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## Experience of Beauty: Valuing Emotional Engagement and Collaboration in Teacher-Child Storytelling Activities

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**Abstract.** At the kindergarten stage, storytelling activities are a proven intervention that promotes children's vocabulary, reading, oral expression and writing development. The purpose of this study was to examine children's emotional engagement and cooperation during storytelling by early childhood teachers. This study adopted a qualitative research method with a sample of children (aged 5-6 years) in an inclusive K3 kindergarten in China. Data were collected through video recordings of storytelling activities. Conversation Analysis (CA) and Multimodal Interaction Analysis (MIA) were used as analytical tools for teacher-child emotional engagement and collaboration in storytelling activities. The study focuses on the entertaining nature of teachers' storytelling organisation, storytelling teaching styles and children's participation (verbal and non-verbal). The study found that teachers used body language, props and vocal tones to stimulate children's emotional engagement and cooperation. Children demonstrated their understanding of the story by actively answering questions, catering to body movements, choral singing and creating story segments to achieve co-participation. The data from this study form initial insights into the deepening of children's aesthetic literacy and socialisation through storytelling activities. This research can further prompt teachers to focus on diversity in the organisation of storytelling activities, as well as help children to immerse themselves in early literacy through their emotional appraisal of story events or characters.

**Keywords:** storytelling activity; young children; aesthetic literacy; teacher-child interaction

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## 1. Introduction

There has recently been a growing emphasis on involving young children in research, wherein children themselves are considered worthy of investigation and researchers seek to understand the process of young children's experiences of activities from the children's perspective. In preschool education, reading and storytelling have traditionally been seen as essential learning activities for young children's literacy development, providing effective stimuli for early literacy (Cooper, 2005; Maureen et al., 2020). Learning about stories is an activity that promotes the socialisation of young children. According to Bianchi (2014), adult storytelling has the power to elicit curiosity and aesthetic preferences in young children. Moreover, the aesthetic characteristics and developmental advantages of storytelling have been the focus of research by many literary researchers and psychologists (Violetta-Eirini, 2016). Sullivan (2021) argued that storytelling is the oldest form of teaching and learning and still has many attractions in the modern age, including identifying emotional states, developing vocabulary for self-promotion, encouraging the use of strategies, and enhancing a sense of hope. Storytelling is defined here as teachers' narration for young children through texts with a narrative structure (storybooks, picture books). For children, listening to stories is a rich way to gain insight, resources and ways to cope with these unprecedented times.

However, with high expectations of storytelling's fascination as an aesthetic experience and engagement for young children as an important role in their literacy experiences, previous research has focused on storytelling's capacity to improve young children's reading, literacy and mental health (Melzi et al., 2022; Pulimeno et al., 2020). As such, currently, many early childhood educators acknowledge the lack of attention to teacher and child emotions in storytelling activities with young children (Bateman, 2020), arguing that the focus has been on understanding the content of the stories and neglecting the emotions of young children in response to the stories. China's National Early Childhood Education and Development Policy emphasises the need for emotional experiences in preschool education to permeate all aspects of kindergarten teaching and learning, and to prepare children for literacy development (Bullough, 2019). Theobald (2019) and Bartan (2020) concluded that children's performance in storytelling activities depends on their teachers' attitudes and organisational approaches. However, despite extensive research on the value of storytelling, there has been insufficient investigation into the aesthetic experience of storytelling activities in China. The aim of this study is to explore children's emotional engagement and cooperation during storytelling by teachers. To achieve these aims, the study focused on the ways in which the teachers of young children engaged the children during storytelling and how the children participated in the storytelling activities organised by the teachers.

This study has made children's educators aware that storytelling activities are not a one-way output, but rather a socialisation practice accomplished as an interaction. In this practice, children are immersed in early literacy as they jointly engage in aesthetic experiences and emotional evaluations of story characters and events. Furthermore, the findings of the study provide a

systematic strategy for storytelling activities for teachers of young children, helping them to focus on emotional experiences in storytelling activities and to improve their organisational skills in storytelling.

## **2. Literature Review**

Three areas of scholarship underpin the work in this study: storytelling's contribution to early childhood literacy, teacher-child interaction in storytelling, and aesthetics and engagement in storytelling. Below, this study summarises the literature in these areas and notes how they provide important information for this study.

### **2.1 Storytelling's contribution to early childhood literacy**

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of education (Collins, 1999). Taylor and Leung (2020) argued that the value of storytelling in education is wide-ranging. For example, it is used to deliver curriculum topics, to understand science (Green et al., 2018), and storytelling activities are employed to support literacy and numerical literacy development in early childhood education (Maureen et al., 2018; Ramalingam et al., 2022). With the intervention of technology, Ramalingam and Jiar (2023) have demonstrated the positive effect of mobile storytelling apps on language teaching and literacy.

