

What's in a name? Labels and literacy in Readers Theatre

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Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, it was the custom of all the fathers and mothers in China to give their first and honored sons great long names. But second sons were given hardly any name at all.

In a small mountain village there lived a mother who had two little sons. Her second son she called Chang, which meant "little or nothing." But her first and honored son, she called Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo, which meant "the most wonderful thing in the whole wide world!"

(From *Tikki Tikki Tembo* by Arlene Mosel. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc. Copyright © 1968.)

The tale of *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (Arlene Mosel, 1968) is the story of two brothers who unwittingly take turns falling into the local well. Because of the brevity of his name, the younger brother Chang is quickly rescued, though he is long suffering due to the accident of birth order that relegates him to secondary status. However, the older brother Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo lies for a long time at the bottom of the well while Chang rushes about in an effort to save him and simultaneously speak his brother's great long name with reverence. Tikki tikki tembo is saved, but the moral of the story is to rethink the labels we give our children, whether in length or in meaning.

The Chinese tale is but one story within the story I am about to tell—a larger story of a yearlong study of a classroom's experience with Readers Theatre. With the help of Bill, a professional theatre director who introduced Readers Theatre to the class, and the commitment of Natasha, a classroom teacher interested in trying out alternative methods of reading instruction, I analyzed the children's interpretive behaviors—language uses, body movements, comparative approaches, and affective interpretations—as they enacted literary texts in the theatre of their own creation.

The setting for my story is a multicultural urban classroom of school-labeled remedial readers in America, not China. The time is the present day, not "once upon a time." And the protagonists for this story are not two

boys, but three—Bobby, Greg, and Henry—who had all received an RSP (Resource Specialist Program) label that caused retention as well as special classroom placement throughout the boys' short school careers. Though only third and fourth graders, these boys and their classmates had other labels as well: ESL (English as a Second Language), LEP (Limited English Proficient), Chapter 1, and Title I. Many had confidential guidance files located in the district office related to problems in the home. The boys' school problems, however, centered around reading, and it is the moral of this tale that one possible solution to the problems of labeled children is the confluence of reading with drama.

Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre is defined by McCaslin (1990) as "the oral presentation of drama, prose, or poetry by two or more readers" (p. 263). Children (a) read a story, (b) make selective and analytical choices in transforming the story into a script through social negotiation, (c) formulate, practice, and refine their interpretations, and (d) finally perform for an audience, reading aloud from hand-held scripts (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989). Readers Theatre originally began with students standing at lecterns reading with minimal gestures. However, over the years it has evolved to include elements of stage theatre, including interaction between players, expanded gestures, sets, and costumes.

Although reading in this framework is active, analytical, socially negotiated, and interpreted through both verbal and nonverbal means, it is often set aside until children master the basics. The curriculum for children labeled "at risk," "language delayed," or "learning disabled" often focuses on *literacy skills* rather than *literate behaviors* (Heath, 1991a). In the spirit of engaging children holistically in the full range of language uses, some educators argue for informed and sensitive uses of Readers Theatre for such labeled children (Bidwell, 1990; Yaffe, 1989).

In this study, a professional actor and theatre director came to the classroom to conduct 10 morning sessions in Readers Theatre (Wolf, 1992). In each session he followed a basic routine. The children began with a warm-up to prepare both voice and body, followed by mental preparation exercises de-

signed to relate thematically to upcoming text interpretations or to practice the necessary skills of an actor's trade.

The Readers Theatre work was the centerpiece of each session and consisted of script writing, rehearsal, performance, and follow-up commentary. While the children initially worked on a uniform selection, usually chosen from the basal reader by the classroom teacher, the later selections were the children's own suggestions, chosen from a variety of multicultural trade books. The seventh through ninth sessions were devoted to preparation for a culminating performance. During this period, two additional mornings were devoted to set and costume design, supported by a small budget obtained through outside funding. In the tenth and final session, the children demonstrated vocal and physical warm-ups and acting exercises, and then performed five short literary selections for their parents and peers.

Reality in rehearsal

The words "drama" and "theatre" typically call up images of creativity, imagination, and individual freedom to explore the interpretation of text. But the life of the theatre is not a boundless profusion of innovative ideas; it is instead bounded by reality, rules, and routines. The constraints offered by real life—what is and what is not possible—construct a frame for interpretation. There is ample freedom within the frame, but individual interpretations must be negotiated between performance partners, be held to available resources, and acknowledge the routines and rules that professional actors follow.

