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Peer-reviewed paper

Storytelling cultures in early years classrooms

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The analysis presented in this article draws on Rogoff's (2003) work on intent participation and Dyson's (2001, 2010) studies of children's written compositions to identify the nature of peers' contributions to meaning making, and cultural transmission processes claimed to occur when young children narrate stories to supportive adults. It draws on data collected during an evaluation of an in-service training programme that introduced UK-based early years practitioners to a version of Paley's (1990) storytelling and story acting curriculum known as the *Helicopter Technique* (HT). The HT draws on theatre practice and drama to foster narrative development and literacy skills. Children tell a story to a practitioner trained to scribe this exactly as told and who assists them to identify story characters that can be acted out later with peers. The significance of adults' contributions to these sessions is well understood, but less is known about the contribution of peers who may also be present. The evidence presented suggests that these peer-to-peer processes can be described as two-way transactions between more and less confident language users and may be particularly important for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Implications of these findings for practitioners supporting second language learners are discussed.

Introduction

In this article, I examine the social processes and cultural resources children employ when invited to tell stories to an attentive adult using a sociocultural lens to interpret children's literacy development (Dyson, 2001, 2010; Rogoff, 2003). My analysis is based on video observations and stories gathered during an evaluation of the *Helicopter Technique*, (Cremin, Swann, Flewitt, Faulkner, & Kucirkova, 2013), an in-service training programme for early years practitioners devised by a theatre and education company, *MakeBelieve Arts* (MBA), (Lee, 2012, 2014). The *Helicopter Technique*, (HT) is based on Vivien Gussin Paley's storytelling and story acting curriculum and has been designed to foster narrative development and literacy skills in early years settings. Although there is widespread recognition of the contribution of Paley's work to our understanding of children's play, narrative and literacy development (for example, Cooper, 2005, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2005), prior to the evaluation by Cremin et al. (2013), there have been few studies of its benefits in UK contexts (but see Typadi & Hayon, 2010). Thus, Cremin et al. (2013) were commissioned to undertake a comprehensive investigation of the impact of the HT in settings in Inner London and the Southeast of England.



Previous studies of Paley's work have established that children's meaning making in the context of storytelling and story acting is situated in a rich web of social and cultural encounters and collaborative interactions with peers and supporting adults, (Nicolopoulou, 2005). While Cooper (2005) has documented the importance of the adult's contribution to the child's understanding of literacy conventions during storytelling/story-scribing episodes, there has not been much documentation about the role and contribution of peers during storytelling sessions. This is curious, as our evidence suggests that other children are keenly interested in these sessions. The videos collected for the MBA evaluation clearly showed that participating children experienced storytelling, and the anticipation that their story will be acted out later, as a desirable and enjoyable activity. They were keen to volunteer to be storytellers and to act in each other's stories. Importantly, however, storytelling sessions were rarely limited to the dyadic interaction between practitioner and child. Frequently, a small cluster of the storyteller's peers gathered round this dyad and some of these children would attempt to position themselves as close to the practitioner as possible, even if this meant leaning across the storyteller or sitting right in front of the adult. Although Nicolopoulou (2005) suggests children's meaning making is situated in their social and cultural encounters and collaborative interactions with peers, the children we observed rarely contributed to, or offered any direct comment on each other's stories. Their participation in these sessions, therefore, could not really be described as collaborative. As a psychologist with a keen interest in socio-cognitive development and the influence of peer collaboration on young children's play, story-telling and creativity (Faulkner 2011; Faulkner & Coates, 2011; Faulkner & Miell, 1991, 2004), I found this intensely curious. As sociocultural theory has informed much of my own work, in particular the writings of Vygotsky (1978), and Rogoff (1991, 2003), a key question for me was how the obvious interest and attention these children displayed in each other's narratives might contribute to their understanding of the cultural practice of storytelling, and what, if anything, they might be learning by observation.

