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Windows into Children's Thinking: A Guide to Storytelling and Dramatization

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Abstract Telling and dramatizing stories is an increasingly popular addition to the preschool curriculum, largely due to the attention this activity has received through the writings of Vivian Paley (Bad guys don't have birthdays: fantasy play at four. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988; The boy who would be a helicopter: the uses of storytelling in the kindergarten. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990; A child's work: the importance of fantasy play. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004). While the writings of Paley and others (Cooper, When stories come to school: telling, writing, and performing stories in the early childhood classroom. Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, 1993; Engel 1999) focus on the social and cognitive outcomes children experience as a result of storytelling, less has been written about the process of writing and dramatizing stories with young children. This article discusses procedures and considerations that enhance storytelling with preschool children, including effective prompts for encouraging children's creativity, potential trouble spots such as aggression in stories, and ways that storytelling can enhance home-school relationships.

Keywords Early childhood education · Preschool curriculum · Storytelling · Story dramatization · Play · Aggression

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Introduction

The stories preschool children tell can provide us with important insights into the way they see and think about the world. For example, Vivian Paley's (1988, 1990, 2004) analyses of the stories told and performed by children in her classrooms demonstrate how stories can help teachers to better understand the children they teach, more effectively meet children's social and emotional needs, and create curriculum that is responsive to children's interests and needs.

Dramatizing stories is particularly valuable for children. The play-like action of dramatizing stories is highly motivating for young children, and it allows children to think in more sophisticated ways. Vygotsky (1978) argued that play provides a medium in which children can easily remember, imagine, and recreate images and ideas from their previous experiences, even though these same mental operations might be too difficult if the same children were to simply try to think about or discuss them. Dramatization of children's stories mimics this function of play. In the dramatizations, children are required to conceptualize the ideas represented in the stories of their peers and translate those conceptualizations into action. A process that is abstract and difficult for young children to accomplish in isolation becomes possible within the context of playacting a story.

Paley and others have documented additional benefits of storytelling and story dramatizations, such as (1) introducing children to the process and purposes of writing, (2) allowing for the creative expression of ideas and feelings, (3) providing opportunities to build social skills, and (4) allowing children to work through ideas and experiences (Cooper 1993; Paley 1990).

Over the last two and a half years, we have transcribed and collected nearly one thousand stories from children,

ages two to six, in our campus child development program. One of our top priorities while collecting these stories was to conduct storytelling activities in such a way that children controlled the storytelling process, with little influence or censorship from adults. This article describes what we have learned about maximizing preschool children's control of the storytelling and dramatization process. We begin with a description of the process used to encourage children to tell stories, focusing on the kinds of prompts that most effectively encourage children to produce creative and meaningful stories, followed by a description of the process for dramatizing the stories. Next, we discuss issues that sometimes arise when storytelling is part of the preschool curriculum, with special attention given to stories that explore aggressive themes. Finally, we explore some possible ways in which storytelling may strengthen connections between home and school.

Encouraging Children to Tell Stories

Initiating a storytelling project in an early childhood classroom requires few materials. The only basic supplies not typically found in the early childhood classroom are carbon paper and if needed, a tape recorder (Paley et al. 2003). To begin the project, the teacher can create a storytelling table as a center in the classroom. During free choice, children have the option to tell stories, which the class will later dramatize. When no child is present at the storytelling table, the transcriber (usually a parent or a teacher) seeks out children who are not engaged in other activities. These children are encouraged to dictate a story for the class to act out. Transcribers try to encourage children who have told few or no stories all year to participate.

In order to support creativity and originality, it is important to encourage children to tell stories without influencing or censoring the content. The role of the transcriber is to offer little feedback, commentary, or direct input that would influence story content (Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001). For this reason, transcribers use only general prompts when children seem "stuck." These prompts include opening prompts, prompts for children who do not know how to start a story, continuation prompts, and closing prompts.

Opening Prompts

When a child agrees to tell a story, the transcriber and the storyteller sit side-by-side at the storytelling table. The child sits on the side of the transcriber's non-dominant hand, so the child is able to see the words as they are written (Paley et al. 2003). The transcriber records the child's name and the date at the top of the page.

When the transcriber is ready to start recording the story, he/she uses general prompts to get the child started (see table below). Initiating the story can be the most difficult aspect of the process, especially for younger children (ages two to three), because the transcriber needs to avoid giving the storyteller a topic or theme. The transcriber should be careful not to challenge, question or probe the children's narrative intentions (Fein et al. 2000). If the child does not start dictating soon after the name and date are written, the transcriber can use the story starter prompts listed below.

