn from them. Every nation has its oral tales. They are used to entertain, inform, impart morals, and social values. (O'Reilly, 2009)

The head teacher in my classroom is Yoruba from Nigeria. She told me that as a child growing up in Nigeria, her grandparents would gather the children in a circle outside each evening and tell stories. They were usually stories about tortoise and the antics he was involved in. Some were just for fun, but most had a lesson the children needed to learn as part of their socialization into the community. Chinua Achebe (d. 2013) the renowned Nigerian novelist referred to storytelling traditions as a "conscious form of socialization" (Baker & Draper, 1992 p.9) which he felt was missing from his own children's lives in

the United States. Achebe was a member of the Igbo people of Nigeria. He said as a child he not only listened but he had to be a storyteller as well:

Children need stories. It's not enough that they read them in books, or that books are read to them. If you cannot have the nightly storytelling sessions because of the way we live these days, then books are better than nothing-I'm not underrating the importance of children's books. But I am saying that if children can have the sessions, the nightly sessions they will much prefer that. (p. 10)

Marta Bekele (2003), like Achebe, came to New York from a cultural heritage rich in oral narrative. In her thesis *Ethiopian oral traditions*, she recalls growing up listening to elders share their wisdom through stories and how much she missed this communication:

Oral traditions have been part of my everyday life for as long as I can remember. Growing up in Ethiopia elders always shared stories with me and I, in turn, also shared them with my siblings, cousins and friends. When I moved to the United States in 1985 I left behind a significant aspect of my life and my past. For over ten years I did not share stories nor did I hear one from an elder. It felt as if it was buried inside me until something reawakened my force. The course *Storytelling for Children* (EDUC 528) at Bank Street College for Education did just that for me. (p.1)

Achebe, from Nigeria, Bekele, from Ethiopia, and the head teacher in my class, all grew up listening to stories from their elders. Achebe and Bekele both told stories as children. All three felt this storytelling ritual was missing from the lives of children today. Marta Bekele was able to find a way to regain some of what she lost by taking the storytelling class and then going on to tell stories in her own classroom. Chinua Achebe began to tell stories to his daughter because he remembered the importance they played in his life.

Historical perspective in the African Diaspora:

During the period of chattel slavery in the United States, it was forbidden for Africans to learn to read or write. Being caught reading or writing could get one beaten or killed.

Africans used the oral tradition of storytelling, accompanied by songs, and symbols to help them survive this horrific experience:

Telling ourselves our own stories, interpreting the nature of our world to ourselves, asking, and answering epistemological and ontological questions in our own voices and on our own terms, has as much as any single factor been responsible for the survival of African Americans and their culture (Gates, 1989).

There is a common misconception that Africans once transported to America, lost their history and culture. As an African American studies undergraduate major, I learned that this is far from the truth. Africans retained many aspects of their diverse cultural origins. Over time some of the retentions were fused to form distinct African American linguistic and cultural traditions. Stories from Africa that survived the Middle Passage were often retold using characters that children and adults were familiar with in the United States.

One character that is found in both stories from Africa and the southern United States is the rabbit or hare. As with most folktales, they were told both to entertain and to teach children lessons they needed to learn for survival. During slavery, the church was one of the few places that blacks were allowed to gather in numbers. It is in the church that many plans for freedom were made. Even though slaves were not allowed to gather alone, they still found a way to organize, disseminate information and plan for their freedom. What better place to hatch plans for freedom than in the church?

In her thesis: *A storytelling unit: Brer Rabbit tales*, Kim Thurman (1995) discusses how she used Brer Rabbit tales to engage her fourth grade students in reading and literature.

For Thurman (1995) being involved in the black church had a profound influence upon her life. At one point she calls the preacher “the master storyteller.” (p.6). I also remember attending church and listening to the preacher tell stories to drive parts of his sermon home, to whichever group of parishioners he felt needed to hear the message. Just as preachers couched road maps to freedom through stories during slavery, the pastor used stories from the bible to admonish children who were disobedient to their parents. He also used stories to celebrate political victories, happy occasions and just about any situation that might be affecting his “flock”. From my own experience growing up in the black church I can relate to Thurman’s statement:

In effect he [the preacher] was a master teacher. High up on the church pulpit, my pastor would tell stories using a combination of oratory and dramatic skills. His sermons were fashioned to fit every occasion within Afro-American communal life. (p. 7).