When Bill, the theatre director, came to the classroom, he highlighted the analytical aspects of text interpretation. He urged the children to prepare their voices and bodies through warm-ups, to study and critique their texts, to highlight words they wanted to emphasize, and to analyze how their choices could be reflected in intonation and gesture as well as enhanced through set design and costuming. Above all, he asked them to treat themselves and each other as characters and as actors. This identification of the child players with real actors in the theatre is similar to how coaches tend to treat their players as real professionals (Heath, 1991b).

Through explicit instruction and model-

ing, and by encouraging the children to shoulder the "mantle of the expert" (Heathcote, cited in Landy, 1982), these young actors were guided to construct their own critical frames for interpretation. And with the newly acquired label of "actors" and its incumbent responsibilities, the children began to see themselves as experts in the multiple decisions necessary for text interpretation and performance.

In preparing for the final performance, the class enthusiastically voted to perform *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, and Bobby, Henry, and Maia volunteered to play the roles of Tikki, Chang, and their mother. Due to time constraints for the final production, performance groups needed to select one scene to enact from their chosen book, which presented a problem for those who needed to include more than one scene to create dramatic tension.

The story of *Tikki Tikki Tembo* presented particular difficulties, for part of the moral of the story lay in the connection of two major episodes. In the first episode Chang fell into the well, but because he was the lowly second son the mother showed little concern. When Tikki tikki tembo, the honorable first son, fell in, however, the mother was desperate. As Bobby, Maia, and Henry sat and discussed possibilities, they flipped the pages of the book back and forth, reading different sections and writing down their ideas.

In selecting and setting the scene for enactment, Bobby called on his extensive knowledge of the text; it had only been read to him once, but he had explored the text on his own in class. The lines he used for the characters were a close paraphrase of the actual lines of the text. As Bobby outlined the possibilities for action in sequence, he combined background theatre knowledge with an articulate envisionment for his peers: He described Maia in costume, he pictured a curtain separating scenes, and he analyzed the characters' attitudes ("And we're playing around the well, never minding the warning"). His desire to get his ideas down was so strong that even the lure of recess could not pull him away from his planning.

Bobby's interpretation, however, left little room for his peers' opinions, and they were quick to point out the inequities. While Bobby was talking, Henry and Maia were busy por-

ing over the book and writing:

- Maia: No, we have to look in the book....We have to find out the scene that we're gonna do.
 Henry: It's right here. [turning to the book and reading] Chang ran as fast as his little legs could carry him to his mother
 Bobby: No, that's not the scene....
 Henry: and said, "Oh, most honorable Mother, Tikki tikki tembo—
 Bobby: No, I've already told...the scene. The scene is Maia tells us never to play by the well.
 Maia: No, Bobby, you don't know if we agree on that scene!

Bobby envisioned the scene where Chang, the insignificant brother, fell in the well, but did not include the second vital scene in the book where the beloved Tikki tikki tembo took a dive. Using the text as resource, Henry stressed the importance of the second scene and smoothly read the key words of the episode. Maia supported Henry, stating her case while she negotiated the scene to meet the needs of all the players. Their talk showed sound textual knowledge as they slipped back and forth between scenes, weighing each episode for inclusion in their play.

In their subsequent conversation, the book became a resource, but its authority was not all encompassing. Heath, Branscombe, and Thomas (1986) suggest that in extended conversations about text, the book becomes a "narrative prop [in] which children learn to create narratives of various genres on both information in books and knowledge beyond books" (p. 32). Henry and Bobby told stories about how the scene might be effectively portrayed, orchestrating their understanding of the text, their ability to paraphrase or cite lines directly, and their imaginative interpretive possibilities.

The boys' language was the talk of a conditional world—a world of "how 'bout"—which cast them into the future with suggestions that began "we can just" and "we'll have." In their discussion, they raised the following questions:

- If Tikki tikki tembo fell in the well, how would he look?
- Should he douse himself or should water "squirt out" with a splash?
- If the mother is washing her clothes, how could that best be portrayed?
- Could a table substitute for a river of "fake water"?
- If we want to include both boys falling into the well, how can we combine the episodes and still stay within our time constraints?

Henry also suggested editing the script by connecting the two major episodes with one explanatory sentence. This met with Bill's emphasis that in script writing, the children were free to make decisions about what to include and eliminate.