My analysis of the video observations and collections of stories in class logbooks has been informed by research on "firsthand learning through intent participation" (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003). The analysis explored, firstly, the nature of peer involvement in the storytelling sessions and whether there was any evidence that attendant peers actively contributed to each other's narratives, and secondly, whether there was evidence of 'cultural transmission' between children. That is, whether after listening to another child telling his or her story, listening peers appropriated its themes and characters when it was their turn to tell a story. A high proportion of children in the nursery and reception classes participating in the evaluation were from indigenous African, Asian or other ethnic minority groups. In addition, a significant minority had special educational needs and for many, English was an Additional Language. I was also interested, therefore, to understand possible influences of this considerable cultural and linguistic diversity on children's individual and collective meaning making. The next section gives a brief description of the schools involved in the evaluation, here identified as School B and School C.



The schools

The Inner London schools that participated in the evaluation were primarily interested in the potential impact of the HT on children's narrative understanding and literacy development. These schools are situated in London Boroughs, where over 50 percent of the population belong to indigenous and minority ethnic groups. Consequently, the practitioners in these schools were also interested in whether the HT facilitated language development, as, in many cases, English was not the children's first language. School B had a high percentage of children on Free School Meals, a significant number of migratory families (due to social and housing problems) and a high level of children identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN). It was also ethnically diverse, with approximately half the children registered with English as an Additional Language. The Nursery teacher and Early Years Practitioner (EYP), supported by two part-time Learning Support Assistants, was responsible for 24 children (14 boys and 10 girls). The Reception teacher was also the Early Years Coordinator, and was supported by a teaching assistant. This class had a total of 29 children (nine boys and 20 girls). In both classes, approximately a third of the children had English as an Additional Language.

School C was a larger than average primary school, with approximately 330 pupils on roll. It was multicultural and multilingual. Just over half the pupils were of White British heritage. A quarter of the pupils were of Bangladeshi origin; the remainder came from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds. Two fifths of pupils spoke an additional language to English. A high proportion of pupils were eligible for Free School Meals. The number of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was above average with many of these having moderate learning difficulties. A phase leader coordinated provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and each class had a class teacher and a nursery nurse. Two combined nursery and reception classes, each with 27 children, participated in the evaluation. Just under half of these children were from households where English was not the main language spoken.

In the three classes described above, we collected field and video observation data from the initial training session with MBA trainers, as well as photographs and video observation data from storytelling and story acting sessions on three further occasions during the summer school term (April – July). We also kept copies of the class logbooks containing all of the stories children produced during *Helicopter* sessions over one school term. In this paper, (and outside the original purposes of the main evaluation), I draw on these video observations and logbooks to investigate the role of peer involvement in the storytelling sessions and to explore whether this appears to influence the nature and content of these children's narratives when, later, it is their turn to tell a story. The nature of these sessions and the in-service training offered by MBA are briefly described in the next section.

The MBA Helicopter Technique

The *Helicopter Technique* offered by *MakeBelieve Arts*, (Lee, 2012, 2014) typically involves an adult scribe sitting with and listening carefully to an individual child's story, writing this down word for word as it is narrated, reading the story back to the child, clarifying the key characters or stage parts and



underlining these so that they can be acted out later. An important tenant is that *any* contribution a child makes should be respected and recorded, even if this is only a single word, a noise accompanied by actions and gestures, or two or three loosely connected phrases. Similarly, teachers are coached not to rephrase or correct a child's emerging narrative and grammar, although they may offer non-directive prompts, such as 'What happened next?' or 'Did anything else happen in your story?' Each storytelling session lasts approximately ten minutes.

Later the same day, all children in the class become actors and audience, and enact the day's stories on a special 'stage' marked out on the floor with tape. Typically, on any day, between four to six stories might be recorded and acted. In our study, the stories were collected in a single logbook over the course of a term. Each story is restricted to a page in length (although children may continue their story on a later occasion). Typically, the story's author is encouraged to select the children who are to act out their story. All stories are acted out and teachers become skilled in encouraging children to use mime, movement and gesture to represent even the simplest of stories. Similarly, the only props used are the shapes and configurations of the children's bodies, such as the joining of hands to represent an arch or the gateway to a castle, or the waving of arms to represent trees.

Analysis and discussion

Peer involvement in the storytelling sessions: The video data

In total, 55 storytelling sessions were captured on video from the nursery and reception classes at School B and the combined nursery/reception classes at School C. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the number of sessions videoed in each setting.