Opening prompts

1. "Would you like to tell me a story so we can act it out later?"
2. "Tell me your story and I will write it down." (Write down child's name and the date).
3. "Here's your name and this is the date. Go ahead and start your story."

Prompts used if child does not start a story

"A lot of stories begin with, 'Once upon a time....' or 'Once there was a ....' You can start your story however you want. Tell me what you want to say, and I will write it down."

If a child still has difficulty beginning a story, the teacher can say

"Do you want to think about it? Come tell me a story later."

These prompts offer children general advice about how to start a story, without leading the story in a particular direction.

Continuation Prompts

After a child begins dictation, the transcriber records what the child says verbatim, including grammatical errors. When the storyteller pauses, the transcriber verbally repeats each word as it is written. This repetition helps the storyteller learn that his or her exact words can be written down—an important concept in literacy development. If the child is dictating too fast, the transcriber can elongate each word verbally while it is being written to slow the pace. Some teachers suggest using the phrase, "Let me catch up with you" to slow a child's dictation.

As the child tells the story, he or she may need to be prompted to continue the story. In order to minimize simple responses to prompts, the transcriber should ask questions or give prompts that are open-ended. The most common prompt is, "Then what happened?" The tone of this question should convey interest and genuine curiosity so that the storytelling experience remains fun for the child (Paley et al. 2003). Additional continuation prompts are listed below.

Continuation prompts

1. Reread the last few sentences to the child, then ask "What happened next?"
2. Summarize highlights of the story, then ask "Then what happened?" If a child is repeating the same action with the same characters then the prompt increases in specificity. "What happened after (character) did (action)?
3. Summarize basic idea, then ask "Then what did (character) do?"

Some children repeat themselves when given a continuation prompt. Children tend to repeat themselves for two reasons: (1) to emphasize a particular point, or (2) as the result of a lack of idea generation (writer's block). The latter can often be resolved by giving the child a few moments to organize his or her thoughts. Lack of idea generation can also be a result of excessive distraction. A child who has difficulty generating a story in the busy environment of the classroom may be more successful in a quiet area, such as the hallway. Room dividers can also be helpful. However, some children use the environment, including their peers, to generate and expand upon their ideas (Dyson 1993), thus a minimally restrictive environment is preferred.

If repetition impedes the progress of the story, the transcriber can continue to ask general questions. Consider the following example:

Storyteller: A frog came.
Teacher: Then what happened?
Storyteller: A frog came.
Teacher: Okay, so a frog came. Then what happened?
Storyteller: A frog came.
Teacher: Let me read you your story so far. 'A frog came. A frog came. A frog came.' Then what happened?
Storyteller: A frog came.
Teacher: Okay, you said the frog came. Then what happened after the frog came?
Storyteller: The frog went to school and played.

In this example, the teacher's initial prompts lead to repetition. However, as the teacher continues to prompt the child with general questions, the child is able to move the story forward.

Another issue is that children often use ambiguous pronouns (e.g., he, she, they, it) that can make it difficult for the story to be dramatized. In such cases, the transcriber can ask clarifying questions, but he or she should be careful to keep the questions and tone neutral. Consider the following examples:

Leading response
Storyteller: Then he hit him.
Teacher: (shows disapproval) Why did he hit him?
Storyteller: He was mad.

Better response
Storyteller: Then he hit him.
Teacher: (in a neutral tone) Who hit him?
Storyteller: The tree.
Teacher: The tree hit the dog?
Storyteller: Yes.
Teacher: *writes down* (Then he [the tree] hit him [the dog]).

In the first example, the teacher is imposing a judgment and steering the plot toward an explanation of the motive for hitting. In the second example, the teacher clarifies the story without influencing it.

Closing Prompts

Most children bring their stories to a natural conclusion. Some include a closing statement such as "That's all," or "The end." Such statements should be written verbatim. In some cases, children are encouraged to limit their writing to a single page in order to allow the maximum number of students to participate. With both enforced and voluntary endings, the transcriber should give the closing prompt, "Let me read it to you to make sure it's right." Most children are interested in hearing their story read to them. If the storyteller specifies that any parts are incorrect, the transcriber should make all necessary changes (Fein et al. 2000).

In some cases, teachers may want to allow the storyteller to assign classmates to play the characters in the story directly after finishing the story. If that is the case, the teacher might use the prompts below to assist the child in assigning roles as soon as he or she has finished dictating. Teachers who are concerned that all children have equal opportunities to play roles may choose to delay the assignment of roles until children gather together for the dramatizations. The transcriber should also remember to thank the child for participating in the storytelling activity.