In the sessions that followed, the children made a number of decisions. Maia decided to work on another play—she wanted to play the lead role in the African-American story of *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (Patricia C. McKissack, 1988)—and Greg took her place. Bobby agreed to take on the role of the mother on the condition that they substitute all references to “mother” with the word “father.” He was so insistent on this point, in fact, that he crossed out every instance of “mother” on all three boys’ original scripts and carefully wrote in the masculine substitute.

When Chang runs to say that his older brother has fallen into the well, his “father” is doing his daily wash and cannot hear what Chang is saying over the rush of the river. More important, he does not listen well, for he is less patient with his second son.

In rehearsal, Bobby, Greg, and Henry sat working on their scripts, underlining the words they wanted to emphasize. Tone was at the center of this discussion. Would the father be impatient, angry, or simply perplexed? And would this attitude be reflected in tense tight-lipped talk, loud desk-banging blather, or calm query? Was it a question of simply not being able to hear over the rushing water or a statement of continued frustration with a disappointing son who constantly mumbles his words?

Bobby, Greg, and Henry experimented with a variety of options, their own voices overlapping as they tried on the tones of varying attitudes. Bobby’s initial suggestion seemed to portray poorly suppressed frustration, dragging out the vowels, but Henry interpreted this as a whine. He exaggerated the tone using nonsense words, which placed the words of text in the background while the tone became preeminent. Then he countered Bobby’s suggestion with an angrier tone, yelling the words.

Greg upped the ante on Henry’s interpretation by repeating the words three times, starting the anger off low but building to a desk-banging finale. This effective performance convinced the others that anger was the

way to go. Still, when Bobby tried the line, leaning close to Henry, lowering his brows and shouting, Henry called a halt to this interpretation (“No, ‘cause I don’t like that... ‘cause I have enough of that at home.”).

Bruner (1976) suggests that children play to explore and understand the real world while simultaneously being buffered from natural consequences. Control is a key issue, for the child at play can shape the objects and actions as well as the intentions and motivations of the characters in play. In portraying the father in the story, Bobby played his own father, imitating his gestures and tone, but for Henry the stance was too menacing. His enthusiasm for a violent interpretation fell away when the tone of anger, supplemented by intense eye gaze and threatening gestures, was specifically directed at him. For Henry, the buffer zone of play had disappeared, and the danger was too close, too familiar, for comfort.

Perhaps because all the boys could appreciate Henry’s position, they offered a substitute for menacing violence. Greg suggested the world-weary voice of a father burdened by daily duties as well as an incessantly tiresome boy jabbering at his side. He sped up Chang’s line, turning it into a blur of noise, and then slowed the pace to pick up on this suggestion, and all elements of anger were dismissed.

In their rehearsals, Bobby, Greg, and Henry not only analyzed the language of the text, but they weighed the possibilities for interpretation in their choice of props. They decided to use a rope instead of a ladder to save the drowning characters because a ladder was hard to come by and jump ropes were easily available in the classroom. They built a set—wrapping red poster board around a desk, cutting a window in the structure to enable the audience to see the action of drowning at the bottom of their well. With a small budget for costumes, they prepared a shopping list, weighing their suggestions against monetary constraints:

- Greg: Are three pairs of Ninja shoes too much?
Shelby: ...Ninja shoes. Uh—I don’t even know what Ninja shoes look like. Are they like the—
Greg: ...They’re like...black on top of here and something—they’re like cloth up here [sticking his foot on the desk and demonstrating with his hands]
Shelby: Do you think I could get them in Chinatown?
Henry: Ya.
Greg: Ya. They have a whole lot of ‘em.

Ninja shoes were a highly desired item, deriving in part from the boys' love of Ninja Turtles, but the request was also a reasonable one, for they were inexpensive and in good supply. The boys also requested Chinese jackets (blue for Greg, yellow for Henry, and brown for Bobby), but as I was about to leave for the day to purchase their requests from the shopping list they prepared, Greg pulled me aside and said, "The colors don't really matter. Just make sure they have dragons on the back."

Play in performance

In Readers Theatre, players learned to respond to each other not only as actor to actor but as character to character, with a spontaneous response that tied the players together in the space, time, and situation of the text. The spontaneity hinged on the well practiced dance of players as they rehearsed and refined the match of talk and movement for their characters. This is not to say that their choices in voice and physicalization were frozen in form, but rather emerged within each performance (Baumann, 1977). Although lines were often set and moves and tones worked out in advance, performance, particularly with a new and untested audience, intensified the experience. Thus, the players connected as actor to audience as well, playing up successful lines and joining the audience in their response.

