

Overview

In this fictional story, Nia learns about the value her Tongan culture places on her long hair. The story is told mainly through dialogue between Nia and her grandmother, cousins, and mother, as well as through Nia's own thoughts. The family setting reveals strong family and cultural values, and Nia learns about traditions through physical and emotional connections that span

three generations. The text provides opportunities for readers to learn about one specific tradition and to make connections within the text and with their own experiences.

Texts related by theme

“Mele’s Money Dance” SJ 1.1.10 | “Naming the Baby” SJ 2.4.09 | “Family Treasures” SJ 1.3.07

Text characteristics from the year 4 reading standard

some words and phrases that are ambiguous or unfamiliar to the students, the meaning of which is supported by the context or clarified by photographs, illustrations, diagrams, and/or written explanations

a straightforward text structure, such as a structure that follows a recognisable and clear text form

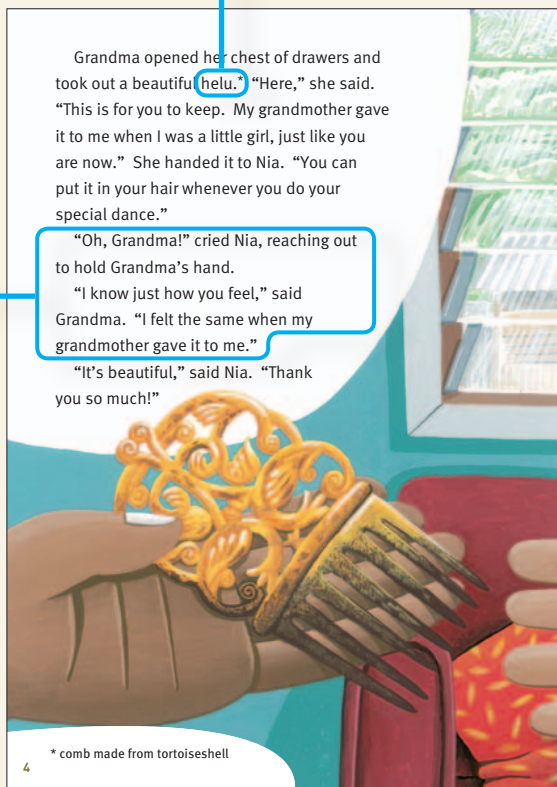
figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, or personification

Grandma opened her chest of drawers and took out a beautiful **heleu**. “Here,” she said. “This is for you to keep. My grandmother gave it to me when I was a little girl, just like you are now.” She handed it to Nia. “You can put it in your hair whenever you do your special dance.”

“Oh, Grandma!” cried Nia, reaching out to hold Grandma’s hand.

“I know just how you feel,” said Grandma. “I felt the same when my grandmother gave it to me.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Nia. “Thank you so much!”



* comb made from tortoiseshell

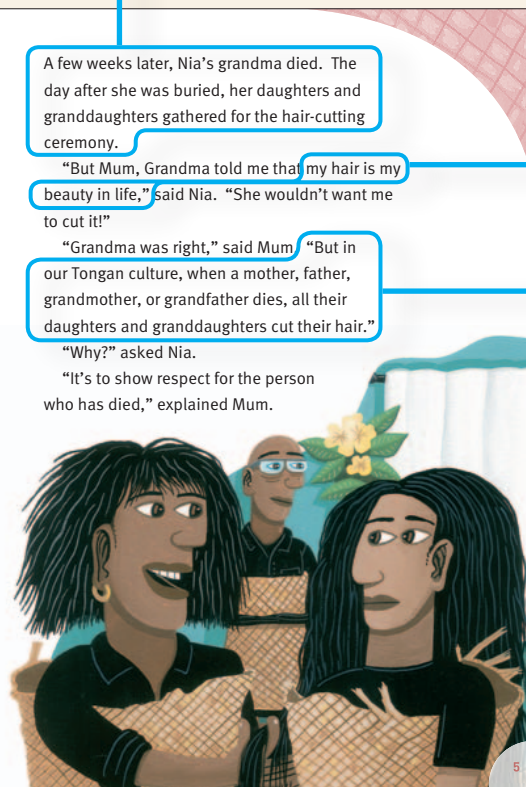
A few weeks later, Nia’s grandma died. The day after she was buried, her daughters and granddaughters gathered for the hair-cutting ceremony.

