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Literacy learning and pedagogical purpose in Vivian Paley's 'storytelling curriculum'

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Abstract Vivian Gussin Paley's 'storytelling curriculum' consists of two interdependent activities, dictation and dramatization. It has long been recognized for its impact on young children's psychosocial, language, and narrative development. As a result of the Bush administration's educational policies, holistic, play-based curricula like storytelling are rapidly being replaced in early childhood classrooms across America by curricula aimed at specific sub-skills of the reading and writing process. This article provides a structural analysis of what happens when children dictate and dramatize original stories in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classroom. It highlights the opportunities for literacy learning around specific literacy sub-skills that are available in this holistic, play-based activity as well as the teacher's role in the process. It also looks at the storytelling curriculum's relationship to the goals of a 'balanced' approach to early literacy instruction, including oral language development, narrative form, and word study.

Keywords academic literacy; early literacy; play-based literacy; skill acquisition; storytelling; Vivian Paley

In this way a story often contributes lessons worthy of the best kindergarten curriculum.

(Vivian Gussin Paley, 1981: 167)

Introduction

Among Vivian Gussin Paley's many contributions to early childhood education in America and around the world is her celebrated focus on story as the mainstay of the kindergarten language arts curriculum, if not the kindergarten experience itself. First described in *Wally's Stories: Conversations in*

the *Kindergarten* (Paley, 1981), Paley's 'storytelling curriculum' consists of two interdependent activities. In the first, a child dictates his or her story to the teacher. In the second, the story is dramatized by the class. The holistic nature of the storytelling curriculum is evident in the learning it promotes in almost all areas of development, from using language to express and shape intention to making friends (Cazden, 1992; Clay, 1991a; Cooper, 1993; Dyson, 1997; Hurwitz, 2001; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane and McNamee, 1990; McNamee et al., 1985; Niccolopolu et al., 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1998; Sapon-Shevin et al., 1998; Wiltz and Fein, 1996). Accordingly, the play-based storytelling curriculum is a model of the integrated developmental learning historically associated with early childhood education in America and other western countries (Williams, 1992). Its very richness, however, may ultimately be the source of its disappearance from modern American classrooms. Driven by new state and federal standards, school districts around the USA are rapidly replacing their traditional early childhood programs with more academically oriented ones that give over large chunks of the school day to literacy sub-skills. A notable influence on this shift of priorities is the Reading First Initiative of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), a centerpiece of the Bush administration's education agenda. States that agree to its imperatives receive additional federal support. NCLB, in general, and the Reading First Initiative, in particular, have spawned widespread controversy among teachers, teacher educators, and educational observers in the USA. Some critics question the legitimacy of the research support (Coles, 2003). Other critics object to the fact that adherence to the legislation narrows the early childhood literacy curriculum to direct instruction or teacher-led activities around five sub-areas of the reading process: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Supporters of the change in focus suggest that the traditional developmentally comprehensive and play-based curriculum does not provide sufficient preparation for young children's early literacy development in these areas.

Despite the controversy that NCLB has wrought in the early childhood community since its passage in 2001, Dickinson (2002) writes that the academicization of the pre-kindergarten (4–5 years) and kindergarten (5–6 years) curriculum has been making steady progress on the American early childhood education scene for the last two decades, replete with regular assessments of children's progress in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. While many experienced teachers question the appropriateness of such goals, and object to the concomitant reduction in playground time, singing, cooking, and other hallowed habits of the early childhood classroom, few are willing

to risk the implications for the children or themselves if they ignore mandated directives.

This article accepts the goal that young children master some academic sub-skills in the kindergarten and, in a different way, the pre-kindergarten year. It rejects, however, the premise that such learning requires the reign of academics over play, or direct instruction over embedded learning opportunities. In the best of all possible worlds, direct instruction in literacy sub-skills in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten year would take up an average of less than 30 minutes a day. Complementary activities, like sign-in sheets and other functional activities involving letters, sounds, and writing would provide practice support. A broad swath of embedded affective and cognitive experiences around language, print, and story that run across the curriculum and are scaffolded by the teacher and competent peers, however, would provide core support. I offer a structural analysis of teachers' and children's participation in Paley's storytelling curriculum as a prime example of the potential in exemplary traditional early childhood activities to indirectly, but influentially, promote academic knowledge. My guiding questions are: What are the opportunities for literacy learning, including academic sub-skills, when young children regularly participate in the dictation and dramatization activities described by Paley (1981)? Furthermore, what is the teacher's role in the process?