Earlier research on storytelling focused on language development and literacy skills (Badrkhani, 2019; Kim & Yang, 2021). Storytelling has been found to enhance language development, even when compared to similar reading-centred approaches (Lenhart et al., 2020; Suggate et al., 2013). Children acquire vocabulary from listening to stories (Elley, 1989) and, as such, interactive and elaborate storytelling promotes vocabulary in preschool children (Suggate et al., 2021) while the involvement of the narrator during storytelling increases children's word learning and enhances their understanding of story conventions and narrative structure (Lenhart et al., 2020). All of these share a common characteristic, namely an emphasis on the value of storytelling activities for literacy. Although previous research has contributed to highlighting the relative effectiveness of storytelling, the aesthetic experience and emotional assessment of young children through engaging, collaborative forms of storytelling characters and events has rarely been studied. Greater awareness of the potential of storytelling is needed if it is to be used effectively to immerse children in literacy.

### **2.2 Teacher-child interaction in storytelling**

With or without books, storytelling is a time-tested way of communicating cultural ideas, attitudes and experiences and promoting language development (Vaahtoranta et al., 2018). Research has shown the added value of children's participation in the storytelling process (Flack et al., 2018). Even though it has also been found in tightly controlled classrooms that children are exposed to just one story, adult narrators who tell it well can make gains without distracting children through word definitions and explanations (Suggate et al., 2021). As Bukhalenkova et al. (2022) reported, adult-child interaction during adult storytelling has a positive impact on children's vocabulary growth, and the oral

discourse of professional storytellers supports children's potential for vocabulary learning. It has also been suggested that the storyteller's spontaneous vocal modulations and gestures act as contextual clues to the story and have a positive impact on the listener's ability to infer the meaning of words (Goodwin, 2000). Multimodality opens new ways to analyse new phenomena that are rich in research findings. Isbell et al. (2004) suggested that storytellers increase motivation and potential learning by using more eye contact, gestures, voice modulation and questioning to direct attention to certain words or content. Reese and Newcombe (2007) crafted a storytelling style that focused on binary interactions, i.e., enriching these interactions by talking more about past events and asking children more questions in conversation, while Vaahtoranta et al. (2019) developed a method they termed "Interactive Elaborate Storytelling (IES)" in which the teacher is asked to adopt mostly an exclusive narrator role, while allowing the child to be the protagonist of the story, thus developing active listening skills and participation. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) also encouraged children to participate in activities using acting out stories, which were designed to promote children's comprehension. The teacher's facial expressions and gestures, as well as auditory cues such as intonation, rhythm, pitch and accent, all contribute to the interpretation of picture books as a complex system of symbols (Golden & Gerber, 1990; Taylor & Leung, 2020). Notably, this study demonstrates that teacher-child interactions in storytelling are closely related to children's emotional stance and to their early literacy development.

### **2.3 Aesthetics and engagement in storytelling**

Stories occupy a special place among the different genres of children's literature that contribute to language development (fairy tales, stories, poetry, small folklore genres, non-stories, jokes, etc.). Educational stories created by adults to educate children for their development are widely used to address educational tasks (Kotelianets, 2020). At the same time, work on aesthetic education emphasises the value of engagement with works of art, including music, visual arts and stories, to foster "widespread awakening", which is essential for the development of self-motivation and engagement in learning. Aesthetic education emphasises the importance of the social construction of knowledge and the contextualisation of learning and teaching methods. Nevertheless, only a few interactive storytelling systems aim to promote emotional engagement and aesthetic understanding in young children (Catala et al., 2022). When targeting young children, there has been a tendency to consider more embodied and tangible experiences, such as storytelling in children's "performative authoring" (Loustau & Chu, 2022).

Hence, the focus of the current study is on highlighting what collaborative actions teachers and children need to take to round out their storytelling. Specifically, this study explores how teachers and children use voice, intonation, facial expressions, gaze and gestures to stimulate children's participation in gaining aesthetic experiences during the storytelling process.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Research design**

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilising video-ethnography (recordings, observations, and interviews with early childhood teachers). The study took place in the preschool class (K3, 5-6 years) of an inclusive full-day kindergarten in a less developed urban area of eastern China. Video recordings were made over a period of six months, with each event lasting approximately 30 minutes, for a total of eight hours. The video recordings were collected during different storytelling themed activities. The videos provided detailed information about the nursery classroom environment, storytelling times and other details. Ethnographic fieldwork guided the explicitly thematic activities of our study, as this was particularly feasible for collecting video recordings, and due to the relatively dispersed timing of the collection of the corpus, the researcher was able to document the themes of each storytelling session (see **Appendix 1**).