“But Mum, Grandma told me that my hair is my beauty in life,” said Nia. “She wouldn’t want me to cut it!”

“Grandma was right,” said Mum. “But in our Tongan culture, when a mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather dies, all their daughters and granddaughters cut their hair.”

“Why?” asked Nia.

“It’s to show respect for the person who has died,” explained Mum.



some places where information and ideas are implicit and where students need to make inferences based on the information that is easy to find because it is nearby in the text and there is little or no competing information

some compound and complex sentences, which may consist of two or three clauses

Possible curriculum contexts

SOCIAL SCIENCES

LEVEL 2 – Understand how cultural practices reflect and express people’s customs, traditions, and values.

ENGLISH (Reading)

LEVEL 2 – Ideas: Show some understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

LEVEL 2 – Structure: Organise texts, using a range of structures.

Possible reading purposes

- To find out about some special cultural practices of a Tongan family
- To learn about why a young Tongan girl has her long hair cut off
- To explore how a family commemorates the death of their grandmother
- To identify how a writer reveals a character’s thoughts and feelings.

Possible writing purposes

- To describe a practice or family tradition from their own culture
- To recount a personal story about an older relative
- To chart two or more cultures to show comparisons
- To rewrite the story as a stage or radio play
- To describe a precious family heirloom.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words and concepts, including “braid”, “coconuts”, “hairdressers”, “piled”, “poked”, “blossoms”, “vase”, “Flower Show”, “announced”, “beauty”, “should”, “chest of drawers”, “whenever”, “buried”, “granddaughters”, “hair-cutting ceremony”, “culture”, “respect”, “explained”, “nervous”, “braided”, “wondered”, “scissors”, “twisted”, “Princess of Plates”, “unwound”, “dresser”, “dancing costume”, “braided”, “gave birth”, “cord”, “woven”, “oiled”
- The word “braid” used as a verb and a noun (“braid”, “braided”)
- The use of Tongan words.

Possible supporting strategies

Use strategies to preview the vocabulary, such as having students share stories about their hair and charting key vocabulary, describing the illustrations, or matching words with definitions.

Decide which vocabulary is low frequency and only relevant to this text (for example, “helu” and “kafa”) and which is appropriate for your students to focus on learning (for example, “braid”, “beauty”, “respect”, “wondered”). For the latter, provide multiple opportunities for the students to encounter and practise it before, during, and after reading.

The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction, pages 39–46, has some useful information about learning vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Knowledge of students’ own and other cultural practices
- The concept of showing respect when a person has died
- Knowledge of family groups and dynamics
- Knowledge of hair styles and care within different cultures.

Possible supporting strategies

Provide opportunities for the students to explore some of the necessary background knowledge and concepts they need to understand the context. For example, discuss the way things are done and passed on in different families and cultures and/or discuss different customs to do with hair cutting.

Introduce or review other terms that are not in the story but can be used in this context, for example, “customs”, “traditions”, “values”.

Students who have similar stories to Nia’s can relate them to the class, bringing in artefacts and/or family members if appropriate.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- The use of Nia’s internal dialogue marked by the verbs “thought” and “wondered”
- The movement of the story through different time settings in the past and the verb forms and signal words that help the reader follow the action – “Every morning before Nia went to school”, “were always”, “on Grandpa’s eightieth birthday”, “when”, “A few weeks later”, “As she danced”. (Note that the verb forms “would rub” and “were always wanting” indicate habits in the past. Also note that the dialogue uses mostly present verb forms, which may be confusing.)
- The connections within the text to the repeated nature of a tradition
- The use of simile (“like a flower vase”, “as if Grandma was all around her”) and metaphor (“hair is your beauty in life”)
- Many complex sentences and some compound-complex sentences – “Every morning, before Nia went to school, her grandma would rub her hair with special oil and braid it”, “They piled Nia’s hair on top of her head and poked so many blossoms into it that she looked like a flower vase.”

Possible supporting strategies

Support students to identify who is speaking and what they say. Prompt the students to notice how direct speech is shown in the written text. Discuss the use of the same structure to show what Nia is thinking on page 6.

Support students to identify the relationships between the main characters in the story, modelling your thinking as you check the daughter–mother–grandmother–granddaughter connections. This can be done as a diagram that shows the relationships.