I base my analysis on my practice of Paley's storytelling curriculum as a teacher, teacher educator, and researcher for more than two decades. Though I have made every possible effort to be faithful to my data sources and overall understanding of the work, this is neither a case study nor an evaluation study. Rather, I aim to provide a reconceptualization of the storytelling experience for teachers and children, so as to operationalize the link between theory and practice on the academic underpinnings of play in the early childhood classroom. To that end, except when noted, the teachers and children described here represent a composite description of what I have learned about their potential roles in the process from the hundreds and hundreds of stories I have implemented, directed, or observed dictated and dramatized over the years (Cooper, 1993). My goal is not to focus on the individual child or teacher but the curriculum itself, to turn it inside out, so to speak, to reveal its academic silk lining in terms of very specific ends. Too often, the relationship between play and academic achievement is cloaked in generalizations of play's contributions to later school success. This has left the play-based curriculum vulnerable to the charge that it is not a sufficiently rigorous or exact preparation for early literacy. What does academic learning look like when play is peeled away? Vygotsky's theory of scaffolded learning (1978), where learning precedes developmental

changes, provides the pedagogical frame in which teachers and experiences lend the hand that makes future independence possible. Sadoski's (2004) view of reading's cognitive and affective elements provides a framework for literacy learning from a 'balanced literacy' perspective. Finally, it is important to note that this focus on academic achievements in early literacy is not meant to ignore other goals of the reading program, such as critical and cultural literacy. The assumption is that instruction and learning in these areas is interdependent and, in a related discussion, could be cultivated through storytelling as well.

Methodological overview of the 'storytelling curriculum'

Dictation

It goes without saying that each teacher and classroom of children will put their individual stamps on storytelling and story acting methodology. Herein lies the possibility for using dictation and dramatization to further literacy learning in ways tailored to individual or group needs. The following is a very basic overview of what it might look like. For the record, my methodology differs in small ways from Paley's own description (1981, 1992, 1997, 2004), which, like mine, has changed somewhat over time (Cooper, 1993). The important commonality between us and among the many, many teachers we have worked with or heard from is that the child's words and intentions are respected according to group norms.

In essence, participation in the storytelling curriculum means that, first, an individual child tells – dictates – his or her story to the teacher, who acts as a scribe, editor, and initial audience. Ideally, this occurs during center or choice time, but in the absence of either, or if the teacher prefers to be completely free during these periods, it can occur when the rest of the class is engaged in independent work. A typical opening exchange might go as follows:

Teacher: How does your story begin?

Child: One day . . .

Once children get the hang of the process, it is not unusual for them to launch right into their story. 'Write down I'm going to Mexico,' says Victor, sliding into the author's seat. 'To see my cousins. Write that, too.'

Often the teacher will need to ask for clarification on a confusing point. 'I don't understand. How many babies were there?' Or she might pause in her scribing to simply appreciate the story. 'Wow! What an amazing day you had.' With little qualification, all topics, true and untrue, are welcome. For the sake of efficiency, the story is usually held to one page. The concept of

'to be continued' is introduced as needed. The teacher then rereads what the child has written to offer the opportunity for revision. Finally, the author chooses classmates to play the various parts from the list of classmates waiting for a turn in a story. Children who are not actors will comprise the audience.

Dramatization

Story acting – dramatization – of each story best serves young children's interests when it occurs on the same day as the story is told. It does not have to happen immediately, however. Most teachers use dramatization as a transition activity, after center time and before lunch, for example. Dramatization follows a simple pattern. The teacher first reads the story to alert the audience and actors as to the plot. She then reads it aloud again as the children step into their roles. Though the teacher serves as director and producer, offering suggestions to foster dramatic interpretation, such as 'How can you show the class that the monster surprised you?', expectations of dramatic performance are relatively low. Except on special occasions, dramatization is a one-time through, no-rehearsal event. In time and with specific suggestions, the children will come to see the possibilities in it, but it is not the focus of the overall experience except in the sense that children will often shape their narratives to produce a certain effect in drama. I once had a class, for example, that liked when the actors all 'fell in a hole', and would insert that into the story, however, unrelated to the main point, just for the giggles it would bring in dramatization. Finally, I insist on a 'no touching' rule in all dramas so as to avoid accidents when the plot line involves karate kicks, putting robbers in jail, or even putting babies in cribs.

As we know, Paley did not invent dictation or dramatization in the early childhood curriculum. She is to be credited, however, with establishing them for the field as inseparable and regular classroom activities. Regular is key, for the stories children tell and act out are synonymous with the lives they lead, and life cannot be relegated to special occasions. This theme runs throughout *Wally's Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten* (Paley, 1981), *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom* (Paley, 1990), and *The Girl With the Brown Crayon* (1997), and the other books in which Paley describes the uses of storytelling in the classroom. Indeed, it is hard to not to find a hundred uses for any curriculum in which a five-year-old imagines 'First, I was a Ninja Turtle. And then I became a real Ninja Turtle' (Cooper, 1993). A real Ninja Turtle? *The Velveteen Rabbit* redux? Alice through the looking class? To paraphrase Seuss, oh, the places children will go through storytelling. This includes reading and writing.