Storytelling activities differ from other group teaching activities in that they are usually conducted in a storytelling corner or other comfortable space in the classroom, with different themes and different numbers of children participating in each activity, sometimes three to five or more (8-12). The children in this study were allowed to participate in the storytelling and performance of the story itself, or to have direct contact with professional storytellers. The pedagogical objectives of the storytelling included: to improve emotional interaction between teachers and children and between peers; and to develop children's literacy practice. Most of the stories were familiar to the children as they had already been taught in the classroom. The study observations focused on the way the teachers organised entertaining and engaging storytelling activities, listening to and observing children's participation (verbal and non-verbal) in the process of their listening to the stories. During the observations, each adult narrator arranged the appropriate props and materials for each storytelling session.

#### **3.2 Participants**

There were 78 children from K3 (5-6 years old) in the kindergarten; 12 children participated in the kindergarten after-school storytelling programme, which was used as the target population for the study (Creswell, 2012). The children in this group were in the same environment, in line with the ethnographic research method. Two female preschool teachers were also included in the sample (see **Appendix 2**). Of these 12 children, there were six girls (Learner 1, Learner 2, Learner 3, Learner 4, Learner 5, Learner 6) and six boys (Learner 7, Learner 8, Learner 9, Learner 10, Learner 11, Learner 12). No children were absent on sick leave or leave of absence during the data collection process.

#### **3.3 Research ethics and procedure**

Prior to commencing the study, informed consent was first obtained from the kindergarten director and parental consent forms were sent to the parents of the children, and all parents agreed to allow their children to participate in the project (see **Appendix 3**). With the permission of the teachers, the researcher used video and audio recording to record the whole process of the educator's

storytelling activities in order to facilitate the subsequent analysis of comprehensive and complete information. In addition, the study was approved by the relevant departmental ethics committee.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

In analysing the data, Conversation Analysis (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975) was used as the main theoretical and methodological framework to examine the recording of video interactions, which included, among other things, the early childhood teacher reading, narrating and acting out stories for the children. The video recordings were watched several times to record the participation and collaboration of children's aesthetic experiences during the teachers' storytelling. For this study, the transcription of the speaker's speech was supplemented by multimodal aspects of the participants' actions and turns (Goodwin, 2000), including gaze, gesture, posture, body space position between participants, and manipulation of the object environment (props, multimedia, storybooks). During transcription, all elements of participants' voices (emphasis, volume, pitch, inspiration, pauses) were considered relevant indicators for research analysis.

The research focuses specifically on the emotional stance and engagement with the story by both teachers and young children; the analysis was inspired by a multimodal interactive framework as a way of analysing collaboration between teachers and young children. The Teaching Through Interaction (TTI) approach (e.g., observational assessment using standardised protocols) proposed by Pianta and Hamre, 2009) provided an important and practical framework for measuring teacher-student interaction in the classroom, one which has been widely used globally for measuring teacher-child interactions (Hu et al., 2020; Suchodoletz et al., 2020). The study's analysis of children's emotional engagement was also informed by Hu et al.'s (2016) framework for teacher-child interaction support, which the researcher adapted to the goals of each teaching activity. Along with adapting the embodied nature of the participants, the data were categorised according to the research questions. Finally, descriptive analysis of the data was conducted based on the themes developed from the research questions. For privacy reasons, in illustrating the collaboration between the teachers and the children, the names of the participants in this study have been changed to Learner 1, etc., in. To avoid facial recognition of the participants, the researcher made line drawings of the characters to protect the participants' identities.

### **3.5 Selection of episodes**

This study presents excerpts from three representative activities, each of which have clear teaching objectives, lively and interesting story content, and high levels of positive teacher-child interaction. The objectives of the analysis were the entertaining nature of the organisation of the educator's telling process, the way in which the story was taught and the children's participation (verbal, non-verbal) in order to illustrate the key features of multimodal interaction in storytelling. Three storytelling contexts were involved (Table 1).

**Table 1: Background of the three storytelling activities**

No.	Story Title	Preparation Materials	Story in brief	Participants
1	The Little Gecko Borrowing a Tail	Pictures of animals without tails (small geckos, calves, small fish, swallows)	The story tells of the little gecko who loses his tail and borrows one from a calf, a fish, and a swallow. The story tells us that each animal's tail plays a role.	Learner 1 Learner 2 Learner 3 Learner 7 Learner 8
2	Xiao Ai's Dragon Boat Festival	A model of a zongzi and dragon boat; a wishing lantern	The story follows Ai, a young girl who loves to eat zongzi and follows her mother from the bustling city back to her great-grandmother's ancient town in Jiangnan for the Dragon Boat Festival where she falls in love with everything about it.	Learner 1 Learner 3 Learner 5 Learner 6 Learner 7 Learner 9 Learner 10 Learner 11 Learner 12
3	Little Horse Crosses the River	Pony headdress, picture of a big yellow cow and squirrel, word cards	The story is about a little horse who wants to cross a river, so he enquires from a squirrel and a big yellow cow about the depth of the river. The squirrel says the river is deep, while the old cow says it is not deep at all. Faced with both statements, the horse returns home and asks his mother for help. With her active encouragement, the little horse tries to cross the river, and finds that it is not as shallow as the big cow says, nor as deep as the little squirrel says.	Learner 3 Learner 4 Learner 5 Learner 6 Learner 7 Learner 9 Learner 11 Learner 12 Learner 10