Closing prompts

1. "Let me read it to you to make sure it's right."
2. "Who do you want to be when we act it out?"
3. "Who should be (character)?"
4. "Thank you for telling me that story."

When the child has completely finished telling the story, he or she moves on to a new activity, and a new child can begin. Dramatizations are performed after all of the day's stories are collected.

Guiding Children's Dramatizations of Stories

The class gathers around a simple masking tape "stage" for the dramatization of the narratives. Because the transcriber is familiar with the stories, it is usually best to have that individual orchestrate the dramas. A simple way to proceed is to read the stories in the order they were told. The transcriber first reads the story to the class with the author next to him or her. Next, children are selected to participate in the dramatization (if they have not already been chosen by the storyteller). Teachers can use different methods to ensure that all children have a chance to participate, such as distributing an object to each child and then collecting the item when the child has a turn, or simply going around the circle in a set order and asking for volunteers (Rothman 2006). Children should be encouraged, but never forced to participate. To avoid confusion, a maximum of 4–6 characters are used for dramatization and the audience is asked to imagine the rest (Paley et al. 2003).

As dramatization begins, the transcriber reads the story again. This time, the transcriber should pause as necessary to allow the actors to play their parts. Some children may need to be prompted to dramatize the actions portrayed in the story and to speak any dialogue in the story. As each character is introduced in the narrative, the teacher can ask the child playing that character to show how they would play the character. At the end of the story, the transcriber prompts the actors to bow and the audience to clap (Paley et al. 2003).

Dramatization prompts

1. "Show me how you would do (action)."
2. "Show me how you would be a (character)."
3. *if needed, reminders such as*: "Remember to stay on stage."
4. "Good job. Take a bow. Everybody please clap for our performers."

As with storytelling, decisions about how to dramatize the stories should be made by the children, as much as possible. Again, the use of general prompts can help to preserve children's creativity, while ensuring that the activity remains productive.

Issues that May Arise When Storytelling is Part of the Curriculum

Potential Issues with Toddler Stories

Younger children (between the ages of two and three) occasionally have trouble comprehending the concept of a story, have a tendency to tell simplistic and repetitive narratives, are less able to focus on the task of generating a narrative, and are less able to sit still and focus on the dramatization. Although it may appear that these children are not developmentally ready to participate in storytelling activities, it is possible, and beneficial, to successfully incorporate storytelling into the curriculum for younger children (Paley 2001).

Even the simplest stories generated by two- and three-year-olds are sufficient to be dramatized and have the potential to provide rich learning opportunities. For example, one story we collected simply contained the words "Baby brother." When this story was dramatized, the children took turns discussing and acting out their individual perceptions of "Baby brother." Some children insisted that baby brothers cry in the night, while others contested baby brothers sleep. Others did not have a baby brother but explained their experience with baby sisters. This dramatization provided opportunities for language development, recall of information, and social interactions.

Another toddler story did not contain any English words; instead it included horse noises (grunts and whinnies). These noises were transcribed and used during dramatization. The storyteller recreated the noises and galloped about the stage, providing a lively and convincing rendition of a horse. Later in the year, children in this classroom of two- to three-year-olds began incorporating the horse into their stories. One child's story included the phrase "a horse goes to this school," and the author of the original horse story was chosen to dramatize that character. This meaningful peer interaction would have been lost if the teacher had decided not to transcribe the story containing only horse noises.

One of the reasons children's narratives are so simplistic at this age is due to the short time most are willing to spend at the storytelling table. Their short attention span is also apparent during the dramatization process, as some children begin wandering and are disengaged with the group activity. Nonetheless, the above examples show that storytelling can promote a child-centered curriculum that builds upon the interests and ideas of the children. As long as children have a choice about whether or not to participate in the storytelling and dramatization activities, these activities can play a valuable role in the curriculum for younger children.

Potential Issues with the Stories of Older Preschool Children

Four- and five-year-olds have the interest and ability to produce more complex narratives, and they are excited to perform in front of one another. Four- and-five-year-olds

take elements they have experienced in their real lives and the media, and weave those elements into original—and sometimes quite fantastic—new accounts. Adults sometimes find the content of these imaginative creations worrisome.

One concern that parents expressed in response to some of our children's stories was that they contained too many elements from books or other media. However, this tendency to re-use characters and plots is evidence of progress in children's cognitive development. A two-year-old would have trouble recalling and verbally explaining the plot of their favorite cartoon movie. However, a five-year-old is not only capable of retelling a story, but may enjoy the sense of mastery she or he gets from doing so.