Table 1 Number of storytelling sessions with boys and girls in each setting

		Number of storytellers	
Class	Number of sessions ^a	Boys	Girls
Nursery	15	5	4
Combined N/R ^b	30	13	14
Reception	10	4	3
Totals	55	22	21

^a There are more storytelling sessions than children, as several children were videoed on more than one occasion.

^b Data from the Combined Nursery/Reception classes has been pooled,

My review of this data focused initially on identifying and counting all instances of peer involvement in the storytelling sessions and the number of peers, in addition to the storyteller, who appeared to be watching and listening to the storyteller and adult scribing the story. In some cases, accurate identification of the number of children was difficult, as they tended to move in and out of the video frame, although remaining in close proximity. As far as was possible, the physical positions of these peers relative to the storyteller and adult were also



noted. The numbers of children present, in addition to the storyteller, ranged from zero to seven. At least two other children were present, in addition, in 73 percent of the recorded sessions. On average, there were four to five children present in the nursery, three to four in the combined N/R classes and two to three in the reception class.

In most cases where the storyteller and just one other child were present, the two children sat on either side of the adult. When more children were present, they could assume any one of number of positions. Children who were actively watching and listening to the story tended to cluster in front of or to either side of the storyteller and adult. Although these children sometimes interrupted the storyteller by wanting to know when their turn was or by identifying the role they would like to play during the later story acting session, contrary to expectations, they did not actively contribute ideas and suggestions that could be incorporated into the story although they occasionally interpreted or clarified a storyteller's meanings for the adult. Other children appeared to be monitoring the progress of the storytelling sessions at a slight distance whilst simultaneously engaging in other activities, usually on the floor or at the other end of the table. Finally, some children appeared, departed and reappeared from other areas of the classroom between two and three times during the ten minutes or so it took for each session.

My interpretation of this evidence draws on Rogoff's (2003) sociocultural theory of children's guided participation in cultural practices and her account of first hand learning through intent participation (Rogoff et al., 2003). In my view, this offers a convincing explanation of the nature and purpose of the roles assumed by attendant peers, as well as accounting for the collective narratives that evolved between children over time. The video analysis confirms that only a quarter of HT storytelling sessions are restricted to a dyadic interaction between storyteller and adult; more usually, one or more of the storyteller's peers are also present. This is particularly true of the three-to-four year-olds in the nursery class. Although some children were passive bystanders, other children's participation was more deliberate and intentional. Rogoff (2003) describes the nature of this involvement as 'intent participation', defined in operational terms as, "Learning through keen observation and listening, in anticipation of participation" (Rogoff et al., 2003, p. 176). The video data supports this interpretation. Firstly, attendant peers were as interested in learning about the writing process as they were in the emerging story. The direction of their gaze was seldom on the storyteller's face; instead, it focused on the movement of the adult's pencil across the page. The children were intensely interested in how the storyteller's words could be represented as marks on the page, and how these marks allowed the teacher to read the story back. They were interested in how many words could fit on a page, the spelling of names, and the underlining of story characters and roles. This supports previous studies' claims that the HT promotes literacy development. Secondly, in anticipation of their own possible participation in the later story acting session, attendant peers frequently volunteered to take part in the later story acting session as one or other of the underlined story characters. By contrast, the children monitoring the progress of the session on the periphery (usually in anticipation of being called to act as a storyteller later) could be described as active bystanders rather than intent participants. These children were not obviously interested in the writing process, nevertheless, they did appear to be 'learning by eavesdropping' (Rogoff et al., 2003) and by imitation (Vygotsky, 1978) as later they incorporated identical



characters and phrases to those used by the storyteller into their own stories. In some instances, peers with a more competent command of language progressively elaborated the ideas of a child with a less secure grasp of English and/or less knowledge and experience of storytelling and narrative structure. This has been illustrated in the following example of stories told consecutively by four boys from a reception class.

Story 1

The Ninja fought and then they came home and then they were friends again.

Story 2

One day there was a Ninja who was at home. And then he was fighting with the black Ninja. And then he went home to fight some of the other ones. And he punched someone and then he fell.

Story 3

My story is going to be about an airoplane. And the tigers trying to get the airoplane. And then a female tiger came along to get the male. Then Ninjas are trying to fight the tigers and then even more Ninjas are trying to attack the tigers. Then the tigers went on the bridge and then they were too heavy. Then they just fell down.