#### 4. Results and Analyses

In analysing the interaction between teachers and children during storytelling activities, the researcher identified a range of methods (verbal and non-verbal) that teachers used to engage children's attention and motivate their experiences. Children's emotional resonance provides an important resource for the organisation of the teacher's narrative and the children's responses. Storytelling is a two-way interaction, either written or oral, between a narrator and one or more listeners, and it is known to be a powerful way of communicating information and engaging an audience (Sundin et al., 2018). In the following, the

researcher describes the methods employed by the teacher to hold the children's attention and outline their responses in this process, using this to present the children's emotional engagement in and collaboration with the story.

#### 4.1. Story warm-up and introduction of story characters

An effective story warm-up will fire up children's curiosity, focus their attention and create a positive environment for literacy learning. Adult narrators use a variety of story introductions in which the main characters and new vocabulary are linked to children's prior learning experiences. Table 2 shows six children participating in a story segment of "The Little Gecko Borrowing a Tail". Before the story began, the teacher, wearing the headdress of a small gecko, walked around the children and observed their responses (e.g., line 1). After seeing the children's reactions, the teacher began to ask them what parts of the little gecko's body were included. Learner 3 and Learner 1 responded positively to the teacher and expressed great surprise (Learner 8 began to applaud) and the atmosphere of the activity began to rise (Figure. 1). However, when the teacher presented a picture (A little gecko without a tail), she asked the children what was the difference between the little gecko she was wearing on her head and the one in the picture she was holding. The children looked at the teacher with confused expressions and did not answer; when the teacher re-interrogated the children in a different way, Learner 4 and Learner 7 responded by raising their hands enthusiastically (e.g., line 9,10).

**Table 2: The "Little Gecko Borrowing a Tail" episode**

Participants	Transcript from the Participants' Conversation	Non-verbal behaviour of participants
Learner 1 Learner 2 Learner 3 Learner 4 Learner 7 Learner 8	1. Teacher: Hello, children, do you know me? Do you know what my name is?	Teacher wearing a gecko headdress.
	2. All children: Wow, it's a gecko!	The children are so surprised that they cheer.
	3. Teacher: Children, what do you find on the gecko?	
	4. Learner 3: Big eyes and a mouth	
	5. Learner 1: Four legs; and a long tail .....	
	6. Teacher: Children's eyes are so bright, and they are very observant. What is the difference between the little gecko I am wearing on my head and the little gecko in the picture I am holding?	Teacher nods.
	7. All: No sound .....	
	8. Teacher: Where did the gecko's tail go in the picture in my hand?	
	9. Learner 4: The little gecko's tail has broken off.	Learner 4: raises her hand.
	10. Learner 7: The little gecko's tail is missing.	Learner 7: raises his hand.



**Figure 1: Storytelling plot of “The Little Gecko Borrowing a Tail”**

This passage exhibits several distinctive features:

- (i) The teacher uses props and questions intelligently to engage children’s interest and curiosity.
- (ii) The teacher’s storytelling session promotes whole child participation and children can respond positively (verbally and physically) to the teacher’s questions (lines 2, 4, 9, 10). The teacher’s story warm-up stimulated children’s interest in the story and their awareness of the key characters, and, at the same time, made connections with their previous knowledge and experience, which set the stage for the storytelling that followed.

#### **4.2 Eye and body language framing children’s voluntary participation**

During storytelling, teachers use a variety of body language to increase opportunities for children to communicate. Ekman et al. (1983) categorised teachers’ classroom body language as including symbolic gestures, illustrative gestures, displays of facial expressions, regulative behaviours, and adaptive behaviours. The teacher uses gestures - these include finger gestures, palm gestures, and head gestures, such as extending the thumb in affirmation, lifting the palm of the hand upwards to indicate standing, clapping and applauding, nodding, and shaking the head. Also included are expressive gestures - looking around, gazing, smiling, expressionless, and facial expressions that can change according to the context of the activity. These body gestures are not intended to supplement the content of the lesson, but rather to focus on the children’s performance, to remind them, to suggest them.

In Table 3, nine children in the storytelling corner are listening to a story called “Xiao Ai’s Dragon Boat Festival”. When the teacher directs the children’s attention to the change in emotion of Ai’s great-grandmother (“Can you see what kind of emotion Ai’s great-grandmother felt when she saw Ai?” “Why did Ai’s great-grandmother shed tears?”), they look around at each of the children

and use multimedia to show a picture of Xiao Ai when she meets her grandmother (Figure. 2).