Review of the literature

The literature on early literacy learning in America, let alone an international perspective, is vast and beyond the scope of this article. Relevant to my focus on storytelling and the shifting goals of the early childhood curriculum, this review asks, first, what is the evidence that expectations of literacy instruction in the early childhood classroom have changed since Paley introduced the storytelling curriculum in 1981? Second, what specific skills are called for? Third, what other factors beyond sub-skills impact early literacy development?

Dickinson (2002) suggests that the American late 20th-century shift away from early childhood's historical emphasis on a 'reading readiness' curriculum to teaching reading is perhaps most symbolically represented by a comparison of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) first and second editions of its influential manual of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs. In the first edition (Bredekamp, 1987), recommendations around literacy learning and pedagogy are largely confined to activities representative of traditional goals around language and symbolism, such as singing, house-keeping play, and environmental print. The second edition 10 years later (Bredekamp and Coppola, 1997) includes a substantive increase in recommendations for teaching specific skills in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, such as phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and beginning phonics. The significance of this change is underscored by a joint position statement in a similar vein between the International Reading Association (IRA) and NAEYC (IRA and NAEYC, 1998), marking the first such policy alliance between the two professions. The National Reading Panel (2000) in its review of 'scientific-based' literature on effective reading strategies, found five indicators of early literacy success: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These were incorporated as program goals in the Reading First Initiative within the NCLB of 2001. The NCLB legislation gives funding preference to those programs that incorporate curricula aimed at these specific practices (Manzo, 2004; Yell and Drasgow, 2004; <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/rigorousevid/index.html>).

Of the five indicators of early literacy success noted by the National Reading Panel's (2000) report, none has generated more controversy than the role of phonics in learning to read. Allington (2002), Coles (2000, 2003), and Taylor (1998), among many others, have questioned the validity of the criteria used by the National Reading Panel to support this position. Yet phonics has been at the center of the debate over how to teach

reading for over a century. Today's debate, however, has the added distinction of influencing the kindergarten and even pre-kindergarten curriculum, not just the first and second grades where reading instruction traditionally began. The main competition for a phonics-based approach through the 1960s was the sight-word method, forever anchored in the American public imagination by Scott Foresman's *Dick and Jane* series, which debuted in the 1930s. Support for phonics instruction gained new momentum with the publication of Rudolph Flesch's (1955/1986) *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It*. Flesch's bestseller combined a scathing critique of the sight word approach with a how-to manual on teaching phonics. The tension between the two camps peaked with the publication of Jeanne Chall's (1970) review of the research, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. The name itself became interchangeable with the by-then entrenched division in the field. It is widely assumed that Chall found in favor of a phonics only approach. In reality, her review presented a much more nuanced endorsement, stressing that while phonics instruction was a most necessary component, the evidence did not support its exclusive use.

About the same time that American teachers were enthusiastically receptive to Canadian Frank Smith's (1979) *Reading Without Nonsense* and *Joining the Literacy Club* (Smith, 1987) that emphasized the social aspects of literacy learning, Ken and Yetta Goodman (Goodman, 1986; Goodman et al., 1991) added a third strand to the debate: meaning-centered, literature-based instruction, called 'Whole Language'. A Whole Language approach immerses young children in reading and writing activities that are deemed authentic, that is involving real purpose or genuine attraction. Australian Brian Cambourne's (1988, 1995, 1999) work in naturalistic literacy settings was also influential in changing the reading and writing curriculum across America. Marie Clay (1991b) and Don Holdaway (1979) of New Zealand are often linked to a Whole Language type of approach, though their work in 'word study', including both phonics and sight words, as well as activities like shared reading, was more widely embraced when criticism of the Whole Language appeared in the mid-1990s. Of special note about this period is the fact that the Whole Language movement was immediately and astonishingly popular with many teachers and school districts, changing the course of literacy instruction across America almost overnight. Many teachers – though certainly not all – heralded the de-emphasis on skills instruction as a better-late-than-never release from the basal-bound days of the past.

One of the more prevalent and most controversial ideas associated with Whole Language is the use of invented spelling. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s and beyond, parents and upper grade teachers led the charge that

children who went through Whole Language classrooms in the primary grades had not learned to spell and, in some cases, even to read. Without addressing the validity of these charges, what in the 1960s was called a mere debate escalated into the 'reading wars' 30 years later. The National Reading Panel (2000) drew on Adams' (1998) review of research to reaffirm phonics as the curriculum of choice for beginning readers and writers, with the added precursor of instruction in phonemic awareness. Again, like Chall decades earlier, Adams concluded that though the research favored phonics, there was not a mandate for an exclusive phonics approach. One practical difference between the two was that Adams' review, unlike Chall's, resulted in major changes to the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten curriculum, resulting in what opponents refer to as the 'pushed-down' curriculum.