During rehearsal, Greg, who played the character of Tikki tikki tembo, adopted a goofy, clumsy shuffle atop the well and imitated the act of drowning with panache. When I asked him where he got the idea for such dramatic drowning, he referred to a specific episode of *The Simpsons*, a television series quite popular with the children in Natasha's class. Several other children had seen the episode and said that Greg's imitation was just right. In the final performance, however, Greg expanded on the comic effects of his choice and began the scene by falling down on the desks. This was something he had never done in rehearsal, but it met with such a positive audience response, it gave Greg full license to play up all the slapstick actions at which he so excelled.

Garvey (1990) provides an apt label for the audience reaction—"group glee" in which hand clapping and sounds of enthusiasm spread "like wildfire from one child through the group" (p. 21). In the glow of group glee,

Greg redoubled his comic efforts. His Tikki tikki tembo was the ultimate clown—a figure that fell down, leaped up, pranced and danced around the desk tops, and fell with abandon to the bottom of the well.

During the performance, Greg also made innovative use of the Chinese cap and queue of his costume. After Greg thrashed about at the bottom of the well, Bobby (as father) and Henry (as Chang) finally came to his rescue. As they pulled him up, it became apparent that Greg had reversed his cap. The cap was tipped forward on his forehead, and the queue now hung down in front of his face. Greg ignored the fact that while it is possible to turn one's cap around, yanking a braid from back to front was physically impossible. Although his choice bordered on the absurd, its unreality was outweighed by a higher bid for comic behavior. Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983) explain that "play is guided by the organism-dominated question, 'What can I do with this object'" (p. 699). In formulating the answer, children take control, assigning meanings that may not match functions or purposes in reality. Although the answer to the question is "Whatever I wish!" the meanings chosen are not arbitrary, but are justified by criteria that meet goals.

Greg later explained that his choice was "Like makin' some comedy" and in comedy, as he well knew through cartoons, anything could happen. In cartoons, pulverized characters come to life in the next frame, a six-inch goose egg on the forehead shrinks to normal size in seconds, and flattened coyotes fill out to chase the roadrunner again. No one—actors, adults, or audience members—questioned Greg's choice. Instead, they laughed. By shifting his hat around, Greg helped to shift what might otherwise be interpreted as a desperate situation into a light-hearted romp at the bottom of a well. Yet, his interpretation did not veer far from the humor of the original text illustration, for in the story Tikki tikki tembo is pictured sitting calmly at the bottom of the well, his cheeks puffed out in an exaggerated and comical pose of holding his breath.

Rethinking labels

The labels we assign children often reflect the difficulties they have in school—their limitations of language, difficulties with de-

coding, and confusions in reading comprehension. The labels focus on and assign importance to what is *not* in the child, *rather* than on what is there, and the instruction that emerges from deficit models assumes that skills will be mastered by the child if only he or she will *listen* (Heath, 1991a). Readers Theatre, however, offers some interesting contrasts to traditional instruction for such labeled children. The primary assumption here is that children will come to be capable interpreters of text if they are allowed and encouraged to *talk* (Wolf & Heath, 1992).

In this Readers Theatre classroom, children formally labeled at risk became experts in interpretation, direction, set design, and costuming. They negotiated the critical analysis of text among peers. They used vocal tone and physical gesture to display their interpretations. They established their individual talents. Bobby became known as a "director" who could help others clarify their plans. Henry's range of vocal interpretation led others to attempt intonational variety. Greg was known as both "comedian" and "artist," for he designed the program for the final performance. And all the children raised their status among both peers and teachers through successful performance. As one classroom wrote in a thank-you note for the performance, "You are all stars!"

In the tale of *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, a child is nearly lost by his misguided label. His brother Chang rushes to save him, but his rescue is slowed by an adult's demand for Chang to articulate his message in set ways. Bobby, Greg, and Henry all had their school labels, but the labels did not indicate what the boys knew. However, through the analytical talk of Readers Theatre—the negotiation, decisions, ges-

tures, set design, reading, drawing, and writing—the boys created and enacted an interpretation of text that demonstrated what they knew and understood about text and the world around them.

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