In addition to providing evidence of a child's cognitive growth, children can develop important cognitive and social skills through retelling familiar stories. Retelling stories can help children practice important literacy skills, including language development, story comprehension, and a sense of story structure (Morrow 2005). Retelling stories can also help children to connect with their peers by providing them with common interests that can be used to initiate conversations and play.

Stories that explore sensitive topics can be a second cause of concern among adults. Children in our center sometimes used storytelling to explore sensitive topics. Paley and her colleagues suggest that it is important to place the fewest restrictions on story content (Paley et al. 2003), but the content of unrestricted stories may leave teachers feeling uncertain about how to proceed.

Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) distinguish between a developmental view and a sociopolitical view of play that involves sensitive issues. Those who take a developmental view believe that children must be allowed to choose their play. The themes they choose reflect issues or concerns that they need/want to explore and master through play. Those who adopt a sociopolitical view worry that children may be learning and/or reinforcing negative ideas about conflict, politics, and morality when they are allowed to engage in play that involves potentially worrisome topics. These two views can also be adopted in response to children's stories that contain sensitive themes.

One practice children sometimes engaged in when writing stories was the use of bathroom talk (i.e., potty, poopy-head). We took a developmental view towards such stories, and in an attempt to be as non-restrictive as possible, we did allow such language to be included in the narratives and dramatizations. However, we did not allow profanity, because such language could easily have caused adults and children in the classroom to feel uncomfortable. In such cases, we simply told the child that we would not write or act out that word because it might make someone feel uncomfortable.

A similar problem exists when children tell stories that contain aggressive and violent elements. Many of the stories children write use superheroes as the main characters. The following narrative is a typical example of a superhero story.

> Once there was a T-Rex and then Spiderman came by and T-Rex beat up Spiderman and then Superman came by. He crash-landed, and then he beat T-Rex up, and Spiderman came back alive, and he beat up T-Rex once.

While many teachers and parents are content to allow children to *write* stories such as these, they are understandably more concerned about how children will *dramatize* them in a group setting. Again, we took a developmental view, and decided that children should be allowed to choose the characters and events in their stories because such choice has the potential to empower children by giving them an alternate way to confront and defeat potential and real adversaries (Cooper 1993). We believed that these benefits extended to dramatizing as well as writing the stories, and thus decided to allow children who wanted to participate in dramatization of these stories to do so. In order to maintain a safe classroom, we did insist that when children dramatized such stories, there was to be no touching between characters. The children were allowed to pretend fight, as long as there was no physical contact between their bodies. The children understood that the rule was designed to protect their safety, and we think it helped them to distinguish between pretend and real aggression.

Of course, children's stories can vary a great deal, and there are some stories that seem particularly disturbing. Consider the following story, written by a child in our program.

> There was a princess. Her stepsister killed her with a gun. Then she went to heaven. Then she went to the hospital and came right back home. Then her Mom took care of her and she was all better.

When this story was dramatized, a parent assisting in the classroom was disturbed that death and gun shooting would be acted out in the preschool. With a story such as this one, the developmental view does not seem to adequately address the sociopolitical concerns an adult might have about allowing such disturbing content in the classroom.

It is important to note that the children involved in this incident were not at all bothered by the violence. Perhaps the story was not troubling to them because they did not view the death as permanent, or because the protagonist is comforted by her mother at the end of the story. At the time this story was dramatized, we used the children's reactions to the story as a guide to whether or not such stories should be banned. Because the children did not seem bothered by the story, we focused our efforts on helping parents understand why children might tell such stories and

reassuring them that children's stories that contain violence are quite typical. We wrote a letter to parents (http://www.fcs.utah.edu/info/cfdc/storytelling_letter.pdf) that discussed our views about violence in children's stories and invited them to talk further with us about their concerns.

In allowing this particularly violent story in our curriculum, we followed the lead of writers such as Cooper (1993) and Engel (1999; 2005), who argue that stories create a much-needed space where children can play with ideas that concern or frighten them. Cooper believes that stories empower children. Rather than encouraging further violence, they simply give children opportunities to play out, and thus diffuse, scary material. Similarly, Engel argues that children understand stories are different from real life. Because stories don't represent the real world, they give children a clearly defined, safe place to explore scary, taboo, or otherwise worrisome ideas.