**Figure 2: Storytelling plot of “Xiao Ai’s Dragon Boat Festival”**

The teacher’s facial expression matches the gesture of the grandmother in the story (beaming with happiness and with tears in her eyes). When the teacher asked, “Why is great-grandmother in tears?” many children said that their great-grandmother was also sad, while Learner 12 suddenly ran over and hugged the teacher, who then explained to the children that great-grandmother’s tears were tears of happiness, because she was very happy to see her family (Figure. 2).

**Table 3: The “Xiao Ai’s Dragon Boat Festival” episode (1)**

Participants	Transcript from the Participants’ Conversation	Non-verbal behaviour of participants
Learner 1 Learner 3 Learner 5 Learner 6 Learner 7	1. Teacher: Mum and Ai went to her great-grandmother’s house, where she was making zongzi.  Can you see what kind of emotions Ai’s great-grandmother felt when she saw Ai?	/
Learner 9	2. Learner 11: Grandmother was too sad.	/
Learner 10 Learner 11	3. Teacher: “Why did Xiao Ai’s great-grandmother shed tears?”	/
Learner 12	4. Learner 12: Great-grandmother misses Ai very much.	Learner 12: runs over and hugs the teacher.

As the teacher explained the reason for Ai’s great-grandmother’s tears, she kept an eye on each child’s reaction. The teacher delivered the story with emotion,

her rich facial expressions capturing the children's attention and giving them emotional recognition.

### 4.3 Voice and emotions in parallel

Emotion is one of the most crucial elements of storytelling, and a narrative that is not emotionally engaged will not inspire the audience. The teacher's sincere devotion is a resource that enables a collaborative emotional and aesthetic experience between the children and the teacher, which can hold the attention of the child audience.

In Table 4, the teacher uses voice and emotional gestures to engage the children's points of interest. During the narration, the teacher uses different voices to play different roles and this emotive performance helps to gain the children's attention and encourage participatory responses. When the teacher imitates Ai and sings the song that Ai's mother has been singing to her (line 1), Learner 6, who has stayed aloof until now, hums along with the teacher. This story, told with great emotion by the teacher, not only taught the children about the customs of the traditional Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, but also the value of affection. The teacher and the children performed a warm and touching song about family love together.

**Table 4: The "Xiao Ai's Dragon Boat Festival" episode (2)**

Transcript from the Participants' Conversation	Non-verbal behaviour of participants
1. Teacher: Lying in grandma's arms, Ai felt very warm. Ai sang a nursery rhyme to her grandmother that her mother had always sung to her "Rock, rock, rock to grandmother's bridge, grandmother calls me a sweet baby".	The teacher sings tenderly.
2. Learner 6: 	Ai sings with great enchantment (Figure. 3).

<sup>1</sup> From the children's rhyme – "Rock, rock, rock to Grandma's Bridge"



**Figure 3: Learner 6 singing**

Teachers are good at grasping the layers of the story based on the emotion of the text, and using changes in tone of voice, high and low intonation to express these layers, so that children can feel the content and artistic beauty of the story more deeply. The emotionally valued behaviours embodied by the children (e.g., smiling, fully attentive facial expressions) demonstrate that they are paying attention. It is also a response to emotional engagement with events and characters.

As in Table 5, The “Little Horse Crosses the River (eight children involved)”, the rhythm of the storytelling is shown. The old horse sees that the little horse is willing to help and says, “Yes, you can help me carry this half sack of wheat to the mill”. The teacher uses a full breath and high voice to express the old horse’s delight. The little squirrel, seeing the pony trying to cross the river, shouts, “Do not cross the river, do not cross the river, it is too deep, too dangerous, you will drown!” The teacher’s short breath and quickened speech show the squirrel’s anxiety. At the same time, Learner 9 and Learner 5 repeat these key words with anxiety and tension: “do not cross the river”, “it is too dangerous”, “drowning’ (line 4, 5). The participation of the children in the narration of the story, based on the intonational features of the teacher and through the repetition of the key words, shows their understanding of the vocabulary, the text of the story, and their emotional engagement.

