



Children as STORYTELLERS

Kerry Mallan



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BEGINNINGS

*A story. A story.
Let it come. Let it go.*
African ritual opening

Childhood is a time full of stories. Those of us who were fortunate enough to live in households where stories were told as a matter of course have grown into our adult years with a rich endowment. These family stories, anecdotes and reminiscences are meant to be passed on, embellished and shared with the people we love. Stories grow from stories and so we keep adding to our inheritance every day of our lives.

The stories I remember from my childhood came not so much from printed texts, though I was given books for birthdays and at Christmas time, but more from the stories that my parents told me. My father filled my head with wonderful stories of his English schooldays in a strict Catholic boarding school; of the harsh punishment meted out when he was caught smoking in the toilets — having to kneel all night before a holy statue on a cold, hard chapel floor. The punishment proved an ineffectual deterrent, for my father and his accomplices nearly burnt down the school in a later encounter with the illicit pleasures of nicotine.

These stories told of the darker side of life, like the fairytales of Grimm and the stories of Dickens. They were not insipid, but full-bodied stories; they were also told with humour. Perhaps the humour made them palatable — and, after all, my father had obviously survived!

There were other stories: my parents' first meeting on a hot, dusty road in Singapore just after the Second World War; the time my mother as a young woman attended a thirty-six course banquet at a sultan's palace in Johore; our dog Spot, who thought he was a cat and liked to sleep on a neighbour's fence; my brother, aged 4, singing 'Danny Boy' at a wedding reception with all the imitated sincerity and style of Al Jolson; my mother's terror on awakening to see a huge rat above her in the mosquito net; and her unforgettable experience when, as a young child, she was forced to kiss her dead great-aunt, lying in her coffin. It seemed like the stuff that movies were made of — but these stories were real. There was one exception; a rather fanciful story which made me believe I was of royal blood. I proceeded to tell my Grade 4 classmates and teacher that I was really an Irish

princess. Though my teacher told me to check the authenticity of my claim, and my classmates half-believed and half-mocked me, I continued to believe and enjoy my tale for what it was. It gave me a special feeling of magic and make-believe.

Family get-togethers were another rich source of stories. At such gatherings I could listen to all the stories of times past and laugh as the funny side of our lives was recalled. They were happy times. I was not always the listener; I often had an attentive audience for the stories, jokes and exaggerated tales that I wanted to share with my extended family and friends. No one person was given the role of storyteller, for it was just accepted that every one of us had stories to share.

Though my father and other members of my family have gone, the stories they told me over the years have stayed with me. The stories yet to be told will also become an important part of my life. Now I tell stories of our family history — of times past and present. My husband brings his own stories of a very different childhood. Together our stories and the stories our children share with us are expanding our view of the world and creating tapestries of our lives and who we are.

My family is not unique in its oral tradition. Stories — about everyday life, people, places visited, special occasions — are there in every family. It is sad when families do not give life to these stories, but bury them in long-forgotten memories. In cultures where the storytellers have died without passing on their stories, there has been an irretrievable loss of a cultural heritage. The same is true for our times.

The oral tradition is important for schools as well as families. Storytelling provides a way for children and teachers to engage in creative and imaginative learning.

Teachers, for as long as there have been teachers, have taught using story. The power of children's imagination as an intellectual force for learning has not always enjoyed the same degree of academic research and respectability as more tangible outcomes of cognitive ability. According to Bruner (in Rosen, B. 1988, p. 169), narrative is an important mode of thought which helps us to order our experiences and construct reality. Unless children's ability to use narrative in their thinking, speaking and writing is given the same degree of time and attention as analytical thought, then we are failing as teachers in our responsibility to allow our students to develop the full range of their cognitive ability.

The emphasis on literature in language arts programs has given written texts prominence in primary classrooms. Today's children are perhaps better read, and read to more, than previous generations. Yet oral stories tend to be neglected. Teachers and children have their own treasure-chests of stories to be unlocked and shared. Harold Rosen (in Rosen, B. 1988, p. 167) states the case for storytelling in schools most fervently:

... we have been so mesmerised by the intellectual culture of our times, so intimidated by spurious claims for the superiority of what has come to be called 'expository discourse', that we are frequently disposed to be apologetic about narrative.

While the written narrative is seen as important for the reading, writing and listening aspects of the language arts, the oral narrative — through storytelling — lags behind.

This book explores ways for teachers to give children the opportunity to create and retell oral stories; not just for their entertainment value, but more importantly as a way of making sense of experiences encountered both within and outside the classroom. The teacher must be committed to storytelling, but instead of assuming the role of 'wise elder' must allow children the right to tell stories as well. The sharing of stories between adult and child is the basis for forming a relationship. Just as we come to know members of our own families by sharing our life experiences, so too can teachers and children come to know each other better through these exchanges.