If necessary, support students with identifying the movement of time in the story. Choose parts of the text and support them to identify what happens in each part and how we know time has passed. (You could use a timeline to do this, noting the changes in the story and the language that signals time and sequence.) Model using context clues, time signals, and verb forms. Explain that the dialogue uses mostly present verb forms.

If students find these complicated sentences difficult to follow, break them down into smaller clauses and identify when, who, what.

Instructional focus – Reading

Social Sciences (Level 2 – Understand how cultural practices reflect and express people’s customs, traditions, and values.)

Text excerpts from “Nia’s Hair”

Students (what they might do)

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

Nia loved her long hair, but sometimes she dreamt of cutting it. “Grandma, why can’t I cut my hair?” she asked.

“Your hair is your beauty in life,” smiled Grandma. “You should always rub it with oil, comb it, and braid it. Or if you like, you can roll it up on top of your head.”

“But I’d rather let it hang down my back,” said Nia.

The students identify the conflicting thoughts Nia has about her hair. They make connections with their own experiences of caring for their hair and use words and illustrations to infer how Nia feels.

They infer that Grandma thinks Nia’s hair is beautiful from the way she talks about it to Nia.

“Oh, Grandma!” cried Nia, reaching out to hold Grandma’s hand.

“I know just how you feel,” said Grandma. “I felt the same when my grandmother gave it to me.”

Students infer how Nia feels and make connections with any similar experiences of being given a special treasure by a relative. Students infer that grandma understands what Nia means when Nia holds grandma’s hand. Grandma makes a connection with her own feelings from the past.

“But in our Tongan culture, when a mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather dies, all their daughters and granddaughters cut their hair.”

“Why?” asked Nia.

“It’s to show respect for the person who has died,” explained Mum.

Students draw on prior knowledge about cultures and, with prompting, integrate this with the text to identify the specific cultural practice described here. Students evaluate the practice as a way to show respect.

“I braided some of your hair with these little shells that your grandma gave me when I gave birth to you. Your grandma made me a sash with my hair when I had my first haircut, after my grandmother died. I still have it.”

With some support, the students integrate the information about Mum’s action with the concept of passing on items and traditions. Grandma gave Nia’s mother the shells when Nia was born. Grandma also cut Nia’s mother’s hair after the death of her grandmother. Students unpack the passage to work out that there are four generations of women mentioned.

METACOGNITION

ASK QUESTIONS to make students’ strategies explicit for them as they read and respond to the text.

- What does “Nia felt as if Grandma was all around her” mean? How did you work that out? What helped you?
- How have your own connections to parts of this story helped you to understand it?

PROMPT students to think about how they would feel if they were Nia.

- On page 2, how do you think Nia feels about her hair? How do you know that? What knowledge of looking after your own hair helps you to understand how she feels?
- Why do you think Grandma is so particular about Nia’s hair?
- What does Grandma mean when she says Nia’s hair is her “beauty in life”?
- Turn to a partner and talk about the ways that hair is regarded in your family. Are there any similarities? What are they?

For some students, hair may have different significance and they may not feel comfortable discussing their own hair or family attitudes. Steer the conversation to stay with the text and the value that the grandmother is expressing.

MODEL

- I wonder what Grandma means by “I know just how you feel”? How can she know what Nia is feeling? I know that authors give us clues without telling us directly about how a character is feeling. Sometimes it’s about what a character says and how they say it, and sometimes it’s about what they do. Let’s reread from the top of the page and see if we can find those clues.

ASK QUESTIONS to help students follow the explanation and relate it to cultural practices.

- What do you think Mum means by “in our culture”?
- Mum says this practice is to show respect. What does she mean? How would cutting your hair show respect?
- What do you know about the special things people do after a person has died?
- How is cutting hair similar to other practices you know about? (For example, wearing black clothes or an armband)

MODEL how to unpack these sentences, writing the names and relationships on a whiteboard as you talk through each person mentioned, starting with Nia. You could add arrows or a brief sentence to record what each person passed on.

ASK QUESTIONS to help students integrate Mum’s actions with the other examples of passing on items and practices in the story.

- Where else in the story was someone given something special?
- What do you think “handing on” means for the people in this family?
- What can this tell us about the values of Nia’s family’s culture?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- I noticed you were able to make a lot of connections in this text – with your own knowledge of customs, between parts of the text, and with what you’ve read about different cultures. Sometimes you’ve had to change your thinking a bit to fit what you’ve learned from this story. This is how good readers build and refine their knowledge. Well done!

