Sharing experiences, sharing stories

Children develop language through sharing exciting experiences with other children and adults. Recounting what they have done forms the basis for storytelling. **Michael Jones** reports on his work with children with learning disabilities, stimulating their communication by replicating the excitement of these experiences in school

Andreas is two-and-a-half years old. He loves going to the park and is fascinated by the swings and slide. He only uses two words at a time, but even with his limited vocabulary and expressive language, he is able to communicate some very complex messages, e.g. "Can I go to the park; I went to the park; I want to go on the swing; will there be a dog there; can I take my ball?" He loves looking at books with pictures of parks, and spends as much time as he is allowed to, watching his favourite DVD: BBC's *Something Special*. This programme has MAKATON signing throughout, and most importantly for Andreas, has an item about the park. Sharing the exciting experience of going out with his mum, his parents' friends and their children of the same age seems to be enough of a stimulus to generate streams of language. When Dad comes home, Andreas won't need any encouragement to recount what he did in the park.

Andreas' sister Heidi is nine. She has severe learning needs and attends a special school. Heidi has exactly the same fascination with the park as her brother. She has less well-developed language, and would be judged to be 'operating at a one-word level'. After a trip to the park, she will need a lot of support and patient listening and interpretation to recount her story, but she will be expressing exactly the same feelings as her brother. She also enjoys watching *Something Special*, and responds to the MAKATON by signing herself, as best she can. Their parents, through naturally enjoying their children's play, are facilitating and supporting communication. And crucially they are joining in and enjoying themselves at the same time. (This may explain why so many parents can be seen playing on swings and slides, despite the clearly displayed 'Equipment for under 14s only' signs!)

Telling stories

Both these children, like children everywhere, develop communication through being involved in exciting experiences with adults and their peers, which stimulate their emotions. They have a natural urge to tell everyone who will listen about what they have done. This gives them vital practice in conversation, as well as practising their developing language skills.

What is happening in the park is that the children are becoming familiar with the activities through repetition. They are exploring the equipment, and being exposed to language in context, making the whole experience completely meaningful. They are active, with the adults talking about what they are doing, and almost certainly using repetitive language, e.g. "Daddy push Andreas" or "Heidi, do you want another go?' When the children return home they are still excited, and are keen to look at books about the park and to watch DVDs. These are decontextualised activities, which are crucial for language development, and form the basis for language, as well as reading and writing.

From real life to school

These types of shared activities are vital for Heidi, and other children with learning disabilities. They are totally meaningful and self-motivating, and therefore effortless. Dr Nicola Grove, Lecturer at City University, and author of *Ways into Literature*, argues that the sharing of emotions is the earliest and most fundamental impulse for communication: 'If the origins of language are in the sharing of experience, our starting point should be storytelling and sharing feelings.' This view of language development gives practitioners the green light to experiment with sharing experiences with children with learning disabilities, as a way of developing meaningful communication. It also helps us develop a language curriculum that is relevant, and, crucially, has the potential to be fun for everyone. In my recent work in special schools, I have been experimenting with replicating these fun experiences in order to stimulate communication and language with youngsters with severe learning disabilities.

> "The sharing of emotions is the earliest and most fundamental impulse for communication"

I have developed a series of 'story workshops' based on the concept of sharing familiar and exciting experiences. The 40-minute sessions revolve around a theme, e.g. Christmas, Diwali, Eid, birthdays, and going to sleep (trust me, this can be fun!) At the end of the day, I lead the whole school in a semi-improvised story session based on the activities and props we have shared together throughout the day. I visited Park Special School in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, to share 'The Christmas Experience'. Students at Park are aged 5 to 18 years, with learning needs ranging from moderate to severe and complex. I spent a day at the school, with the aim of providing each class with a 40-minute session based on the theme of Christmas presents—with a focus on using wrapping paper and sticky tape, and playing 'pass the parcel'. One of my aims was to encourage pupils to explore taking objects out of containers, as well as reinforcing the concept of 'Christmas stockings'.

I was based in the 'Sensory Theatre': a room with equipment to stimulate the senses, including a relaxation area, music and lights. Staff helped to create the atmosphere with Christmas decorations and party music.

I set up the room with as many Christmas toys and artefacts as I could find, including a real Christmas tree with flashing lights, singing Santa toys, cardboard boxes of various sizes and vast quantities of wrapping paper and sticky tape. I encouraged the pupils and staff to experiment with the materials. Some pupils were able to verbalise their thoughts and ideas about Christmas, while others tracked the lights or responded to the Christmas music. Where appropriate, we guided the pupils towards unwrapping and wrapping presents and playing a game of 'pass the parcel'. Most of the sessions were raucous affairs, in the spirit of Christmas, helped along by a member of staff in an inflatable Santa suit!

Pupils were becoming involved at whatever level they could, and with the high adult to pupil ratio, adults were able to respond appropriately. At the end of the day I led the whole school in a semi-improvised story called *The Wrong Christmas Stockings*, which involved unwrapping presents, and all the other elements of the earlier sessions. Many students showed by their responses that the shared experience had had an impact on them. As I told the story, involving the youngsters, I used the same props that they had been experimenting with in the sensory theatre, and the same music. Using Christmas images in a PowerPoint throughout the story, and an adult helping with signing, maximised understanding and involvement.