The following chapters examine the place of storytelling in schools. While the emphasis is on children as storytellers, teachers will need to model and share stories and reveal themselves as people in order to establish an open climate. Through storytelling, children stand to gain academically, socially and personally: a fact that is supported by a growing body of research, both in Australia and overseas. I have attempted to incorporate much of this research and to offer practical suggestions for implementing the ideas.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

Tell me the story about when you were a little girl and a lady phoned to tell you that your dog Spot was watching TV in her lounge room.

Kimberley, aged 8

Storytelling is so basic to human existence that we often cannot see that we all engage in telling some form of story every day of our lives. Some individuals have a special gift for telling stories to an enraptured audience, but we are all capable of being storytellers. Storytelling is defined most simply as using oral language in a social context to relate something heard, read, witnessed, dreamt or experienced. Peck (1989, p. 138) offers another definition: 'Storytelling is the oral interpretation of a traditional, literary, or personal experience story'.

Storytelling and storyreading

Storytelling is different from storyreading, though the two are often confused. Storytelling is born out of the oral tradition; storyreading depends on the written text. Both are important ways of sharing stories. The important difference between storytelling and storyreading lies in the interaction that occurs between teller and audience. With storytelling, the interaction is creative, as both teller and listener create the story. Words are used to create mental pictures of the story. The storyteller's face, voice, body and personality help to convey meaning and mood.

During storyreading both listener and reader are conscious of the book. With a picture book, the audience focuses on the illustrations to help their appreciation and understanding of the story. There is occasional eye contact between reader and listeners and this helps to make the connection between them.

In storytelling the sharing of the story is more personal, in that the storyteller connects more directly with the audience through eyes, gesture, voice and proximity. The teller is also free to use his or her own words within the framework of the story. Freedom of language and of movement add to the personal nature of storytelling. The storyteller learns to work not only with the language of the story but also with its structures so that changes, adjustments and emphases can be made in response to the audience's reactions.

According to Livo and Rietz (1986, p. 7), storytelling 'has a historic, ritual, rule-governed, patterned integrity'. Storytelling is an ancient art form. All previous generations used storytelling as part of their daily survival and entertainment and to preserve their cultural identity and history. Storytelling uses rituals, rules and patterns in its performance. There is a long-established expectation that a story session will proceed according to a pattern: ritual openings and endings, the degree of formality adopted by the teller, the willing transition by audience and teller from the primary world of the present to the secondary world of story, the form of audience participation in the story, the setting — all form part of the storytelling experience.



Traditional and personal story sources

Traditional literature has its origins in the oral stories, songs, myths, legends, dances and religious ceremonies of the earliest people. These stories tell of the human condition, and their appeal today lies in our ability to see ourselves in these old tales. Jane Yolen (1981, p. 15) has referred to folklore as 'a living fossil that refuses to die'. The archaeological analogy fits, for layers of civilisations become exposed as each story is shared. Many of the traditional stories we tell today have been written down, but they still need the human voice to give them colour and power and to restore them to their original oral state.

Today's 'myths' are made by films, current affairs shows, rock music, talkback shows, newspaper articles and so on, all of which add to the stories of modern civilisation. This book focuses on traditional stories and stories from our personal lives as sources for using storytelling with children. Very little emphasis has been given to contemporary fiction, for a number of reasons. The most important of these is that if children are to develop confidence and competence in their own storytelling abilities, then it is easier for them to begin with their own personal stories and the stories of folktales which have recognisable story structures, repeated language patterns and familiar motifs, characters, settings and themes. As for picture books, they make storytelling (as opposed to storyreading) very difficult because the illustrations are often an integral part of the work; to tell the story without the illustrations does it an injustice. Picture books are better read so that they can be enjoyed as a celebration of text and illustrations.

The emphasis of this book is the oral sharing of stories for the enhancement of speaking and listening skills. Reading and writing are seen by this author as important spin-offs from storytelling. Through storytelling, children will come to the printed text with a degree of familiarity and certain expectations of story structure, language and patterns.

Chapter 2

WHY CHILDREN AS STORYTELLERS?