In our center, open communication with parents, in which we listened carefully to their concerns and provided thorough explanations of our rationale for allowing such stories to be recorded and enacted was sufficient to alleviate parental concerns. In addition, teachers in this center did not notice increases in aggressive behavior among individual children who told aggressive stories or in the class generally. Thus, these teachers felt comfortable with allowing the aggressive stories to be told and enacted. However, it is possible to conceive of situations in which adult concerns about stories are not so easily addressed. Some parents may be more adamant about story enactments that transgress family rules about nonviolent play, or teachers may feel they don't have the flexibility to allow story enactments that transgress school-wide policies banning violence. Adults who care for children who have directly encountered violence may have different concerns than adults who care for children who have not had such encounters. Thus, the wider social and contextual issues associated with a school, community or children's home environments may cause adults to assess the appropriateness of aggressive stories differently.

Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) argue that both the developmental view (as exemplified by the attitude we adopted in response to stories containing sensitive topics) and the sociopolitical view (as exemplified by the parent who questioned the inclusion of particularly violent stories in group dramatizations) are valid responses to aggression in children's play, but that neither, on its own, is a sufficient response. The developmental view sometimes ignores the very real concerns parents have about exposing their children to inappropriate material, while the sociopolitical view sometimes ignores the potential benefits children receive from being allowed to explore intriguing or scary ideas.

Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) suggest that when children are allowed to engage in aggressive play, adults should do one of two things: they can suggest alternate ways to work on the same issues, and/or they can actively facilitate aggressive play. Levin and Carlsson-Paige suggest art, writing, discussion, and children's literature as alternatives to play. In other words, writing stories might be a better alternative than allowing very aggressive play in the classroom. Levin and Carlsson-Paige argue that activities such as art and writing rely on symbols, and thus may provide more distance than dramatic play does. By this reasoning, children's written stories may be viewed as less problematic, but the issue of whether to allow children to enact potentially disturbing stories remains.

The suggestion by Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) to facilitate aggressive play may provide more guidance about how to handle enactments of potentially disturbing material. Levin and Carlsson-Paige recommend that teachers actively respond to children's aggressive play by reinforcing the idea that play is pretend, encouraging children to think of and try out alternatives behaviors and resolutions in their play, humanizing the "enemy," and helping children to understand the actual effects of violence and aggression. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore how these suggestions might be applied to storytelling dramatizations, it is likely that responses such as these can adequately address many of the concerns raised by disturbing content in children's stories. For example, after an enactment of an aggressive story, a teacher might comment, "Boy am I glad that story is just pretend, that kind of fighting might really hurt someone!" Such a comment directly suggests that story solutions are not necessarily appropriate in the real world, without discouraging the child from continuing to explore his or her ideas.

As with all areas of children's development, there is a range of ways teachers can respond when children raise scary or inappropriate themes in their stories. Depending upon the specific themes raised, the children's reactions, school context, and parental concerns, teachers can choose to respond in different ways at different times. However, we believe teachers should strive for options that restrict children's ideas as little as possible, so that children have the freedom to express and explore the ideas they find most intriguing.

Home-School Connection

As the storytelling program develops, parents may become increasingly interested in the stories their children tell. To encourage parent involvement, we use carbon paper to create a copy of every story, and the copy is sent home with the storyteller at the end of the day. This approach to storytelling and dramatization gives parents an opportunity for different types of involvement (Epstein 2001). First, parents can recreate school curriculum at home. We have found that

children often want to read and act the stories again at home. Such repetition reinforces cognitive and oral language skills and builds feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Second, sending copies of stories home enhances home/school relationships. One benefit is that parents have tangible evidence that their child is receiving individual attention. More importantly, children's stories can launch discussions between parents and teachers regarding the child's interests and accomplishments. For example, some parents show amazement at their child's stories, indicating they were unaware of the child's ability to produce detailed narratives.

As previously discussed parents sometimes are embarrassed or concerned about the content (e.g., aggressive themes or sensitive topics) or unsophisticated nature (e.g., one-word stories, repetition, or lack of a clear plot) of their children's stories. Rather than viewing this outcome as a negative consequence, we believe such situations have the potential to improve communication between teachers, parents, and children. We hope teachers can use the ideas expressed in this article, along with their own knowledge of the particular contexts in which they work, to develop rationales for the inclusion of children's storytelling and playacting in the preschool curriculum. These rationales can help parents recognize the value of their children's stories, and may even encourage parents to talk with their children about some of the more sensitive issues children sometimes raise.

Conclusion

Storytelling and dramatization can enhance early childhood programs in many different ways. Children develop literacy skills, social skills, and creativity. Home-school connections are strengthened, and teachers gain insights into the thinking of their students. These benefits all result from a process that is mostly child-centered, where children engage freely in the activity and are able to direct most of the process. Storytelling carried out in this way provides a good example of curriculum that is play-based, child-centered, and highly beneficial.

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