Story 4

One day there was a man and the man saw a Ninja. And when he saw the Ninja he took his helmet off and then asked all his other friends to come and play with the Ninja. Then there was a lion and the lion chased the Ninjas.

From a simple start, these stories become progressively more elaborate, with each child internalising the language, characters and actions previously introduced by his peers whilst, at the same time, introducing one or more new elements. They also demonstrate how these children drew on shared cultural knowledge to elaborate and extend the 'Ninja' topic introduced by the first child. Further examples are given in the next section.

The influence of peers on story content: The logbook data

The class logbooks were used to compare the stories told by individual children during the videoed storytelling sessions with those told subsequently by other children present during these sessions. Table 2 shows the total number of stories by boys and girls recorded in the class logbooks in each type of class.

Table 2 Number of Stories in class logbooks by class type and gender

Class	Boys	Girls	Totals
Nursery	37	30	67
Combined N/R	64	58	122
Reception	12	29	41
Totals	113	117	230

The evidence from the videos and logbooks demonstrated that stories produced by intent participators and active bystanders frequently appropriated themes, characters and actions previously introduced by the storytellers captured on video. Socially constructed, collective narratives that reflected local cultural



meanings began to emerge over successive iterations on the same day or over time on different days. There were twenty-eight instances where two or more children built on each other's narratives either sequentially, or over the course of two or more sessions. For example, five different children from the nursery class (N) narrated the following stories over three weeks. Two or more of this group were observed listening to each other's stories at any one time.

Story 1

Big bad wolf 'Little pig, little pig let me come in. Not on my hair on my chinny chin chin'. (Boy 1N – first week)

Story 2

The three little pigs go to build a house with bricks. The three pigs go to see a wolf. And the wolf run go inside their house. And the three little pigs fought the fire and the wolf does burn his bottom. (Boy 2N – immediately following Boy 1N)

Story 3

There was a crocodile. The crocodile snatched the water. And then the little pig came and then she just eat some food. And then the crocodile snatched the food. And then there was a big bad wolf. And then the goldfish swam in the sea. And then a dinosaur came and then it ate the goldfish. (Boy 3N – immediately following Boy 2N)

Story 4

Once upon a time there was a little girl called Rapunzel. She had very long hair. It was magic hair and the crocodile ate her hair so she couldn't get her Mum to get up to her tower because she was shopping and didn't have a ladder. There was a green butterfly and there was a boy called Jim. (Girl 1N – one week later)

Story 5

Once upon a time there was a little princess, Cinderella who lived in a castle and a boy called Jack climbed up her hair and she had long hair and then magic. They kissed and some people play music. They sleep, then they wake up and eat breakfast. Then they lived happily ever after. (Girl 2N following Girl 1N)

Although these five stories are only loosely connected, they illustrate a number of features common to many of the stories told by the children. Firstly, they draw on highly memorable fairy tales that these children are used to hearing at school. The characters from these fairy tales frequently join each other in a single story, as in the final story above, which contains elements of Cinderella, Rapunzel and Jack and the Beanstalk. Secondly, the same characters and themes reappear in successive stories: the three little pigs, the wolf, the crocodile, the magic hair and a princess or girl (Rapunzel and Cinderella) trapped in a tower or castle. As reported in the American studies of Paley's story-telling and story acting practice, clear evidence of gendered subcultures also emerged (Nicolopoulou, Brockmeyer, de Sá, & Ilgaz, 2014). For example, although 44 percent of girls' stories involved elements drawn from one or more fairy tales, these elements only appeared in 12 percent of boys' stories. By contrast, 27 percent of the boys' stories mentioned two or more American or Japanese superheroes in the same story, compared with 9 percent of girls' stories. The superhero most frequently mentioned by girls was 'Pink Power Ranger', a female character. Finally, although 46 percent of girls' stories had a conventional beginning, 'Once upon a time' or 'Once upon a time there was a



princess', this was true for only 35 percent of boys' stories, and only 26 of the 230 stories (11 percent) had both traditional beginning and/or a conventional ending. Only seven stories from the nursery class had both a beginning and an ending.