*'From this day and going on forever', proclaimed
the Sky God, 'my stories belong to Ananse and
shall be called "Spider Stories".'*

A Story, a Story (Haley 1972)

Since the beginning of humankind, stories have been told to inform, to entertain and to explain. Traditionally, the role of the storyteller has been ascribed to an adult. The wise elder of the tribe explains the phenomena of nature and tribal lore to the younger members. Japan's kamishibai street entertainer tells stories to children and adults who gather round his theatre. Parents tell their children family stories which have been passed on from one generation to the next. The teacher uses story in all its forms to instruct the class. Children, too, have always been storytellers, but without receiving the same status or recognition as their adult counterparts. Children need to tell stories and make them their own so that, like Ananse, they will have stories named after them. In schools, both in Australia and overseas, the attention is shifting from the teacher as storyteller to the child as storyteller; a shift which springs from a sound background in language learning theory. This chapter, drawing on research published over the past decade, has as its kernel the part that storytelling plays in developing children's oracy skills. I have attempted to explore this kernel and the surrounding husks in order to highlight the positive rewards that can be won for children when we formally guide them into the role of storyteller.

Imagination

Children have robust imaginations. In spite of external attempts to curb their powers of imagination, children will continue to play in fantasy worlds, for imagination is controlled from within. This phenomenon was

described by Chukovsky (1963) in his book *From Two to Five*, which examined how a Russian child, denied his rich heritage of fairytales, was able to let fantasy re-emerge in his day-to-day play and conversation. We can lead children into imagining and creating, but the extent of our endeavours will never be fully apparent, at least to us and other observers. Through storytelling children can use their imaginations to visualise characters, settings and details of the action. Such is the power of story that the imagination is challenged to admit new possibilities and refashion old conceptions. The traditional story 'In a Dark, Dark Wood' (Ferguson & Durkin 1989) provides an excellent example of how visualisation occurs as a personal response. Both listeners and teller can engage in a range of different imaginings with each scene in the story: woods, house, staircase, door, room . . . After having this story told to them, a group of 12-year-old children were asked to draw what they imagined the woods were like. They described very personal and different settings (see figure 2.1). Similarly, the drawings of the 'house' were different in terms of how each listener imagined it (see figure 2.2).

Before the surprise climax in this story is revealed, listeners take part in a kind of predictive play, anticipating — perhaps wishing for — a scary outcome. Depending on the ending chosen by the storyteller (e.g. 'a mouse' or 'a ghost'), the listeners may be pleased to have their prediction confirmed; or surprised and amused that they were somehow tricked into believing that the mystery ending would involve something more terrifying than a mouse. The sense of audience and that particular moment of telling combine to give the storyteller the cue as to which ending to choose. Children can learn to respond to their particular audience, to the mood they have created, and to exercise that power of the storyteller to confirm their audience's expectations or to surprise them. Crosson and Stailey (1988, p. 8) believe that there is nothing 'preconceived' about storytelling, unlike television. They say that through storytelling, 'children will be actively participating in the story and not just receiving another programmed version of the Saturday morning television variety'.

The importance of developing children's imaginations cannot be stressed too much in today's rapidly changing, high-tech world. Exercising their imaginations is an important stage in the development of higher level thinking skills. Young children are actively encouraged to use their imaginations in play and talk, but as they grow older the adult world tends to dismiss these 'flights of fancy' as immature. Yet all people need to nurture their imaginations and let them soar in fantastic flight. Many of the inventions of the modern world might not have been conceived had someone not asked the question, 'what if?' and then considered the fantastic possibilities. Through the imagination one can engage in problem solving and perhaps come to terms with reality. That is, the solutions to the problems of the outer world may be lying dormant in the inner world of the mind.