**Table 5: “The Little Horse Crosses the River” episode (1)**

Participants	Transcript from the Participants’ Conversation	Behaviours of the participants
Learner 3 Learner 6 Learner 4 Learner 5	1. Teacher: The old horse saw that the pony was willing to help and said, “Well, you can help me carry this half sack of wheat to the mill”.	 (High-pitched voice)
Learner 7	2. All children (No sound).	Listening quietly.
Learner 9 Learner 11	3. Teacher: The little squirrel, seeing the pony about to cross the river, shouted: “Do not	

Learner 12	cross the river, do not cross the river, it's too	(Spoken faster)
Learner 10	deep, it's too dangerous, you'll drown!"	
	4. Learner 9: "Do not cross the river, please!"	Learner 9: Waving little hands.
	5. Learner 5: "It is too dangerous you will drown".	/

In the storytelling process, adult narrators are good at using questions to stimulate children's thinking, and, when they get to a key point, they use questions to create short periods of suspense, asking children more questions about what they are asking, sometimes allowing children to discuss or pause, and then continuing with what comes next after the children have thought about it. In Table 6, when the teacher reaches the end of the story, they pause abruptly and ask the question, "When the mother accompanies the pony to the river once again, what does the pony understand? Why?" The classroom sounds noisy, Learner 11 begins to think, and Learner 5 and Learner 4 begin to communicate, Learner 3 leans down and gets close to the teacher..... and, after a while, Learner 10 excitedly answers the teacher's question.

**Table 6: "The Little Horse Crosses the River" episode (2)**

<b>Transcript from the Participants' Conversation</b>	<b>Non-verbal behaviour of participants</b>
1. Teacher: At this time the mother accompanied the pony to the river, (pause); what did the pony suddenly understand? Why?	/
2. Learner 3: There is no sound.	Learner 3 starts thinking; Learner 5 and Learner 4 exchange words.
3. Learner 5 and Learner 4: Start to communicate.	(Figure. 4)
4. Learner 10: The pony starts to try to cross the river.	/



Figure 4: Pony crossing storyline

#### 4.4 Children's and teachers' joint narratives

Teachers tell stories to children, often choosing stories or picture books that have a repetitive structure and recognisable literary conventions and which are familiar to the children. In the narrative process, the teacher collaborates with and responds to the children's contributions, and the children actively demonstrate their emotional stance. Thus, a common emotion is set in collaboration between the teacher and the child audience, which increases cohesion and prompts the children's active participation.

Through the teacher's guidance, the children's emotional stance is demonstrated, which predicts that something will happen in the story. In Table 7, when the teacher brings out the "zong zi", Learner 5 takes the initiative to demonstrate the pronunciation and expands on a similar aspect of the teacher's narrative - an appealing way of pronouncing "zong zhi" (line 2). The teacher emphasises the correct pronunciation (line 3) and Learner 7 then immediately stands up and demonstrates the shape of a zongzi with his hands. The teacher then responds to Learner 7's gesture. The teacher participated and mirrored the child's expected gesture because she had designed her own questions of suspense and confusion. When the teacher gets to the part about how "Great-grandmother's zongzi were the best" (line 1), Learner 1 vividly shows her emotional gesture of "excitement" at the teacher's question - she immediately stands up and says: "These are great-grandmother's zongzi" (line 7).

Table 7: The "Xiao Ai's Dragon Boat Festival" episode (3)

Transcript from the Participants' Conversation	Non-verbal behaviour of participants
1. Teacher: The Dragon Boat Festival is coming, so my mother and Ai went to the supermarket to buy zongzi. Xiao Ai asks her mother: "What are the best zongzi?" His mother replied that his great-grandmother's zongzi were the best. What kind of zongzi does her mother like best?	/

2. Learner 5: "Zong zhi".	/
3. Teacher: It's zongzi.	
4. Learner 7: No sound.	Learner 7: Stands up and demonstrates the shape of the zongzi with his hands.
5. Teacher: No sound.	Teacher responds to Learner 7's gesture of the zongzi shape.
6. Teacher: What kind of zongzi does mum like best?	/
7. Learner 1: Great-grandmother's zongzi.	/
8. Learner 3: No sound.	With mouth open.

The children took advantage of the recognisability of the story structure and elements and contributed to the embodied narrative by voluntarily contributing to either elaborate on the story fragments that emerged, or by predicting the actions and events that would follow. In Table 8, the teacher presents pictures of the ancient town of Jiangnan, China, and directs the children to look closely at their contents (houses, trees, boats, shops). The children can then respond appropriately to the dialogue initiated by the teacher. The adult narrator looks at each child with admiration, a gesture that motivates the children even more, and acknowledges those who participate in answering the questions (nodding, line 3; giving a thumbs up, line 5; touching the child's head, line 7; applauding, line 11)

**Table 8: The "Xiao Ai's Dragon Boat Festival" episode (4)**

<b>Transcript from the Participants' Conversation</b>	<b>Non-verbal behaviour of participants</b>
1. Teacher: Ancient towns in Jiangnan in China are different from cities, and this is the ancient town in Jiangnan where great-grandmother lived. Who can complete the poem?	Teacher shows the picture of an ancient town.
2. Learner 6: The houses (near the water) are built.	Excited.
3. Teacher: You are right.	Smiling and nodding to Learner 6.
4. Learner 3: Willow trees, <u>three</u> or <u>four</u> in front of the door.	Active hands up to answer.
5. Teacher: Yes, there are <u>three</u> or <u>four</u> willow trees in front of the door, how many small boats are there on the river?	Gives a thumbs up.
6. Learner 9: Five or six small boats on the river.	
7. Teacher: Wow! That's right.	Smiles and strokes Learner 9's head.
8. Learner 12: Hawkers on the shore, seven or eight.	With mouth open.
9. Teacher: Hmm.....	Gazing at Learner 12, nodding frequently.
10. Learner 10: Shops in the street, nine or 10.	Rushes to his feet.