For Thurman these experiences were a catalyst for telling stories to children in the classroom. In my own life, the stories my friends and I heard in church helped us to understand our role within the community; they celebrated our lives, and spoke to our aspirations as children and as Black people in America. The oral tradition is still very strong within the black community. You can hear stories being told at poetry slams, in rap and hip-hop lyrics and the wider community of global media.

At the center:

The stories children heard at home, in church and in other social situations, were what they enjoyed talking about. The classroom teacher focused on preparing the children for what she felt would be the challenges of kindergarten. Things like following directions, sitting quietly, and paying attention, were emphasized. Most of the daily classroom communication centered on academic skills and school-based discourse styles. I observed that although the children would dutifully respond to instructional directives, they did not actively participate in verbal interactions. However, I found that when I conducted read-alouds (often before lunch) the students were engaged and had brilliant imaginations.

These experiences were a confirmation that oral storytelling could be a powerful tool for understanding concepts, new vocabulary, and language skills, as well as verbal expression. In the following section I will present several components of key research in the field which helped me to develop the environmental storytelling sessions.

A. Neurocognitive development

Neuroscientists have been studying the brain and how it functions for some time. What is common knowledge at this point is that the brain is the place where learning takes place.

Since the brain is the center for learning it is important that educators have some basic knowledge of how it functions to help facilitate learning (Hart, 1983, Liston, 1994).

Michael Gazzaniga (2012) established that there was a system in the left part of the brain that liked to explain actions and moods after they occurred; he calls it the “interpreter”.

The interpreter takes information that is not necessarily related and turns it into a story; it is constantly trying to explain our behavior in a way that makes us feel comfortable.

Theories of neuroscience are presented to demonstrate the significance of storytelling and narrative to education by relating brain function to learning. Liston (1994) in her article entitled *Story-telling and narrative: A neurophilosophical perspective*, describes for teachers two theories: the “tensor network theory” and the “neurogenesis theory” in order to provide an understanding of brain functions during learning. She asserts that learning is based on previous learning and that if new information is not connected to students’ current knowledge and interests, previously established neural networks will not exist, and students will be unable to connect new extension. She further asserts, “Storytelling and narrative are a good way to encourage new connections and the recognition of new patterns and relationships among objects and ideas.” (P. 54). To illustrate this point, Liston uses the example of students learning the geography of West Africa through storytelling rather than through memorizing lists of facts and geographic details. For example: instead of using decontextualized lists of nations and capitals, the students are

shown a wide variety of artifacts from the region and are presented with tales from those who have lived or traveled in Western Africa. A student, who has seen clothing from the region, can relate their interest in fashion and clothing to a particular part of the region, helping them to remember facts that are important to the official curriculum and testing.

Each student hearing the same stories would make their own personal connections to them using different neural networks to capture the relevant information. “Appealing to each student’s unique hunger to learn by presenting a broad menu of possible “hooks” or connections with pre-existing neural networks, storytelling makes education fun and significant for students and facilitates true and lasting brain-compatible learning.”(p.65).

Neurocognitive science supports what human beings have demonstrated for centuries: storytelling helps us make sense of the world and helps us survive. Today through empirical research, we know that oral narrative improves text comprehension in school-based subjects (Isbell, et al, 2004). Storytelling has been shown to help students learn detailed information, facts and concepts in both social studies and math. Researchers also agree, that it supports literacy and language development across the disciplines.

B. Language and literacy

In the introduction to *Storytelling: Process and practice*, librarians Norma Livo and

Sandra Reitz (1986) state:

Stories have the power to reach within, to command emotion, to compel involvement, and to transport us into timelessness”. They are a way of thinking, a primary organizer of information and ideas, the soul of a culture, and the consciousness of a people. Stories are a way in which we can know, remember and understand (pp.3-4).