Repetition, repetition, repetition

Christmas is all around us for at least two months of the year, so it is a popular theme for sharing experiences. Birthdays and birthday parties are also popular, and my 'Birthday Experience' proved to be just as successful on a return visit. Once again, I based it on the theme of wrapping and unwrapping. I could be accused of lacking imagination, but I was exploring an important principal for all learning, and particularly for students with learning needs: repetition encourages familiarity, which develops meaning, which promotes understanding and learning. The pupils launched into the activities again, and there were a range of responses: from talking in depth about party games and preferred presents, to a child with severe learning needs smiling at a balloon and reaching for it.

If these popular sessions are repeated regularly, using the same central key objects and games, students' familiarity with the concept and the activities will lead to increased awareness, participation and communication. This is particularly important for youngsters with autism, who can find changes in activity challenging.

Follow-up activities, such as watching *Something Special* together, introduce the important element of decontextualization, reinforcing what has already been experienced. Annette Parkin, Park School's Deputy Head Teacher, agrees: "When you use different activities and games to support teaching and learning, it is important to teach pupils *how* to play the game or take part in an activity, so they are familiar with how it works, what they have to do, and how it will end. After they are fully conversant with this then, and only then, can you use the activity or game as a teaching tool, and expect them to learn from it. Repetition is crucial if pupils are to learn, and ultimately to be able to share through communication what they have learned."

Sharing stories

I asked other members of staff to describe their experiences of sharing stories with the pupils. Vincent Mealing comes from a background of exhibition and set design, including a stint as a model maker at Madame Tussauds. He defines stories as, "an opportunity to take you away from everything, and to find a magic place." He uses powerful shared-experiences, "to find a form of common ground where we understand what our pupils understand, giving us the basis for shared communication."

The whole school were preparing for an international day, with an African theme, and the staff turned the sensory theatre, and the corridor outside, into a jungle. They set up the room three weeks in advance so students became aware of the changes in the room. By sharing the experience together, staff were able to observe students' responses, and could see what worked, and what needed changing. By using the same music and similar activities each time they visited the room, the pupils had an anticipation that they were going to be involved in something that was to become familiar and exciting.

Fran Angeletta, Park's coordinator for pupils with sensory and visual impairment, uses as many sensory experiences as possible to develop pupils' responses and communication. For Fran, a story in its broadest sense is an opportunity to share real life experiences and to give an experience of pretend. This is true for all children. For example, many students responded positively to the realistic-looking puppets, while others could relate to the cuddly toys that were clearly less real.

"We aim to encourage the pupils to lead, so we can observe their level of response, at that moment, and over time. Then adults can support exploration and learning, and gradually adapt the experience over weeks and months. An initial 'story experience' could be helping a child get used to a spider puppet, and with time (and sometimes a lot of time) he could move to playing with smaller spiders, and link these with photos and books on the same theme."

Both Fran and Vincent agree that adults need to adapt the sessions to take account of pupils' physical needs at that time. This requires adults to respond to moods; for example, youngsters may be lacking in alertness or overactive. The pace and level of stimulation, and particularly how the adults interact with the pupils, needs to be adjusted accordingly.

Sensory stories

Staff have developed a bank of 'sensory stories'. They take a central theme from a story and make props that pupils can interact with and respond to. For the theme of 'knights and dragons', adults and pupils filled a cardboard box with empty tin cans and threw it around to create the effect of a 'clanking knight'. Using torches and red cloth or tissue paper can create a fire-breathing dragon effect. They took photographs of the students and created their own books. They then made up their own stories or used the props to support the telling of a story.

Again, repetition is the important key to learning. Adults may plan to focus on the same sensory story for a term. This gives the pupils enough time to take an interest in, play with and respond to the props, and join in with meaningful, adult-led activities. By observing how the youngsters respond to different sounds, textures and activities, adults can make judgements about what they like and dislike, as well as gain insight into their learning processes. I love the example of Nathan's response to the life-sized tiger, made from an artificial 'tiger skin rug', and used to illustrate the story of *The Tiger who came to Tea*. Nathan has autism, and Vincent was encouraging him to feed the tiger. Nathan chose a plastic toy sandwich, but threw away the cheese, and then fed the tiger. This seemed a bit strange, until Vincent realised that Nathan doesn't like cheese—and therefore assumed that the tiger wouldn't either!

Gill Thomas, Sixth Form teacher at Park, working with students with severe learning needs, uses the same sensory approach in her class. They share a range of experiences, to benefit those who require a purely sensory experience, and students who can identify something in a picture or read simple words. Gill recognises that all activities need to be sensory-based if everyone is going to be involved. Sharing a range of hot drinks on a cold day is a perfect example of a shared multi-sensory experience. This led to an exploration of fruit teas and then sampling fruit. Gill takes activities in the direction of her students' interests, and while she can't predict what the 'end product' of their exploration might be, she keeps a constant record of the process, using a digital camera and video.

No doubt, some Early Years practitioners reading this will be saying, "But surely this is just good Early Years' practice?" Other readers might object to my comparison of older people with learning disabilities to young children. However, time and again, I am reminded that what works for young children learning usually works for learners of all ages, and at all stages.

Michael Jones is an educational consultant supporting schools and parents to meet the needs of children with communication difficulties and other learning needs.

***Ways into Literature*, by Nicola Grove, is published by David Fulton Publishers. *Something Special*, from BBC *Cbeebies*, is available from www.makaton.org**