11. Teacher: You are very good at following the pattern.	Teacher starts applauding.
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## 5. Discussion

As an important aspect of socialisation for children, stories provide them a rich and complex cultural environment. Children learn in stories, interact socially with adult narrators and peers, and accordingly conform to common rules and create new expectations in a joint emotional gesture (Fatigante et al., 2022). This study uses a dialogue analysis method that allows an in-depth description of the sequential development of transitions and behaviours to examine teachers' storytelling activities with children in early childhood education in China. The analysis focuses on the teacher's organisational design for children's attentive storytelling, the framing of multiple participants, and the ways in which children's enchantment with the story is elicited.

### 5.1 Support frameworks: Wisdom for teacher input and output

#### 5.1.1 *Dialogue with children in observation and listening*

This study analysed the organisational design of the teacher's storytelling that engaged children to actively participate and share in the emotional experience elicited by story. By observing and listening to children, teachers lay the foundations for effective organisation of teaching and learning activities. Observation and listening entail the purposeful and planned examination of children's behaviour during activities (Booren et al., 2012; Yoon & Templeton, 2019), during which teachers use their eyes, body language, props and tone of voice to encourage children to participate in the story, working with the rhythm and pace of the co-orchestrated narrative. For example, they often pause to emphasise key elements of a particular part of the story, thereby focusing the child listener on the story's dramatic words and emotions. By doing so, teachers provide opportunities for children to actively participate in the shared narrative - repeating and chorusing key concepts from the story.

#### 5.1.2 *Contextual infection*

Teachers motivate children's interest in learning and activities through contextualisation and infection. Contextual education is a method of using existing or created environments or scenarios that stimulate children's emotions, so that children are exposed to and educated by the situation. Stories introduce emotionally charged imaginary situations which help children to regulate their emotions in group care situations. Children recognise the physical characteristics of events with images, sounds, colors and sensations (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). Through the transmission of sound, light, shape and colour, the story moves from the silent to the word, from the abstract to the concrete, which enhances the impact of the story content (e.g., the use of moving images in "The Little Horse Crosses the River"). In addition, teachers create situations and set up suspense to hold children's attention. At the same time, children contribute active participation and develop an understanding of the story.

#### 5.1.3 *Emotional sharing*

This study analyses the emotional and attitudinal support as well as the affirmation given by the teacher to the children during the interaction.

Emotional support needs to be well-timed, and the appropriate timing of interventions is a key factor (Subbotsky, 1997). Children's proactive emotions in storytelling stem from the guidance of the teacher. In the research, teachers used motivational words, smiles and nods to invite the child audience to participate and share in the emotional level of the story; this kept the children engrossed in the activity. This finding highlights the importance of teachers' emotional support in multimodal interactive storytelling. In classrooms, if teachers provide more emotional support, children can show more adaptive learning behaviours and better academic performance (Graziano et al., 2007). In a story-mediated teacher-child interaction, emotional support occurs as an activity of entanglement between output and input.

### **5.2 Effective aesthetic experiences: children's participation**

The study explores the specific ways in which young children are attracted to the storytelling process. It includes children's participation through attentive listening, voluntary emotional stance, verbal retelling, and active movement. In storytelling, an analysis of children's behaviours showed that careful listening, even if silent, was seen as children's participation, and responding to the teacher's narrative. At the same time, this also shapes the teacher's narrative (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018). In storytelling, children contribute to the telling of the story, through the identification of certain elements, as well as using body movements, verbal retelling, and answering questions to predict the next segments of the story. The children's active participation is responded to and supported by the teacher; through this effective interaction, children and teachers complete a joint narrative and receive an aesthetic and emotional experience, which reflects the charm of the story. It also shows that effective interaction between the child and teacher contributes to the integrity of the storytelling.