The next set of stories from one of the combined N/R classes (C) illustrates other features commonly observed in children's stories.

Story 1

Once upon a time there was a crocodile. Then one monster come to eat the crocodile. And then Ben 10 come to save the crocodile. Then Spiderman come to the rescue and Superman as well. Then Ben 10, Spiderman and Superman killed altogether the monster. Then crocodile was swimming along by herself. Crocodile was happy. (Girl 1C – first week)

Story 2

Ben 10 is fighting the monster. Then Ben 10 uses his automatic to make alien. He turned to foot fire. Then he uses hand to make fire. Then the monster gone back home. Then the Ben 10 go home and watch TV. (Boy 1C – immediately following Girl 1C)

Story 3

Once upon a time there was a crocodile swimming and then one Ben 10 said, are you swimming or are you working. And then the crocodile said, 'I'm swimming'. And then the Superman comed to look where the monster is. Then Superman fight the monster. And the Batman was going to find a snake and then fight him. And the superhero is coming to rescue someone, and then the superhero is going to find someone and he find a bear. (Girl 1C – one week later)

Story 4

Batman was walking in the park and he saved someone and he went to the Bat cave and he got Robin. And then Robin got someone to help someone. Then they went to the Bat cave and they did work. And when they went there they found a new job to do. Then the job was they had to get someone to help do the work. Then they went to get someone to fix the computer. (Boy 2C immediately following Girl 1C)

Story 5

Batman hit monster. Ben 10 hit monster. Then Ben 10 hit monster again. Then Ben 10 hit some fire. Then Ben 10 hit Power Mega Mega. (Boy 3C immediately following Girl 1C and Boy 2C)

As with Girl 1C (see Story 1), several children produced variations on the same story in successive weeks and frequently these stories become more complex, although the stories told by children with EAL, such as Boy 2C (see Story 4), tended to remain list-like, or, as in the case of Boy 1N (in a previous set of stories), used highly repetitive words and phrases from traditional fairy tales. Many of the stories contained characters that combined or remixed several superhero narratives, (in this example, Superman, Spiderman, Batman and Robin). In many cases, superheroes, fairy tale characters and characters from TV and video games co-starred in the same story (as in this example, where Ben 10 hits a Power Ranger in Boy 2C's story). Approximately 21 percent of all



stories contained an eclectic mix of characters drawn from traditional stories and the contemporary media, although approximately 40 percent of all stories described domestic themes, such as going to school or on an outing to the shops or park. Here again, however, children frequently appropriated events, characters and actions mentioned in immediately preceding stories. Only 18 stories told by boys and seven told by girls could be categorised as truly original.

The ways in which the children built on and elaborated each other's stories and/or appropriated characters initially introduced by another child are similar to those reported by Dyson (2010) in her investigation of young children's written compositions. She argues that young children's stories should be understood as socio-cultural productions and that, "Often one child's production could not be understood without situating it in other children's productions" (Dyson, 2010, p. 16). As here, Dyson demonstrated that young children show immense collegial interest in each other's meaning making, even when they are tasked with composing an individual story or text. This can lead them to deliberately copy, remix and recontextualize each other's compositions during composing events, so that collectively they, "Participate in the production of popular culture and, indeed, their own peer worlds" (Dyson, 2010, p. 16). The logbooks in our study contain many examples that support this cultural studies interpretation of story content, in addition to evidence suggesting "deliberate coordination of composing" (Dyson, 2010, p. 17). This occurs when a group of peers implicitly draw on identical or closely related themes, so that the content of their stories exemplifies the meaning making activity and gendered subcultures of the peer group as a whole, rather than the meaning making of any one individual (Nicolopoulou et al., 2014).