An unexpected challenge to a skills-dominant literacy education in the pre and primary grades can be found in the recent spate of research in early childhood development, including the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2005), which concludes that overall language development, vocabulary development, investment in print, and comprehension skills are more pivotal to children's learning to read and write than simple skill knowledge (Hart and Risley, 1995; Snow, 1991, 2002; Snow et al., 1998). These are seen, not as the outcome of particular lessons in school around letters and sounds, but as the outcome of family life in which young children are read to regularly, and where parents engage them in a give and take style of verbal interaction, call their attention to environmental print, writing print, and so on. The question is, first, can schools replicate this learning for children whose families have not followed this direction? Second, can they replicate them in a skills-based program?

As Frank Smith (1987) once wryly observed, the one thing we know about teaching young children to learn to read is that all methods work for some children. The last few years has seen increasing support among early childhood educators, reading specialists, and researchers for a blend of all three approaches, which also takes advantage of the emphasis on oral language development. Popularly known as 'balanced literacy', this compromise position combines instruction in skills with language-based, meaning-centered activities, relative to the instructional purpose and, just as importantly, appropriate to the activity (Au et al., 2001; Cowen, 2003; Morrow, 2002; Morrow and Asbury, 1999; Sadoski, 2004; Xue and Miesels, 2004). The call for balance in literacy instruction has gained a substantial following in recent years (Xue and Meisels, 2004), even among pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers. It also provides a philosophical home for Paley's storytelling curriculum, when viewed from a literacy perspective.

The storytelling curriculum, play, and academic achievement

Paley (1981) sees children's use of storytelling in the classroom as an extension of their play, and thus all the more powerful in its potential influence in all areas of their development. 'The use of play as a medium of learning' (Williams, 1992) in early childhood education is indisputable (Bergen, 1992; Bowman, 1990; Roopnarine and Johnson, 2005). The following structural analysis of the storytelling curriculum's contribution to children's early literacy development builds on, not apart from, its traditional developmental roots and objectives.

When asked if stories were the method by which she taught reading in her kindergarten, Paley was clear, 'Not really, although some children do learn to read them' (1981: 167). If Paley does not view the storytelling curriculum as a mere reading program, she is nonetheless keenly aware of the link between storytelling and later academic achievement in general. In her most recent book, *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (Paley, 2004), she cautions us not to forget that fantasy play, including the stories children make-up and dramatize, is the 'glue' that binds all early academic learning. 'Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goals of having an open mind, whether in the service of further storytelling or in formal lessons' (Paley, 2004: 26). Vygotsky (1978) makes a parallel argument for play as a vehicle by which children stretch themselves cognitively, taking place as it does in their 'zone of proximal development' where children act not as they are, but as they might be. Furthermore, essential to both Paley and Vygotsky's perspective is the idea that play requires young children to regulate their behavior – an essential, if not underrated characteristic of the successful learner – to fit the rules of the game or the fantasy. In turn, they learn to separate thought from action, thus furthering their thinking skills and disposition for learning (Bodrova and Leong, 1996; Erikson, 1950/1985).

From this perspective, Paley's storytelling curriculum should not make us nostalgic for some early childhood neverland, a time and place before academic learning invaded our teaching lives. It is potentially a substantive factor in cognitive development relevant to long-term learning goals. The marriage of storytelling to specific academic achievements is not, as described in the following pages, one of mere convenience, contrived to meet state and federal standards in this area. The fact is the very structure of stories and storytelling makes the experience a vital, fertile opportunity for young children to learn many things directly and indirectly about language, print, and narrative, three critical components of early literacy development (Morrow, 2002). The question is how?

The storytelling curriculum and balanced literacy

Sadoski (2004: 43) reminds us that the goals of teaching reading 'can be derived and organized from broad taxonomies of learning'. He borrows from Bloom (1969) to describe the affective and cognitive domains of reading. The affective domain involves the development of a positive attitude toward reading, as well as the cultivation of personal interests and tastes (Sadoski, 2004: 47). The cognitive domain develops fundamental competencies of reading, increasing levels of independence, and the ability to use reading to solve problems (Sadoski, 2004: 53). These goals are then embodied in specific curricular approaches, which Sadoski organizes into two types, 'skills' (Sadoski, 2004: 97) and 'holistic' (Sadoski, 2004: 106), such as phonics and Language Experience. A proper mix, he says, results in a third approach called 'balanced'.

To the novice eye, the storytelling curriculum would not seem to address any particular reading approach. Its primary aim is to provide a forum in which young children tell and act out a story of significance to themselves and the class. From beginning to end, the context is decidedly social – teacher and child, child and group. The pay off more often seems emotional rather than cognitive. Thus, to some, storytelling would seem of little help in the search for a curriculum to develop young children's knowledge of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But this is too simple a view of the storytelling curriculum and literacy. The following structural analysis of the dictation and dramatization activities explores their potential impact on six essential tasks of a balanced approach I have culled from the literature (including Au et al., 2001; Cowen, 2003; Morrow, 1990, 2002; Sadoski, 2004; Xue and Miesels, 2004).