Stories have an important impact on language development and literacy. From the time a child is born they begin to develop language through interacting with parents and other siblings and relatives. These interactions teach children about the meaning, structure, and use of language usually expressed in the form of conversation.

Beginning at the age of 3 or 4 years, children begin using another language storytelling. These narrative skills continue to develop over time and are valuable for three reasons. a) as a useful tool for development of oral language. (Morrow,1985). b) narratives are thought to form a bridge to literacy (Hedberg & Westby, 1993) and c) there is evidence that narratives are related to conceptual development (Applebee, 1978; Vygotsky, 1962) (Stadler & Ward, 2005, p. 73). For Vygotsky (1978) “Cognitive and linguistic skill appears twice on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category.” (p. 163) Children first listen to a story in a social setting, in this case, the classroom told by the teacher, and during this process they internalize the story on a personal level. As children listen to a story being told, they have to use their imaginations to create pictures because there are no

books and no pictures being shown. Stories that are imaginative, repetitive, short, and express crisp, vivid style, work well for telling with young children.

Various types of stories that are effective to tell are folk and fairy tales, original tales, personal experience stories, and literary stories. Telling children stories views teaching in a holistic and literature-based framework and can motivate students to tell their own stories, and to read more widely as they seek to find the literary tales they hear (Swenson, 200). Other researchers also agree that storytelling can lead to the increase in the development of vocabulary and syntax:

We know that children are active participants in their acquisition of language. Their language patterns are learned in social contexts while they are interacting with other children and adults. Studies continue to confirm that the development of vocabulary and syntactic complexity in language are more advanced in children who are frequently exposed to a variety of stories (McGrath, Taylor, & Kamen, 2004).

Storytelling with young children also prepares them for writing in the later grades.

Language is the basis for all writing and young children come to us with the syntax of their language already formed and can communicate great thoughts to us if we're willing to listen. I believe that we need to begin with the end in mind; we need to utilize their very strong structural language skills in oral storytelling before we expect them to write the stories in any form. Songs, poems, finger plays can be dramatized; for young children and the more familiar they are the more the children will enjoy performing (Ohlaver, 2001).

The US Department of Education has designated research in preschool and literacy as a national priority (Jacobson, 2001). Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance, (2004) conducted a study to explore the ways that storytelling and story reading influence the language development and story comprehension of young children from 3 to 5 years of age. Two groups of children heard 24 stories. One group received oral storytelling, and

the other group heard the stories read. The children were asked to retell the oral story and create a story using a wordless picture book. The results showed both story reading, and storytelling had positive results on children's oral language development and comprehension. The children who heard the stories showed improvement in their comprehension skills. This I believe was in part because the use of their imaginations' helped them form their own story pictures in their minds, to remember the story. The students who had the story read to them showed improvement in their language development. This was due to the child's interaction with the text and illustrations, which help build new vocabulary while discussing the story with a teacher or other co-reader.

The above research clearly shows that storytelling has a positive effect on children's literacy and language skills. Storytelling is a fun and interactive way to get children ready for reading and writing. It can be used in almost every curriculum. As teachers we have to be aware of the learning styles of our students. We have to be prepared to differentiate instruction based on the needs of each student where possible. Jan Andrews in an interview with O'Reilly, 2009) stated that:

Storytelling, in fact speaks very particularly to children who struggle with reading (and surprisingly often the best storytellers themselves). For these children, the hook is a stumbling block; they haven't yet reached the point where they see it as a friend. From their responses, [at all ages] I know that being told a story has given them real access to literary experience (p. 12). Both reading and oral telling can effectively tell stories. When the teacher reads a story and shows pictures, the audience is influenced by what they see and the authors' words. However, when children are told stories they can interpret them as they see fit. Kieran Egan, (2001) founder of the Imagination Education Research Group discusses alternative ways of thinking about how children learn. He suggests that children use their imaginations to explain events in their everyday lives:

Children also have imaginations and emotions and these, too, connect with the world. If children's minds are supposed to be restricted to the everyday details of their social lives why are they full of monsters, talking middle-class rabbits, and titanic emotions? We cannot sensibly explain Peter Rabbit's appeal in terms of its "familiar family setting" (Applebee, 1978, p. 75), when it involves a safe forest and a dangerous cultivated garden, and death so close, and so on (p.17).

