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Do the activities first and tell the story later – *Michael Jones* describes an approach that engages children who may be harder to involve

In early years settings it is common practice to introduce a theme or topic by sharing a story with the children, and then involving them in various activities based on that story. This is usually an effective way of planning to develop children's learning. However, it makes a very big assumption: that all the children will enjoy, understand and be inspired by the story in the first place.

While many children are able to become readily involved in a story, for others this is not an effective starting point. There may be a number of reasons for this: the story may be difficult for the children to understand, they may not like or recognise the illustrations, or they may lack the language skills needed to make sense of a story. Or perhaps they are learning English as an additional language, and just don't have the vocabulary to follow what the story is about.

As a result, everyone may have to work extra hard to make sense of what we had hoped would be the start of a series of satisfying learning experiences. So, how can we make sure that all children get the most from the exciting activities that we have planned, as well as enjoy the story?

One way is to plan activities related to the story before we share it together: what I call 'building a path to a story'.

The foundation of this approach is to choose the key vocabulary that supports the ideas that are essential for all children to understand the story. Once we have done this, we can plan activities and open-ended experiences around this core vocabulary. As the children play and explore with the adults, they build up an understanding of the central ideas and vocabulary

in the story, and start to use the words themselves. When they are ready, we can then share the story with them individually, and as a group.

## IN PRACTICE

So, how might this look in practice? Let's consider in detail two projects in the Foundation Unit at St Mary's Primary School in Tilbury, Thurrock. St Mary's is part of the Tilbury Every Child a Talker project, and teacher Sally Roberts and colleagues had asked me to support them in making 'Black History Month' accessible to the children.

Many of the children are learning English as an additional language, and at the time most were three years old, and had only been in the school for a few weeks. We decided to base our activities around the theme of African animals, beginning with activities and building towards a story at the end of the morning. We could have chosen a well-known tale, but I had already made up a story that incorporates several interesting ideas.

The story of 'Hippo's Bath' is based around a waterhole. On Monday a parrot flies to the waterhole, and tells all the animals that a giant hippo is going to come on Sunday to splash in the water and then drink it all up. The elephant (because he is the biggest) fills a very large bottle with water, so that the giant hippo can't have any.

On every day of the week after that, a different animal comes to fill up his bottle. On Sunday the hippo arrives – but he is not a giant, he is a baby hippo. He is upset because there is no water left in the waterhole. All of the animals are sorry, and tip their water back. The animals realise that there is enough water for them all to drink and swim in, as long as they share.



These are the feet which jump the Duck down into the muck all yucky and brown.

It's a simple story, but with lots of ideas and the potential to develop children's vocabulary and language. The key themes that we decided to focus on were Africa, African animals, water hole, bottles (including volume), pouring, and sharing.

The 'water hole' was, in fact, an old tin bath, and this, along with large African animal hand puppets, were the main features of the story that we were to share at the end of the morning. Our core activities were filling and emptying plastic bottles of different sizes and shapes, in the tin bath and the water tray; playing with the large puppets; and making a 'jungle' with small plastic animals in the setting's small digging area.

The adults' role was to support the children's play together, and introduce and reinforce the vocabulary and key ideas. This included helping the children learn the names of the animals, and to talk with them as they poured the water and arranged the bottles by size.

The children were excited and stimulated by all the activities, and particularly enjoyed creating 'waterholes' in the digging area (which soon became a sea of mud!) What was particularly exciting for the adults was to see the different ways that the children developed their own ideas through play, and how they created their own simple stories with the small animals.

Sally Roberts felt that she and her colleagues had learned a lot from this 'building a path' storytelling. As she explains, 'This is essentially the process of introducing children to the language of the story they will be sharing at the end of the session. Finding ways to introduce the vocabulary of the story through practical activities helped them engage with the story at the end, which was presented as an interactive "show". They were able to focus for over half an hour, which is much longer than we would normally expect from such young children.'

## DUCK IN THE TRUCK

Following this session, the staff used the same technique to explore *Duck in the Truck* by Jez Alborough (HarperCollins). This story revolves around an impulsive and excitable duck, whose truck gets stuck in the muck (it's a rhyming story!). He ropes in (literally) various



Children at St Mary's enjoy making a jungle in the muddy digging area

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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farm animals to help him get his truck unstuck. A rope and lots of pushing and pulling are important features of the story.

Instead of initially sharing the story with the children, staff planned a range of activities that would give the children experiences they could relate to the core vocabulary, so they could make more sense of the story later.

The main ideas and vocabulary that the staff wanted to focus on were farm animals; rhyming words such as duck, stuck, truck and muck; rope, knots; push, pull; and help!

Sally takes up the story of what happened: 'Indoors, we filled a builders' tray full of mud and small trucks. Once the children were fully involved, we added string and little bits of rope. We encouraged the children to explore tying knots, "driving" the trucks and exploring the language of the story (stuck, muck, truck, etc).

'Outdoors, we tied rope to car tyres, so children could experience pushing and pulling on a larger scale. We tied rope to a small trailer and pulled the children, so we could recreate the section of the story where the goat attaches the rope to the back of his boat and tries to pull the truck out. With the help of our school caretaker, we moved our massive tractor tyre. It was a very physical activity with fabulous language coming from everyone, including, "It's too big! Push! Pull! It's stuck! Help!" Once the tyre was in place we used washing-up bowls and cloths to clean up the tyre before the children could play in it. This kept some of our particularly boisterous boys involved for practically the whole session.'

'When we shared the story at the end of the session we found some of the children learning English as an additional language were more vocal than usual. They were able to understand what was going on in the story more fully, because they had actually experienced getting stuck, pulling, pushing, etc.'

Both of these topics had been shared with the children during a half-day session, to introduce the vocabulary, core ideas and the story. Over the days that followed, the staff and children continued to explore these activities and ideas in small groups. As a result, all the children were involved in an experience where activity, language and learning were completely integrated. ■

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