The influence of the Helicopter Technique on narrative development

Finally, I would like to argue that, as the HT requires children to tell a 'story' to an adult scribe and later to participate in its staging with their peers, what they are learning, individually and collectively, is how to develop a play-script, similar to those identified by Rowe (1998) in her study of literary related dramatic play. In anticipation of their stories being acted out, children began to develop an understanding of how to construct a play-script, rather than a conventionally structured narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end. They frequently included 'stage directions', actions and multiple characters so that as many of their peers as possible could be included in the later story acting sessions. While stories with a domestic theme might identify particular children by name, the *dramatis personae* of many 'play-scripts' typically included superheroes battling monsters or dragons, and princesses and knights with magical powers. In other cases, they drew on traditional multi-character fairy tales, (*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*). Regardless of age, there was considerable consistency in terms of the number of characters or acting parts included by both boys and girls. Sixty-four percent of all stories contained three or more acting parts, and in some cases contained up to 12 parts. It was also apparent from the videos that, when peers are present, storytellers often focused more on including multiple parts with dramatic potential, rather than on developing a well-formed story with a beginning, middle and end. Similarly, during the 'read through' of the script that typically took place at the end of the storytelling session, attendant peers focused intently on



the 'stage directions' the teacher marked on the script by underlining the words that signified the parts and actions to be acted out later and, most importantly, the circle she made around the part the storyteller selected for him/herself. There was a keen sense of anticipation at this point, so much so that children who had moved away earlier returned for the read through to find out whether there was a part they might be called upon to play during the later story acting session.

Conclusion

As there was considerable diversity within and between classes in the Inner London schools, in terms of language development, there was a lack of conclusive evidence for any advance in children's narrative skills over the relatively short duration of this study (see Cremin et al., 2013 for details). The findings suggest, however, that the HT encourages peer learning through processes of intent participation, imitation and internalisation. The fascination and intense interest children took in observing the adult writing indicates that HT is important for literacy development, as it draws attention to the symbolic representation of the spoken word. It is also apparent that the emphasis placed by the HT on the adult annotating the written version of the stories with marks to identify characters and stage directions allows children to develop an understanding of how play scripts work and how these are different from other kinds of story. In the case of some children, however, including more and more characters in their stories that could later be acted by peers in the story acting session became an aim in itself that appeared more important than establishing narrative coherence. Consequently, their stories were list like and lacking in structure, making it difficult to establish whether the HT had any positive impact on these children's literacy development per se.

A key implication for practice, however, lies with the observation that the majority of the children's stories drew on cultural resources provided by media texts, (television, film and computer games experienced at home) or traditional fairy tales, rather than their home culture. One possible reason for this might be that, as English was an additional language for many children, the highly repetitive language and predictable structure of fairy tales offered an easy solution to the adult's request, 'Would you like to tell me a story?' In fact, some children appeared to interpret this as requiring a more or less verbatim rendering of a fairy tale, confirming Dyson's (2001) observation that young children will often make sense of a new activity, such as the HT, by recontextualizing it within a more, familiar and meaningful activity frame. Another interpretation is that fairy tales and super hero texts contribute to a common culture of childhood that operates across ethnic and community boundaries (Dyson, 2001, p. 430), and therefore offer a 'lingua franca' that is more likely to be accessible to and understood by everyone, particularly children with EAL. This shared culture appeared to mediate multiple peer-to-peer transactions between more and less confident story tellers that allowed the former to appropriate and elaborate the ideas and language contributed by the latter, thereby providing models and examples that more hesitant language users, particularly those with EAL, could imitate.

Advice to early years practitioners supporting children learning English as an Additional Language supports this interpretation: conventionally structured



stories with clear and familiar plots are recommended, as these offer children with EAL an opportunity to tune into and rehearse a variety of reasonably predictable language sequences (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007). Effective practice also recognises, however, that home language skills are transferrable and are an important foundation for second language acquisition. In the settings we observed, it was difficult to detect any developmental progress in terms of children's use of English and understanding of narrative structure. It is likely that this would not have been the case had there been specialist bilingual support for some of the Helicopter sessions that would have allowed children to tell stories in their first language. In England, Ethnic Minority Achievement teams or EAL and Literacy coordinators can provide this support, although there is a high demand for these services. Even where this support is not available, however, practitioners are actively encouraged to reflect on how to build on the narrative understanding children may be developing in their home languages by sourcing translations and culturally diverse texts¹ that can provide positive images of community cultures and richer alternatives to the linguistic experiences offered by fairy tales and superhero texts.

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¹ *Seven Stories*, National Centre for Children's Books in England recently released a list of the 50 best children's books for all ages published from 1950 to the present day that celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity. This is available from <http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/news/latestnews/diverse-voice-top-50>



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