Given Egan's framework, one of the things that I've found that bring stories to life, and stimulates imagination and creativity in an audience, is to include movement, and song into the stories. This adds another dimension, and the audience is better able to retain what they heard. For children becoming physically involved is not only fun, but again it helps them remember and assists in their ability to retell a story. At the center, I often read Anansi stories during morning circle time, and each time after I read, one boy, Sam, (pseudonym) would always tell me he met a particular character and would describe their interaction together. Other students would chime in using sounds and physical motions to show what they did with Anansi or other characters (confirming Egan's thesis).

Sometimes instead of reading Anansi stories from a book, I would tell the stories and deliberately tell a part in the wrong order. The children would say, "No that's not how it goes, and I'd reply oh no then how does it go?" They would retell the story in their own way, adding details as they went. Sometimes they forgot important parts, but always wound up with the same story ending. The children's retelling of the story showed me they were thinking about it, seeing pictures in their minds, and understanding the story. Watching them and listening to them discuss Anansi stories, further fueled my desire to use storytelling to help raise the students' awareness about wasting food. I hoped to encourage them to only put on their plates the amount of food they would eat, so they

wouldn't throw the rest in the garbage. Given all of the above, I set out to answer my question by researching field-based projects and educational resources.

C. Storytelling in curriculum

Storytelling can be used in almost every curriculum we want to engage students in. It is important that teachers be able to choose stories that are appropriate for the curriculums they want to teach, the age group they are working with, and that they are aligned with the common core standards for each particular subject.

Much of what we teach students in school is disconnected from their everyday lives. This is particularly true when it comes to math. When teachers think about what they want students to learn in math they don't usually think in terms of telling stories. Teaching through storytelling can help teachers reach different students at different levels. For the child who has trouble reading, hearing a story can be helpful because it requires the student to use his or her imagination. Egan, (1986) gives an example of how stories can enhance student learning across all subjects.

The general conclusion is that if we focus on children's imaginative activity, we can see a range of sophisticated and powerful conceptual tools in use. The pedagogical task is to work out how we can organize content about the real world in such a way as to encourage ordinary children to use their considerable intellectual abilities in learning (p. 18).

Egan's story form framework has been used for elementary school lesson planning. This framework covers five questions teachers might consider when planning lessons or units of study for their students. 1. What is important about the topic? Why should it matter to children? And what is effectively engaging about it 2. What powerful binary opposite's best catch the importance of the topic? 3. Organize content into story form. What content

most dramatically embodies the binary opposites, in order to provide access to the topic? And what content best articulates the topic into a developing story form? 4. Conclusion. What is the best way to resolve the dramatic conflict inherent in these binary opposites? What degree of mediation of those opposites is it appropriate to seek? 5. Evaluation. How can one know whether the topic has been understood, whether its importance has been grasped, and whether the content was learned? (See: www.ierg.net).

The child's imagination is the thing we want to spark during storytelling. It's imagination that can motivate a student to want to know more about a particular subject, or develop a particular skill. It might take some preparation to find the best stories to read for math, and to a lesser extent science. But the purpose of telling a story is to get them interested in learning more about the skills such as computation in math and experiments in science.

For young children listening to stories improves their ability to tell stories, provide a setting, explain the moral or solution to the problem, and remember the characters in the story. Storytelling complements story reading in the classroom.

D. Ecological sources in folklore and oral tradition

Teachers and other educators, who want to help children understand their connection to the earth, and their responsibility for caring for it, will find many stories that deal with nature, and animals when searching for stories about nature. But, they don't always speak directly to the importance of caring for our earth. MacDonald, (1999) in her book *Earth Care*, collected stories with specific themes that speak to humans' responsibility for

caring for the earth. These folktales come from around the world from places like: England, West Africa, India, China, and Brazil, to name a few. Some of the themes represented in her book speak about our care of the physical environment, and how all things are connected. Others speak to how humans interact with each other.

