

## **“SISTER, CAN YOU READ THE STORY AGAIN?”** **Observing Children’s Responses to Picture Books**

**Sister Fesaitu**

Two picture books *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, written and illustrated by Eric Carle and *The Kuia and the Spider* by Patricia Grace illustrated by Robyn Kahukiwa, were read to three different groups of children, a group of normal children, a group of mute children and a group of blind children. Each group was presented with the stories on three separate occasions a week apart and observations were made. Each of these sessions lasted for approximately one hour.

The age of these children ranged from four to thirteen years. The number in each group ranged from six to eight. These children have very little access to good children’s books. The group of normal children live in the housing authority settlement. The older children’s best known book is the “Bera na Liva” (Phantom Comics). The mutes have a few books in school and the blind only those available in braille. So their idea of story books was very limited. To many children, it was a new experience to sit and listen to stories read to them and have pictures shown to them during the reading. Because of their limited access to books, the sessions we had were something they looked forward to.

During my first session with the normal group, the children at the beginning were restless. They wanted to know what stories I was going to read them, and if I had brought some Phantom comics with me. But when I told them that I had brought something new, they moved closer. When they saw the two books, the boys asked if I could read “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” first but the girls wanted me to read “The Kuia and the Spider”. This reaction to me was an indication that they were interested in the books.

“The Very Hungry Caterpillar” was read first. The children were attentive, some smiled at the pictures of how the caterpillar made holes through the different fruit. When I had finished reading the story, comments and questions such as “he ate the apple”, “no two pears on Wednesday not Tuesday”, “not even, ask Sister”, “yes he build a house and what is it made of?” “What are plums and berries?” were asked among themselves. Then one of them said, “Sister, can you read the story again?” Another one said, “Yes, because I think, the story is very nice.” From their questions, comments and remarks I felt these children enjoyed the story.

They showed the same interest and attentiveness when “The Kuia and the Spider” was read to them. For after reading the story, the youngest of them, grabbed my hand and said, “Me fink nana win te fight cos she fat and big

and pider small.” Another one said “No they not fight they angry”. Some commented about the mats. “Spider mat nice .....” “Yes, but me say not strong like nana”. These reactions from the children showed they were really interested in the story as well as the pictures to be able to make such comments or to ask such questions.

The second session was just as exciting. They were just as attentive and interested as in the previous session. Some remembered the stories fairly well. One took me in the back yard to show me a spider’s web, which made me very pleased for he was able to relate what he saw in the book to his everyday activity.

On my third visit, they volunteered to retell the stories to me. When one of them missed a line or paused for a while someone else helped him. When they all had had turns in telling the stories, they asked for new story books when I came back. This was an indication that they understood, appreciated and enjoyed the stories.

As for the mute group, it was amazing to watch them absorbed in the books. On the three occasions I visited them, I did not read the stories but showed them the pictures, and pointed to the words as we proceeded with the story. These children read the words and read the pictures as well.

The first book we studied was “The Very Hungry Caterpillar”. Their actions, facial expression and the sounds they made conveyed their feelings, interest and appreciation as well as enjoyment of the story, the pictures and the colourful caterpillar. When “The Kuia and the Spider” was shown to them, they were very observant. They noticed things that I had not noticed. For example, the different times shown on the clock as it appeared on different pages, the house being situated on the hill overlooking the sea, the number of mats the Kuia wove, the number of plates on the shelf, the pot holder, the window screen and the floor of the same colour, the key and the door-knob, the number of grandsons and granddaughters. The children noted all this things that the normal group were not aware of. Some of them compared the Kuia’s hair with that of an Indian girl’s hair. When I pointed to another Indian girl, they shook their heads telling me by signs that her hair was not parted in the middle. They were also aware of shapes. For example the triangular web, the circular hub of the web, the oval shape of the spider’s body, the number of legs the spider had. They used their fingers to indicate this.

The boys seemed to enjoy “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” more. For they took the book and were absorbed in it. They enjoyed miming the caterpillar. The girls seemed to enjoy “The Kuia and the Spider”. When I gave them the book, they pretended to weave and some pretended to do the cooking. From all these activities, I felt that they were interested in the books. They also understood the stories for they were able to mime them. Furthermore, I think they enjoyed themselves when looking at the pictures.

On the second visit, they were just as interested as on the first visit. More attention was paid to "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" and especially to the fruit. Their interest was not as sustained as on the first visit, for after going through the two books, they left the books and moved to do something else.

On the third session, very little enthusiasm was shown and only for a few minutes. They became restless and I felt that they were bored, so I took out "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" and immediately, they moved closer; their eyes beamed with renewed interest. These reactions showed that they must have grown tired of looking at the same books. Since their power of observation is very good, they must have seen everything of interest to them. Thus, they wanted something new and different. However, on the whole, I felt that these mutes understood the stories from reading the pictures and they appreciated and enjoyed the story books.

The third group was that of the blind children. Prior to the reading of the stories, a short discussion about animals, fruit, butterflies, mats, weaving, grandmothers and spiders was held. Thus when "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" was read the children were very attentive. Since they could not see they stopped me now and again to ask questions such as, "What are strawberries?" "Are there any strawberries in Fiji? How big is the fruit? Like the mangoes?" or "The caterpillar's teeth must be very sharp eh?" or "What is the caterpillar's house called? What is it made of?" Their understanding of the story depended on their listening ability as well as the way the story was read to them.

They showed the same interest and attentiveness when "The Kuia and the Spider" was read. They asked questions like, "What are kits? What do they look like? How many grandchildren has she? How many has the spider? Who died first, the spider or the grandmother?" To the latter questions, before I answered, one of them said, "I think the spider, because Oscar must have blown down her house." To this remark, the rest of the children laughed. So I took the cue that they were enjoying the stories.

They maintained the same interest during my second and third visits. I was surprised for I expected a waning of interest. They were eager to hear the stories. They seemed to know the stories by heart, for they knew exactly when I missed something out. For example, one would say "Hey you forgot to say the egg on the leaf." or "You didn't say the piece of water melon."

From their reactions I felt that they followed the stories fairly closely and thus had a fair understanding. They enjoyed the stories even though they could not see the pictures. From listening to the stories attentively they probably form certain images in their minds while the story is being read to them and thus entertain themselves from their imaginations.

From these records of my own observations with these three different categories of children, I discovered that good story books are very important for the normal child benefits from both the story and the illustration, while the mute benefits from the illustration and the blind from the way the story is written and read. I felt that the children of each group, understood, appreciated and enjoyed the two stories in their own ways. I also felt that story books are essential for the handicapped as well as the normal child for good books can make children's lives richer and wiser. Most children whether normal or handicapped are good enthusiastic story-listeners, and whether or not their enthusiasm grows or wanes depends on their experience with stories and books.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- Carle, Eric, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* Picture Puffins, 1982.  
Grace, Patricia *The Kuia and the Spider* Picture Puffins 1982.