Figure 2.1

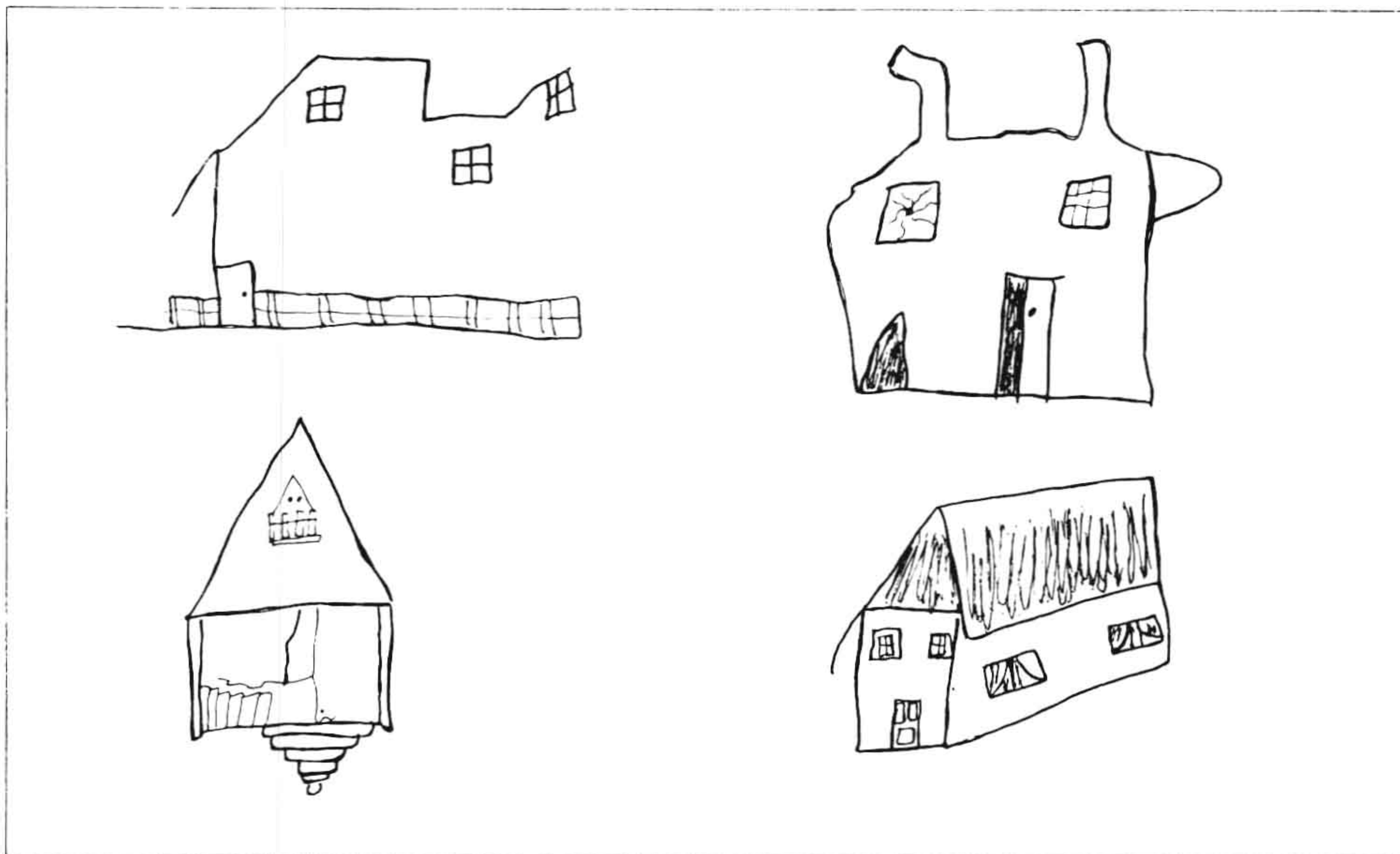


Figure 2.2

Understanding self and others

Through story, the interactions between people are revealed. How they love, show kindness or jealousy, offer friendship, compete and trick are revealed in many ways, simple and complex. Story provides examples of social contexts in which children can see real-life relationships between themselves and others being acted out and resolved in the literary world. This 'acting out' provides children with a range of options to consider when it comes to understanding their own motives and actions, as well as those of friends, parents and significant others in their lives. Britton (1979) says that if a story is close to a child's experience it will 'strengthen and confirm' that child's view of the world. Stories can be used to give children reference points for their experiences. This is true not only of literary stories but also of children's own stories, when these are given voice; they will provide opportunities for children to reflect on events and make sense of the experience. Tough (1974) believes that unless children are given opportunities to tell their stories, they may never come to understand or give meaning to them.

Much of the potential for gaining a better understanding of self and others will be lost if there is not time for reflection. Barbara Reed (1987, p. 36), who has worked with children in classroom storytelling, says that 'the youngsters needed time to process what they had heard'. In order to 'process' what the story tells them, children need to be provided with a number of different extension strategies. A wide range of these is described in the 'Practical activities' sections of this book. The children's individual preferences or learning styles need to be taken into account, however. Some children will need time to reflect on their own without any adult guidance or intervention; for others, strategies such as creative dramatics can be a means whereby children act out and role-play characters' thoughts and actions.

Story enables children to give shape to their life experiences through recounting them, or to compare them with similar experiences from literary sources. This is what Berger and Luckman (1966) call the 'imaginative construction' of everyday events.

Developing skills

It is difficult and indeed inappropriate to think of learning as occurring in either just the cognitive or the affective domain. Vygotsky's theory states that 'development does not proceed toward socialisation but toward the conversion of social relations into mental functions' (1962, p. 165). Children's social interaction with family, other adults and peers develops a