Throughout history, stories have been told to help people live harmoniously with the environment. These stories are told by people all over the world and have been handed down from generation to generation. With the advance of technology however, we have forgotten our responsibility to take care of this planet we live on called earth.

Native Americans as a group, tend to take their relationship to the land very seriously. They live close to the land and their identity is intertwined with nature. Because of the understanding of the interdependence of humans and nature, Native Americans provide many stories about how to live on, and care for the earth and all its many life forms.

In *Keepers of the earth*: Native American stories and environmental activities for children Joseph Bruchac and Michael Caduto (1988) present an anthology of tales and discuss the importance of the earth to Native American people. They relate that at one time western science and Native American culture clashed. Now, however, science is beginning to catch on to the importance of what Native American perspectives and cultural knowledge teaches its members about their relationship to the earth:

The science of *ecology*, the study of the interactions between living things and their environments circles back to ancient wisdom found in rich oral traditions of American Indian stories. Time and again the stories have said that all the living and nonliving parts of the Earth are *one* and that people are a part of the wholeness. Today ecological science agrees every one of us is significant ...Our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations give us a sense of identity based on...interactions with the earth, and other people (p. 5).

These ecological stories require using the imagination and empirical investigation. The extension activities give teachers the opportunity to help students make the connection between themselves and the earth. The activities and stories emphasize how all things in nature are connected, and work together for the good of all.

This book has stories under various headings caring for our land, forests, wetlands, creatures, and stories that teach values, and the human place in earth's sacred space. A theme that is common across cultures. Human greed, pollution, and planning for the future are some of the themes represented in *Keepers of the Earth*.

Choosing a story for the center:

“Why the sky is far away’ is a Nigerian folktale that I first encountered in *Earth Care: World folktales to talk about* by Margaret MacDonald (1999). The story can be classified as an etiological or oral tale that has been re told and interpreted in other collections including: Julius Lester (1969), *Black folktales* and in Gerson, M.J. (1974) *Why the sky is far away: A folktale from Nigeria*. The story relates a mythic time in which the sky was the source of food and nutrients - “all [a person] had to do was reach up and break off a piece of the sky and eat it...” (Lester,1969). However, due to peoples’ greed and wastefulness, the sky eventually removed itself and therefore “people have had to work.” The story is also the focus of “Why the sky is far away” - a curriculum published by

Cambridge public schools grades 3-8 (see Adams, 2013). The unit was designed to study an African folktale about ecology, and to explore issues of individual versus community needs in students' own lives. This curriculum and the retelling of the story by Julius Lester, and Margaret MacDonald, helped me frame my telling of the story. I felt that because it was easy to tell and contained the message I wanted to convey, I would try it at the center. In the following section I include a transcript of the storytelling session that took place at in spring 2013 as well as comments and reflections.

III. Storytelling session: “Too much sky” (*an African folktale from Benin*)

III. Storytelling session: “Too much sky” (an African folktale from Benin)

A. Transcript and comments

Note: I retold the story “Too much sky”, March 2013 during read aloud time at the Head Start center. Here is the transcript of the session with following codes: M=me, (i.e. the teacher); C= the children [initial following = individual child].

M. The name of the story is **Too much sky** it’s a story about wasting food and why the sky is up there. (Points at the ceiling)

M. Can you say too much sky?

C. Too Much Sky

M. Cric!

C. Crac!

Comment:

There are many ways to start a story, the use of the phrase Cric! Crac! Is one that I like to use because it gets the children’s attention and signals to them that a story is about to be told. If the storyteller says Cric! The children respond Crac! I also use this type of call and response to focus the children’s attention back to the story when they start to stray too far away from the theme of the story.

M. A long time ago, the sky used to be down here where we are

C. (S.) But it’s up here now (pointing up towards the ceiling)

M. Do you want to know how it got up there?

C. (A.) I know the sun brought it up there.

M. Oh the sun brought it up there? Thank you (A.)

C. Yes, yes.

M. “A. said the sun took It”. Well along time ago before the sun took it up there, people didn’t have to go to work for food that means Mommies, daddies, grandmas, aunties,

never had to because all they had to do was reach up and take a piece of sky and eat it when they got hungry.