Reading standard: by the end of year 4

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

English (Level 2 – Structure: organise texts, using a range of structures.)

Text excerpts from “Nia’s Hair”

Nia had beautiful long hair.

Every morning, before Nia went to school, her grandma would rub her hair with special oil and braid it. The oil was made from fresh coconuts, leaves, and flowers.

A few weeks later, Nia’s grandma died. The day after she was buried, her daughters and granddaughters gathered for the hair-cutting ceremony.

The littlest ones pulled and swung on her braid until she yelled “Please, guys, please – don’t pull my hair so hard!”

Her cousins liked playing hairdressers. They piled Nia’s hair on top of her head and poked so many blossoms into it that she looked like a flower vase. “The winner of this year’s Flower Show is ...” announced Ela, while everyone clapped and cheered.

Nia closed her eyes. She thought about grandma. “Will she be proud of me?” she wondered.

She felt the scissors cutting through the thick braid. “What will I look like?” she wondered. “If I don’t like it, how long will it take to grow back?”

Nia’s cousins were excited. They twisted the braid into a crown and pinned it onto Nia’s head. Then they piled a hat, some plates, and even Pena the cat on top of her hair. “Here comes the Princess of Plates,” laughed Moli.

Examples of text characteristics

TEXT STRUCTURE

Words that signal sequence or the passing of time: “Every morning”, “before”, “A few weeks later”, “The day after”, “On Grandpa’s eightieth birthday”, “As she danced”

DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

Descriptive verbs: *pulled, swung, yelled, piled, poked, clapped, cheered*

Paired verbs: *pulled and swung, piled and poked, clapped and cheered*

Simile: *like a flower vase*

Metaphor: *hair is your beauty in life*

SPOKEN AND UNSPOKEN DIALOGUE

Dialogue is an excellent shortcut to character and can be more effective than a description.

CONNECTIONS

To help the reader make connections with a text, include some ideas or details that most of the intended audience will relate to. These connections between the reader and the text help to keep the reader interested. They also help the reader understand what they’re reading.

METACOGNITION

ASK QUESTIONS to encourage the students to think more deeply about their writing.

- What were you thinking when you wrote this? What were you trying to say?
- Why did you choose that word to describe him? What effect were you trying to achieve?
- What does the character mean when she says ...? How does this reflect their character?

Teacher

(possible deliberate acts of teaching)

MODEL planning the structure of a text. Show students two or three ways in which a recount or narrative can be planned, for example, using a simple story map graphic organiser, a timeline, or a flow chart. Using a familiar event or story, show how you broke the story into the key events that you will write about. Reread the first two paragraphs of “Nia’s Hair”, pointing out the way they give background to the story.

PROMPT students to use words and phrases that will help the reader follow the order of events and the connections between events.

- How will the reader know what happened first? Next?
- How can you help the reader make a jump in time from one event or “scene” to another?

MODEL how descriptive language can bring a text and characters to life.

- When I read this, I get the feeling that Nia’s cousins are funny and silly (and probably very young). The author uses particular words to help us “see” them playing with Nia’s hair.

- How can you do this in your writing?

Gather examples of descriptive language from the text and use them as a word bank for writing. Spend some time one on one, helping students to add words from the bank to their writing. Select a sentence or two from a volunteer’s work that describes a character. Read it aloud, then think aloud about the sense it gives you of the character. Ask students to discuss some alternatives for the writing, such as the use of descriptive verbs to show how the character moves, reacts, or talks.

EXPLAIN how a writer can use both spoken and unspoken dialogue.

- When you want to show what a character is thinking, you can use the same features you would use for speech. The verbs let the reader know the words are not spoken aloud. The thoughts are put inside speech marks.
- Do you want the characters in your story to help tell the story in their own words (or thoughts)?
- How can you make the dialogue “sound” like the character?

PROMPT students to “write like a reader” by thinking about the way connections work in text.

- What connections could a reader make to their own experiences of your topic?
- Will the connections help them understand? How?
- Will the connections make the reader really interested in reading more? Why or why not?

GIVE FEEDBACK to affirm students’ writing decisions and guide their learning.

- You’ve planned this well: I can follow the order of events easily.
- You’ve used descriptive language and dialogue effectively. I can really imagine what your grandmother was like.
- When I read this, it reminded me of some funny things my grandfather did too! I liked that and it made me want to keep reading to see how similar our grandfathers are.