1. oral language: expression, home language, syntax, vocabulary, and sentence patterns
2. narrative form: knowledge of how stories work, where stories come from, what stories are composed of, sequencing, plot development, characterization, writing process, authorial intention, and use of imagination
3. conventions of print: knowledge of how print functions, including directionality, spaces between words, letters, words, and punctuation
4. code: encoding and decoding
5. word study: sight words, phonics, spelling, and decoding
6. reading for meaning

Dictation

1. Dictation and oral language development: Expression, home language, syntax, vocabulary and sentence patterns

Dictation targets several key areas of early literacy development, but clearly it is rooted in oral language development. Paley gave oral language development a tremendous boost when she realized that dictation could give young children an opportunity to talk about things they want to talk about. In *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (Paley, 2004: 57), she convincingly argues that conversation decreases proportionally to a decrease in play. Along these same lines, I often find that teachers miss opportunities to extend children's talk in their quest to keep children on task. 'That's nice, dear. Now did you clean up?' may seem the more efficient response to 'Teacher, guess what? Micah's coming home with me today'. In the end, however, young children's unarticulated thoughts only build up to the point of real distraction from the task at hand.

It is therefore fortunate that an extremely critical aspect of the dictation experience is its dependence on an open-ended conversation between teacher and child. 'So, what are you going to tell a story about today?' the teacher might begin. Or, 'How is your story going to begin?'. It is the child's choice. Research (Clay, 1989; Dickinson and Tabors, 1991; Hart and Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983; Snow, 1991, 2003) abounds on the relationship between learning to read and write and oral language development that it is reasonable to assume a basic skills approach will never produce. Whether the storyteller wants to write about the new baby or retell for the 15th time the part in *Shrek* where the princess spins around in the air, teachers can play an important role in helping children expand vocabulary, sentence length, and expression. ('I don't understand, Kayla. You say first the princess spun around in the air and then you say she didn't change because she became a *Shrek* princess. How do you become a *Shrek* princess? What's a *Shrek* princess? Tell me more.')

Teachers can also help a struggling or shy storyteller through the right choice of questions or demonstration of interest.

Teacher: Spiderman came. Okay, I'll write that. Is there more?

Child: (silence)

Teacher: Hmm . . . What picture do you see in your head? Does Spiderman come by car, like Batman? Or a cape like Superman?

Child (amazed): NO, teacher! He uses webs. On his hands.

Teacher: Oh, okay. Well, I'm glad you told me. Let me write that down. Spiderman-used-his-webs – to do what?

Child: To come through the window. The bad guy was there.

Teacher: Oh, I see now. To-come-through-the-window. Tell me more about this bad guy. Does he have name?

Taking dictation from young children also gives teachers the chance to understand and work with the children's use of syntax, standard or otherwise for several reasons. For example, as we know the speech of the youngest children is sprinkled with immature patterns ('Mommy work.'). At four and five years old, many pass through a metalinguistic phase, in which they eschew grammatical exceptions they learned without question and now attempt to standardize the language. Where just yesterday they effortlessly used *I ran* as the past tense of *I run*, they now insist on *runned*. Similarly, *fought* becomes *foughted* and *gave* becomes *gived*. Some teachers write down the child's exact words; others offer a gentle reminder of standard usage. On occasion a four year old will become adamant that the teacher not change a thing. This is a sign of a healthy command over his or her own thoughts.

Of course, some children are more fluent in non-standard English than standard usage. The one-on-one nature of the dictation process allows teachers to address this as they see fit. Teachers I work with usually take one of three routes. The first group, as with the younger children, write down exactly what the child says. The idea is that the child will adopt standard speech when he or she is ready. The second calls the child's attention to the deviation from Standard English, suggests the standard form, and requests permission to write it that way. Sometimes the children give permission, sometimes they do not. The third group echoes what the child says, but with modification from non-standard to standard, much like what many mothers do to correct children's speech. If the child does not object, the teacher proceeds to write it down in the modified form. The point is that in all three instances, dictation offers teachers a chance to teach the children about language usage, and to learn what the children know, or are ready to know. There is no one way to approach this issue. Teachers must decide what to do within the context of expectations, their own, the school's, and the families'. Sometimes teachers are surprised by the children's responses. Paley writes of what happens when she was taking dictation from the strong-minded Reeny, the star of *The Girl With the Brown Crayon* (Paley, 1997).

Reeny: Once there was a little princess. And a mother and father. They was the king and queen.

Paley: Do you want to say 'They were the king and queen'?

Reeny: They was the king and queen. And the princess was walking in the forest deeply and she got lost.

Paley: In the forest deeply is nice.

Reeny: Thank you.

Reeny, Paley says, knows the difference between literary commentary and criticism. It's also clear that Paley knows the difference between a teachable moment, and one in which the teacher becomes the learner.

Teachers can use dictation to help children expand on their language by asking for more detail as when young storytellers use one word adjective to describe an emotion. In response to 'Mommy was mad,' the teacher might say, 'Does the mommy do anything to make the little girl know she is mad? Does she look different? Or does she use angry words?'. Perhaps the teacher does not see the need to be as directive and simply asks the child to expand on an idea, as in the earlier example of 'Tell me more'.

2. Dictation and narrative form: Knowledge of how stories work, where stories come from, what stories are composed of, sequencing, plot development, characterization, writing process, authorial intention, and use of imagination

Knowledge of how to use stories to negotiate experience and society at large is essential to human development. It is how we learn to empathize and gain empathy. It allows us to stay connected to home though we must leave it, and to make ourselves known when we return. Stories, however, are not random words or even sentences strung together. Basic structures may change with culture or purpose, but the essential goal remains the same: to communicate meaningfully between parties, to meet and respond to human needs.

For better or worse, modern American schooling rewards children who are competent in a linear form of storytelling, that is stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end. A context, problem, and resolution. Expectations of story resolution drive comprehension efforts in beginning as well as advanced readers and writers. It is the tree trunk to which all other literacy branches are attached.

As noted, a usual moment in storytelling is when the teacher asks the child, 'How does your story begin?' or 'What are you going to tell about today?'. With these questions, the teacher sends a very important message to the storyteller. In the first, she suggests that stories are a different phenomenon than oral speech or conversation. It may have a stylized beginning ('One day' or 'Once upon a time') or it just may be a sentence that signals that the conversation has stopped and a narrative is beginning. The overall concept of narrative is usually easier for young children to grasp than its sub-parts, but with enough experience and feedback from the audience when the story is dramatized, they begin to grasp what makes a

good plot, how to flesh out the characters and so on. These are fundamental aspects of creative writing that young children learn best through demonstration and action.

Essential to the development of narrative skills is permission to experiment with both content and language. For this reason, I applaud Paley's insistence that children's choice of topic should not be restricted when they compose. This means accepting, if not inviting, stories from their imaginations. It also means accepting the fact that they can tell more, if not way more, than they can write. Dictation has sometimes been criticized as inhibiting children's initiative and progress as independent, creative writers. In all the hundreds and hundreds of stories I have taken or observed, and in all the conversations I had with young children about stories, I have seen no evidence that this is even remotely possible. Children want to write their own stories, and will do so as soon as they are able. The fact is very few young children have the physical or mental stamina, writing vocabulary, and basic skills to encode the long and complex stories they have in their heads. Dictation actually spurs on independent creative writing, but delivering the whole far in advance of the author's ability to produce it.

3. Dictation and the conventions of print: Knowledge of how print functions, including directionality, spaces between words, letters, words, and punctuation Children who are read to regularly are known to absorb the basic operations of print relatively painlessly. The child who dictates stories, however, gets to observe them in action. Consider what happens as the storyteller follows the teacher's pen as she moves it left to right across the paper and then back again. How many times on one page does the storyteller observe the teacher lift the pen between clusters of marks, the shape of which gets repeated in various combinations? Consider also what a boon this experience is for the young child who has not been read to regularly, or had much interaction with adult writers. In a short while, the storyteller realizes on her own and with the teacher's help that the shapes on the page are letters and that letters are grouped to make particular words. ('See, Devin, that says "Devin's Story".') The conventions of print are further reinforced for beginning storytellers who often wonder aloud why teachers cannot write between lines or up in the corners. They listen with interest as the teacher explains that the story would be too confusing to read if not written down in sequential order. Teachers will often track the print with their fingers as they reread the story to draw the author's attention to the words in the context of the whole.

4. Dictation and the code Distinct from, though obviously related, young children's growing awareness of the conventions of print is the concept of the alphabetic code. It is usually assumed that this next step requires instruction in phonics, that is the relationship between letters and speech sounds. It does, but not yet. First, young children must understand that what can be said can be written (encoded), that what can be written can be studied for its sub-parts (decoded), and that what can be decoded can be understood (comprehension). Some children learn this at home before kindergarten. Others come to school to learn it, either as very young children in daycare or pre-school or starting in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Let's look at the process from the beginning. In my experience, the toddler or nursery school storyteller most often does not pay much attention to what the teacher is doing during dictation. Their focus is on the oral language required in getting their story out. Unaware still of how what they are saying is connected to what the teacher is writing, they tell their stories to the teacher's face or to the ceiling or their eyes wander around the room as they reveal their thoughts. We take this as a clue that they are not yet available (or 'ready', as we used to say) for more formal instruction. But the older nursery school child, the pre-kindergartner, and kindergartner (depending on their entry point in the process) show us the next stage. Often they lower their heads to the paper to follow the pen. They appear to be watching the flow of words like they are watching water drip from the faucet. Over the years, children at this stage have given me the distinct impression they think the words are actually in the pen, not their own heads. This lack of experience leads them to miss the fact that the teacher is not just writing as they speak, but writing what they are actually saying. All the alphabet instruction in the world will not change the following exchange at the storytelling table, but it is essential to becoming a reader and writer.

Child: (dictating her story to the teacher) I went to Toys R Us with my mother.

Teacher: (echoing the child's words as she writes) I-went-to-Toys-R-Us-with-my mother.

Child: You, too?

Once children get the hang of who is doing what in dictation (and it does not take long), they often take on the role of expert. 'Did you write that down?' a child might ask the teacher. Or 'Where did you put that?'. It is funny when it happens, but more than this it is always a good sign as it indicates the child's growing awareness of how print works (Schickendanz, 1999).

Given these and other possible things to learn by merely observing young children's behavior when they dictate, is it any wonder that teachers often remark that it is one of the best times to assess young children's knowledge of the encoding process? As children get more experienced with dictation, teachers can note what questions they ask about words or ideas. They can keep mental and often written track (in portfolios) of what the storytellers might need to know, as in whether the storyteller tracks print or uses transitional phrases (like 'the next day'). Sometimes children will suddenly say, 'Let me write that' and reach for the teacher's pen, which she gives up willingly. The storyteller then writes the word she knows, sometimes asking for spelling assistance, sometimes not. The pen is quickly returned to the teacher and the storyteller proceeds with dictation. But it is a big leap forward, and the teacher applauds the effort.

Teachers experienced in the storytelling curriculum have often observed that once children come to take the encoding process for granted they no longer put their energies into monitoring the narrative on paper and, instead, become concerned with refining the narrative. These children often have a laid back look about them during the dictation process, acting almost a little bored, but become very animated during dramatization. From this we learn not to waste their time with further instruction during dictation, and encourage as much independent writing as possible at other times during the school day.

5. Dictation and word study: Sight words, phonics, spelling, and decoding Dictation offers a wealth of opportunities for word study in all its permutations. To begin with, telling one's story to the teacher involves so many different types of linguistic transactions, oral and written, that the young storyteller can hardly avoid second hand acquisition of a variety of skills that support the reading process. One reason for this is the sheer repetition of words during the dictation process, meaning high frequency words and key vocabulary like pizza or park get repeated over and over again as the child observes. It is not uncommon for a child tracking her story as the teacher writes it down to say, 'Look, teacher! Marco has the same letters in his name as me (Maria)'. Or 'Oh. Wa-ter-mel-on. That's a long word'.

Direct acquisition may occur when the teacher decides to address particular skills the child is working on in other parts of the literacy curriculum. At first, the teacher might call the child's attention, albeit casually, to the letters and sounds of a particular word. She might want to reinforce a mini-lesson from earlier in the day. 'See, here's that tricky g we talked about. Go and giant. Two different sounds, same letter.' She also might pause to let

the storyteller find words that begin or end the same, suggest punctuation, or play with the spelling of a word she thinks will be good practice. 'What do you think? Remember what we talked about this morning? Should cake have an e at the end of it?' Finally, teachers might also be on the look out for the opportunity to play with words apart from the story.

Teacher: Then Marianna slipped on the blue glue. Is that what you said?

Jennifer: (giggling) Blue glue!

Teacher: (laughing) You are very silly. And, look, blue and glue have the same letters except the first one. They make the 'oo' sound, don't they? Hmm. I wonder what the word would be if we put a c in the b or g's space?

Again, it must be stressed that such instruction occurs in the context of the teacher's decision as to what will serve the child at a given moment. Obviously, she will not want to interrupt the narrative experience too often or without reason. The point is that there are many entry points to teach word study through storytelling, some direct, some indirect. The problem is deciding which of the many to emphasize, when to do it, and at what level. Always, the decision is based on the teacher's knowledge of the child.

6. Dictation and reading for meaning Comprehension is often assumed to be a search for meaning in written text. What many literacy programs for young children fail to reflect, however, is that the ability to search for meaning is greatly enhanced by the experience of creating it. This reciprocal relationship between reading and writing is clearly fostered through the storytelling curriculum. First, teachers model this goal. 'Did I get it right?' she asks as she scribes and rereads. Or 'Is that what you wanted to say? Is there anything you'd like to change?'. Teachers can help children untangle a web of characters or an overlapping plot line. 'Hmmm,' she might think aloud. 'How can you say that so that the kids know what you mean? Let's see. Who comes to the party first? Tell me what happens during that part.' Children engage wholeheartedly in these exchanges, clearly working to make their text match their intentions, to make the pictures in their heads match their words.

Dramatization

The relationship of dramatization to the goals of balanced literacy is not as delineated as dictation in that it relies to a greater degree on circumstance and it involves the psychomotor domain of learning as well as the cognitive and affective. That said, dramatization is an indispensable component of children's literacy learning in the storytelling curriculum. For one, as

Paley (1981: 14) and others, including myself (Cooper, 1993), have concluded, many children dictate their stories for no other reason than the chance to act it out with their classmates. In other words, dramatization is a powerful motivator in the learning process.

Interestingly, Sadoski's (2004) application of Bloom's taxonomy to reading omits the psychomotor. He writes:

As a largely sedentary activity reading involves few psychomotor acts. We move our eyes across lines of text. We may occasionally use a finger to keep our place . . . We may use speech articulation to read aloud or sub-vocalize as we read. Beyond this, little psychomotor activity is involved in reading, and most of this activity is not specifically taught. We can therefore safely omit the teaching of psychomotor skills from our goals in the general teaching of reading. (Sadoski, 2004: 45)

Yet literacy learning in the dramatization phase of the storytelling curriculum is the psychomotor embodiment of narrative text, that is, of words, plot, and intention. The development of oral language is a given, as the children repeat the script and ad lib. Linking dialogue and description to action also helps young children internalize the nuances of language and create pictures in their heads, both essential elements of deep reading. As the drama unfolds, more advanced learning around narrative can occur. For example, the teacher will remind actors to do and act according to what the words say, stressing authorial intent and sequence. 'John, the words say that when Noah went to the school nobody was there but Mr Franks (the custodian). You must wait until I get to the part about the daddy coming before you can go on stage.' Dramatization also allows the teacher to help the child make inferences that he was unable to make in dictation. To Noah she might say, 'Were you worried when you couldn't find the rest of the kids? Did you want to add what you did or what you said to Mr Franks when you found him?'

Conventions of print are reinforced when teachers draw children's attention to the written story before and during dramatization. Often teachers run their index fingers over what the author has written from left to right and so on. They point out particularly interesting words or idioms. If a question about the plot comes up, teachers will often refer back to the paper for verification, lending further credibility to the words on the page. Obviously, coding and encoding are not stressed in the dramatization phase, but comprehension takes on a larger role than ever in that children sometimes do not realize what they meant to say until they see the story enacted. Sometimes the author gets a new perspective on his own story by virtue of the audience's reaction to the killer whale or sleeping princess. Teachers,

too, often do not fully appreciate the children's intentions until the drama. They are quick to help out when they sense the written text still falls short of the child's imagination. 'George, did you want the children to jump up and down on the bed like the monkeys do in the story? Or just lie still? Tell the kids what you were thinking when you wrote those words.' I never tire of telling the story of a little girl in my first storytelling class, Elizabeth, who dictated that Snow White died and then she ate the apple. Did she mean to change the ending or did she get confused? I tried to establish her intention during dictation, but she insisted only that I write it as she said it. I did. When I reread the story to the class before dramatization, however, the rest of the children resisted the unconventional ending immediately. (They were, after all, five turning six and suddenly aware that there were some rules you could not break, like dying only after you eat the poison.) Their vociferous call to restore logic to the story impressed Elizabeth in a way that my gentle prodding did not, and we changed the story on the spot.

Conclusion

Despite the warning signs of the last decade (Dickinson, 2002), the academic requirements of the NCLB's (2001) Reading First Initiative caught many in the American early childhood community unprepared for the challenge to the traditional developmental-based curriculum. The pressure to conform to the call for academic instruction in the kindergarten, and increasingly pre-kindergarten, classrooms has been felt at all levels of the school community. The fear, if not the reality, is that the traditional child-centered activities like fantasy play and drama must give way to teacher-led instruction in specific sub-skills. I contend that while some instruction in literacy sub-skills may prove useful in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, activities embedded in play (including drama) serve young children's overall needs better. In order to address critics' concerns that time spent on traditional curricular activities does not meet children's specific academic needs, however, it is necessary to delineate the contrary. This structural analysis of the entwined dictation and dramatization that make up Paley's storytelling curriculum provides one exemplar. My experience with teachers and young children engaged in the storytelling curriculum makes clear that young children quite naturally pursue every path presented to them in their search for meaning and narrative understanding – two essential goals of any early literacy curriculum. This includes an engagement with sub-skills, including coding, encoding, fluency, and comprehension, which the teacher can naturally direct through scaffolded intervention (Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, this play-based opportunity is

neither a nod to the old days when little children were supposedly allowed to be little children in school, nor is it the property of schools exempt from academic mandates. It is available to all teachers who seek to provide their young children with both holistic learning experiences and specific academic opportunities.

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