M. Reach up above your head and grab a piece of sky.

Comment :

The story Too Much Sky doesn't have a great deal of activity associated with it so in order to make it interesting in included movement and repetition to encourage student involvement. I had them reach up and act as if they were grabbing a piece of the sky.

C. (z) We gonna eat the whole thing!

C. (s) The sky is really big!

C. Yeah!

C. (A.) Gimmie that sky!

C. (A.) Eww this piece is small

C. That's nasty!

C. Gimmie that sky yum yum yum!

C. (A.) I got a big piece!

M. (repeating) – You got a big piece are you going to eat it?

C. Yuck! That's too big!

M. People were taking pieces and biting off them and some people were throwing them in the garbage.

Comment:

Here again, I had students make the motion of throwing food on the garbage, plus accompanying sounds to add to story memory.

M. Sky said stop! No more taking big pieces, bigger than you can eat, and throwing it in the garbage. If you take pieces you must eat it, and not throw it in the garbage!! Because if you do I am going to move way up high and you won't be able to reach me.

M. And the people said ok but they didn't listen!

M. One day two people (S.) (J) Broke off more than they could eat so they went around town saying help me eat it friends. Their friends tried to help, but no one could eat all the sky.

M. Well! The sky was watching and said, that's it I warned you!!

And the Sky left the people and went up high!

M. Now people have to go to work to get food!

M. So when we have lunch or snack and we don't want some of our food, we only take a little and put it on our plates, so we don't waste food. Got it?

Comment:

At this point in the story, I felt it would be appropriate to relate what was happening in the story to what happens in our classroom. Because we have been discussing the fact that food gets wasted if we take more than what we can eat.

C. (I.) If you do put it in the garbage it will go up high

Comment:

This student (I.) was new to our class she had only been there about a week but she quickly got into the story. She related putting in the food in the garbage and the sky leaving. Stories help children make connections. It doesn't matter if they are accurate.

M. If we don't like a food we just put a little bit on our plates right?

C. Yes

C. We can't eat it all

C. (A., M.) So we don't waste it!

B. Reflection with the children

The next morning at breakfast, I reminded the children of the story, and encouraged them to only take as much food as they were able to eat. After the storytelling experience, I wasn't sure if it would have the effect I desired. With my prompting it worked pretty well. That afternoon at lunch time, one of the students was about to take a second serving of mashed potatoes and put it on his plate. Just as he was starting to tap the spoon on the plate, Mona (pseudonym) remembering the story said "We can't eat it all don't put that there so we don't waste it". The other student quickly dropped the spoon back into the bowl. I told him that it was very good that he didn't take more than he could eat and that I was proud of him. I thanked Mona for remembering and reminded the other students to do the same, only take what they were able to eat. The story did help the children become more aware of wasting food and reinforced their awareness with each other.

IV. Conclusion

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Based on this small sample, I learned that story telling is an effective tool for increasing ecological awareness with young children. I was pleased that the students were able to connect the story to their own practice, of taking too much food and wasting it by throwing it in the garbage. It is my hope this mindfulness continues in this class. Because of this experiment, I was able to persuade the lead teacher to reuse a few yogurt containers to store paint and other craft supplies. I am hopeful that in the future, Head Start programs will adopt policies that reflect the importance of ecological awareness.

As a teacher going forward in my work, I plan to use storytelling across as many disciplines as can be done effectively. It is a challenge to use storytelling in math and science, but it can be done. From my research and personal experience, I learned that storytelling does have a positive effect on language development, vocabulary building, and story comprehension in young children. It allows them to use their imaginations and create pictures in their minds that help with retention and re telling. Teachers can use Folktales to develop character building and other lessons they want students to learn. Creating story maps helps students with both sequencing of events, learning characters and story retelling. I would also suggest using movement and music with the story telling, to enhance student engagement. Having older children make instruments to accompany storytelling, is a great way to increase their engagement. It encourages collaborative working relationships and its fun. As neuroscience discover more about the brain and the positive effects it has on developing neuro- pathways in the brain, I would like to predict that storytelling will be used more widely in classrooms across the country.

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