### **5.3 The magic of storytelling: emotional resonance**

Research has shown that the entertainment of story organisation, children's emotional experience and teacher-child interaction act as important factors in storytelling, by which they influence the quality of the storytelling activities. The story is embellished verbally as well as non-verbally by the narrator, so that the child audience gets to understand that the main character in the story is currently in a stable state; this makes the child audience feel that he or she is also experiencing it by which the narrator can easily achieve an affective stance in the child. This indicates that the communication of emotions forms an integral part of enthralling storytelling; also, the emotional stance is associated with engagement and teacher-child interaction in the aesthetic experience of the story (Nilfyr et al., 2021). Children can feel worried, nervous, excited, sad, angry, or empathetic about an entire episode of a story; it is the outward or inward expression of these emotions that children get the most enjoyment from. In the storytelling process, children and teachers work together to complete the narrative, dialogue in collaboration, and have an aesthetic experience. This also shows that storytelling is an important channel for children to increase their aesthetic literacy and socialisation.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined children's emotional engagement and cooperation during teacher storytelling. The focus was on analysing the entertaining nature of early childhood teachers' storytelling organisation, storytelling teaching styles and how children engaged in storytelling activities. Storytelling activities are an important channel for children's emotional engagement and socialisation. Children and teachers engage together in socially conscious interactive practices that can help children learn and integrate into social relationships and thus become part of their own communities. In the light of the results of the study, despite these important contributions, it must, however, also be interpreted carefully, as this was a feasibility study conducted in a small context. Early childhood teachers should be aware of the important ways in which storytelling activities engage children's attention. This study provided solid evidence that attention to children's emotional involvement and cooperation in storytelling activities can unlock the full potential of storytelling. The findings provide additional insights for teachers to encourage diverse approaches to engage children's attention so as to immerse them in early literacy through emotional evaluation of story events or characters. Furthermore, due to the lack of empirical literature in this area in the Chinese context, by re-evaluating and focusing on the importance of teachers' emotional engagement and collaboration with children in storytelling activities, it opens the door for more investigation into storytelling teaching and teacher-child interaction and highlights the aesthetic experience of storytelling and its potential to support children's collaboration and engagement.

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## Appendix 1

**Table A1: Information on all story themes**

No.	Story Topics	Observation Time
1	Ants and Watermelons	After lunch
2	The alarm clock in your stomach	After lunch
3	Chinese Zodiac	After school in the afternoon
4	Who bit my pie?	After lunch
5	My home is a zoo	Before nap time
6	Little Gecko Borrowing Tail	After school in the afternoon
7	Mouse who loves to learn	After lunch
8	Clever little duckling	Before the siesta
9	Rude little bear	Before nap time
10	Uncle Bear's Party	After school in the afternoon
11	Three little pigs build a house	After school in the afternoon
12	Xiao Ai's Dragon Boat Festival	Before nap time
13	The Story of Lei Feng	Before nap time
14	Rabbit stealing a melon	After school in the afternoon
15	Tadpole looking for mother	After lunch
16	Little horse crosses the river	Before nap time

## Appendix 2

**Table A2: Basic information for early childhood teachers**

No.	Sex:	Age	Educational Background	Years of Experience
1	Female	28	Undergraduate	4
2	Female	25	Undergraduate	3

## Appendix 3



家长知情书  
PARENTS' INFORMATION LETTER

亲爱的家长、监护人：  
Dear Parent or Guardian:

我写信是想告诉你我们班上要做的一个令人兴奋的项目。  
I am writing to tell you about an exciting project we are about to do in our class.

你可能知道，在我们的幼儿园，我们举办了一个课后讲故事节目。这门课程帮助孩子更好地学习，激励他们获得知识，激发他们的想象力。本课程让学生有机会将他们在幼儿园学到的技能应用到与个人相关的现实生活中。

As you may know, at our nursery we run an after-school storytelling programme. This course helps children learn better, motivates them to gain knowledge and stimulates their imagination. This course gives students the opportunity to apply the skills they have learned in kindergarten to real-life situations that are personally relevant.

为了深入了解儿童教师和儿童在课后讲故事课程中的现状，开展了一项题为“美的体验：教师和幼儿在讲故事活动中的合作与参与”的研究。

To gain insight into the current situation of children's teachers and children in after-school storytelling sessions, a study entitled 'Experience of Beauty: Teacher and Children Collaboration and Participation in Storytelling Activities' was carried out.

这项研究持续的时间约为 6 个月。幼儿将参与一系列的讲故事活动。这些课程经过专家评审而确定的。在过程实施过程中，教师提供相应的教学材料与教学道具，儿童无需准备。研究人员将对整个讲故事活动进行视频记录。值得注意的是视频记录仅仅作为研究使用，研究人员保证不会将其用于其他方面。

This study lasts for approximately 6 months. The children will participate in a range of storytelling activities. These lessons have been identified through expert review. During the process, the teacher provides the appropriate teaching materials and props and the children do not need to prepare. The researcher will make a video recording of the entire storytelling activity. It is important to note that the video recordings are for research purposes only, the researchers have assured that they will not be used for other purposes.

如果您对项目有任何疑问，请随时与我联系。

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the project!

Sincerely,

签字 / Signature:

联系方式 / Contact Information: