Spotlight on Young Children: Exploring Language and Literacy

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About this book
Discover innovative ways to support the many aspects of children’s language and literacy development—oral language, reading, and writing. The articles in this collection emphasize meeting children’s unique needs, supporting dual language learners, and partnering with families to support children’s development.

About this excerpt
In “Vivian Paley’s Storytelling/Story Acting Comes to the Boston Public Schools,” Ben Mardell, Marina Boni, and Jason Sachs highlight storyteller and author Vivian Paley, whose work provides the foundation for storytelling/story acting (ST/SA) in 50 Boston kindergarten classrooms. The authors describe how ST/SA promotes language and literacy and how to adapt it to meet children’s diverse needs.
Vivian Paley’s Storytelling/Story Acting Comes to the Boston Public Schools

Vivian Paley shared stories from her rich career as a preschool and kindergarten teacher in her keynote address at NAEYC’s 2011 Annual Conference. She then asked us to imagine a world without stories. Such a world would be an impoverished place indeed.

Stories are vital to children’s understanding of the world. Paley’s determination to make stories an important part of children’s lives took shape in her kindergarten classroom more than 40 years ago, when she initiated a program that has become known as storytelling/story acting (ST/SA). In ST/SA a child dictates a story and the class then dramatizes it (Paley 1981, 1991, 1997). Teachers worldwide embrace storytelling and story acting. For example, Houston (see School Literacy and Culture 2013) and London (see MakeBelieve Arts 2013) are notable for the large scale of their efforts. And the Boston school district makes ST/SA part of its early childhood curriculum.

Boston Public Schools (BPS) is an ethnically and culturally diverse system, with some 45 percent of the students being dual language learners (DLLs). During the 2012–2013 school year, the Boston school district piloted storytelling/story acting in 50 kindergarten classrooms. Now part of Focus on K2, the Boston kindergarten curriculum, the ST/SA component is called Boston Listens. The curriculum is being phased in during the 2013–2015 school years and...
introduced in all 250 BPS kindergartens, which include children with special needs. Soon more than 4,000 young learners will be telling their stories and acting them out in Boston schools.

In addition to the basics of storytelling/story acting, BPS’s version includes three special components: adult stories, communication, and family engagement. After briefly describing storytelling/story acting and these three components, the authors explain the ways ST/SA promotes kindergartners’ learning, how it benefits children learning English, and how it benefits children with special needs. They discuss some of the challenges confronting Boston public school kindergarten teachers and how they met them. To provide more detail on the content, they refer readers to relevant websites for the Boston ST/SA program. (See “The BPS Early Childhood Website.”)

**Storytelling/Story Acting**

Dictation and dramatization are the core of ST/SA. Using their experiences and imaginations, children individually tell their own stories to an adult, who writes them down. At group time the teacher reads the stories aloud as children act them out. ST/SA requires few materials: paper, a pencil or pen, and a clipboard. Some teachers provide individual binders or notebooks in which children collect their stories. For dramatization, children need an area where they can sit comfortably in a circle, with space in the middle for the story acting.

### Storytelling (Dictation)

Supporting children’s storytelling involves teachers’ careful listening and gentle scaffolding, such as asking clarifying questions. It is an opportunity to engage children one-on-one in a joyful activity. Some children may begin the year telling lengthy stories, while others’ stories may be very short. However, even a one-word story should be celebrated and acted out. In the BPS curriculum, stories are limited to one page, allowing time for more stories and dramatizations.

During story dictation “teacherly moments” arise. Children watch intently as teachers write down their words. They may ask about punctuation or particular words, leading to conversations about question marks and initial consonants. However, it is critical that ST/SA not be turned into a phonics lesson. The teacher’s primary role in dictation is listener.

See video examples of scaffolding and tools to support children’s storytelling.

http://bpsearlychildhood.weebly.com/dictation.html
Story Acting (Dramatization)

By bringing children’s stories to the group, story acting honors children’s ideas. It gives children a compelling reason to tell stories and an opportunity to create meaning around an authentic narrative they are interested in. Story acting allows children to learn from one another as they creatively figure out how to depict a cat, a princess, or even a tissue box (true story!). Teachers learn more about the children as they work together to bring children’s stories to life.

During dictation the story’s author has chosen her own role, and this is announced to the group. The teacher then begins reading the story. When the first character appears, she invites a child to enter the ST/SA designated area to take that part. If the child declines the invitation, the teacher proceeds to the next child in the circle. Each time a new character appears, the teacher, continuing around the circle, asks the next child to act: “Can I see you be the neighbor?” Using this language encourages children to decide independently how to portray the characters. Teachers should be expansive in their definition of characters—to allow the maximum number of children to participate in a dramatization, characters can include elements like houses, trees, and pets.

When story acting is about to take place, teachers find that rituals, such as ringing a bell, help build excitement and focus the audience’s attention. Inviting the children to co-construct such rituals promotes a democratic classroom culture by involving children in decisions about their learning. For example, children might suggest applauding a dramatization, if the author is comfortable accepting applause.

Treated as literature, children’s stories can be the basis for valuable conversations. Ask children to share their impressions of stories and to make connections with other areas of the curriculum and with their own experiences. Include terms such as characters, setting, plot, and suspense in the conversations. You might also ask the children in the audience what they enjoyed about a performance and whether they have any suggestions for the cast.

Adults’ Stories

The stories adults tell provide models for children—ideas about characters, plot, and narrative structure. These oral stories can be told at any time during the day by teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, or family members. Children rarely copy these models directly, but rather mine them for ideas. Adults’ stories promote a classroom culture of storytelling, inspiring children to share their stories with classmates.

Adults might base their stories on personal experiences (children love to hear stories about their teachers’ lives), folktales or fairy tales (The Three Billy Goats Gruff, Abiyoyo), or imaginary tales they create (the children solving a mystery).
Communication

After children have dictated and dramatized their stories, teachers may offer additional opportunities for them to enjoy the stories and communicate their ideas. For example, children might illustrate their stories. Teachers can display the drawings on a bulletin board, put them in an ever growing binder of classroom stories (that are read by children, teachers, and classroom guests), or place them in children's individual portfolios. Stories can also inspire collage making or painting and suggest themes for block constructions.

Teachers might consider making video or audio recordings of dramatizations. Children enjoy watching recorded performances and, if transcripts are available, can follow the print as they play the recordings.

Family Engagement

As children's first teachers, families can support their children's learning through stories. Teachers can encourage families to tell stories (at home, for example, or on a car ride to the grocery store) about their day, their childhood, or their favorite tales when they were young, and to listen to their children's stories. Teachers can also invite family members to share their stories at school. It is important for teachers to explain to families how stories support children's success in school (see the section that follows, “How ST/SA Promotes Learning”).

How ST/SA Promotes Learning

Because storytelling/story acting is based on stories and on play—two elements of the world that a young child finds most interesting—it is very engaging. With children’s engagement come important benefits in cognitive learning and social and emotional development.

Vocabulary. A robust vocabulary is essential for children’s reading comprehension and their success in school (NICHD 2000). ST/SA provides a rich context for vocabulary development as children listen to and use words in authentic ways. During this activity, children frequently ask about the meaning of words, and teachers can suggest more specific vocabulary. Dramatization brings words to life. It is not surprising that children who participate in story dictation (McCabe et al. 2009) and ST/SA (Cooper et al. 2007) score higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn 2007) than peers from comparable socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds who do not participate.

Narrative structure. Narrative abilities are also essential for success in reading and writing, and ST/SA provides a bridge between the contextualized speech of young children and the decontextualized language of books and writing (Snow 1983). That is, most
young children’s speech is about the here and now: children tell us, “I don’t like that,” “I want it,” and “He hit me.” Contextual cues—children pointing, adults surveying the environment, and people participating in shared experiences—support such conversations.

ST/SA is like the written word in that the stories are generally set outside the immediate context (the classroom). However, ST/SA offers contextual cues—tone of voice, gesture, movement—all of which help convey the meaning of the words. In this way ST/SA acts as a bridge between the contextual language of early childhood and the more abstract language of literacy.

Narrative development is a strong predictor of success in reading and writing; 4-year-olds with more advanced narrative skills are stronger fourth and eighth grade readers than those without (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). McNamee (1987) found that participating in ST/SA promotes essential narrative abilities, a finding confirmed by Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010).

**Print awareness and phonemic awareness.** ST/SA supports literacy skills such as print awareness and phonemic awareness (Cooper 2005; Nicolopoulou 2008; Cremin et al. 2013). During story dictation, children notice the left-to-right and top-to-bottom directions of print when they watch the teacher transcribe their words. They attend to features of letters, their sounds, and the spelling of favorite words. Seeing print used for a meaningful purpose such as storytelling, children are motivated to begin writing themselves (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer 2006; Cremin et al. 2013).

**Social and Emotional Development**

**Self-esteem.** Some children come to school confident and ready to interact with peers. Others, because of shyness or special needs, may be more reserved. ST/SA takes all children’s ideas seriously. Their ideas become known and are celebrated. Through mastery of telling and acting out stories children’s confidence increases, and teachers note that children are more willing to participate in discussions after the implementation of a storytelling/story acting program (Cremin et al. 2013).

**Community building.** ST/SA fosters a sense of belonging and of social connection (Cremin et al. 2013). In The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter, Vivian Paley (1991) tells of Jason, a child who initially did not fit in with the other children in the classroom.

Through participation in ST/SA, Paley and Jason’s classmates forged bonds with Jason that drew him into the classroom community.

Chris Bucco, a BPS prekindergarten teacher, saw similar results with several children in the class identified as being on the autism spectrum. Through ST/SA Chris gave these children strategies to enter play groups, thus integrating them into the blocks and dramatic play areas and enriching the entire classroom community (Mardell et al. 2010).

**Self-regulation.** Learning self-regulation—to wait, take turns, and defer—is a major task of early childhood (Berk, Mann, & Ogan 2006) and is important to later school success (McClelland et al. 2013). ST/SA promotes self-regulation by giving young children a compelling reason to take turns and follow rules (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer 2006).
Creativity

Eleanor Duckworth (2006) observes that “the more we help children have their wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves for having them, the more likely it is that they will someday happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened upon before” (14). From figuring out how to act like a dinosaur or a flower to telling a meaningful one-word story, ST/SA affords numerous opportunities for children to have wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves. Cremin and her colleagues (2013) report that classrooms that introduce ST/SA see an increase in children having innovative and original ideas.

The experience of Jackson, a kindergartner who was a dual language learner, exemplifies the value of ST/SA. Seeing Jackson begin the school year shy and reserved, his teacher eventually coaxed him to dictate a story. This was Jackson’s first story:

It was somebody’s birthday. I don’t know who. I don’t know whose birthday it is. It’s not me. But it’s somebody’s birthday. That’s it.

As Jackson watched his stories and his classmates’ stories being dramatized over time, his interest in the activity increased. He became an enthusiastic actor and eagerly awaited his turn to tell a story. Through listening and speaking, his vocabulary and narrative abilities blossomed. This is clear in his final story of the school year:

Once upon a time we were in the veterinary clinic. There was Douglas, Dimas, and Ashley. We weighed the cats. We measured them with the tape. We gave them a bath and food. We were taking care of them. Then a cat died. The doctor came and took him away. He was gone. Then the doctor brought him back to life. The end.

Supporting Dual Language Learners and Children With Special Needs

The nonverbal elements of storytelling/story acting offer children learning English and children with special needs opportunities to participate in classroom life. In fact, ST/SA incorporates curricular elements that experts recommend to support dual language learning—allowing frequent chances to talk, making connections to children’s lives, and exploring interesting topics (Haneda & Wells 2012).

Yet the verbal aspects of ST/SA mean that the stories told by DLLs and by children with special needs may differ from the stories of native English speakers and children who do not have special needs. Early in the program, some children may be hesitant to tell stories. Storytelling should always be a choice. Experience shows that over time almost all children choose to tell stories.

While it is important not to view learning English as a special need, the verbal elements of ST/SA mean that children learning English and children with special needs benefit from similar supports. These supports include teachers doing the following:

• **Accepting short stories.** Honoring very short stories—even one-word stories—encourages children to become more confident and to grow as storytellers.

• **Modeling storytelling and story acting.** Children learning English often use teachers’ stories as models for their own tales.
• **Offering prompts based on observation.** By observing children at play, teachers come to know them better. When children have difficulty beginning a story or expressing themselves, teachers can gently scaffold, making suggestions based on such knowledge.

• **Providing visual props.** Mayer-Johnson boardmaker images, puppets, and felt boards are vehicles children can use to help tell their stories, pointing to and manipulating them to illustrate their ideas.

• **Going to the story.** Children who are hesitant to tell a story may be creating complex narratives in the block area or during dramatic play. Instead of asking such children to come over to a table, teachers can go to the places reticent children are playing to get their dictation.

While most children tell stories independently, supports like these allow teachers to co-construct stories with children who need assistance.

### Teacher Challenges and Strategies

The core components of storytelling/story acting are straightforward—take a story and act it out. Its simplicity belies the fact that working with young children is complex. During the pilot year, teachers encountered challenges and devised strategies to overcome them. The challenges included addressing children’s stories containing violence, supplying the appropriate level of scaffolding, and making time in the routine to conduct ST/SA.

### Addressing Violence in Stories

The issue of violence in children’s stories and play has long been controversial. Some children are exposed daily to violence. And in communities where guns and fighting are all too present, it is particularly disturbing to see children acting out shooting and killing. Yet many children are drawn to superhero play, and violence has long been a feature of young children’s stories (see Goodenough & Prelinger 1963).

When children told stories that included violence, BPS teachers had to decide how to respond. Teacher conversations led to a consensus to allow stories with fighting and violence. Teachers understood that stories are a way children make sense of the world. They were swayed by Vivian Paley’s argument that by helping children safely dramatize such stories, teachers help them learn that they control the story, not the other way around.

However, this was not the end of the conversation. Despite the decision to allow such stories, many teachers still felt uncomfortable. Some admitted that they rushed the children through dramatizations of stories with fighting and violence, and wondered whether the children realized that teachers valued other themes more highly.

For example, Sarae Pacetta, a visiting artist, brought the issue of children’s stories containing violence to the attention of a group of teachers in an early childhood workshop, along with a video of the dramatization of a superhero story she had
facilitated. The teachers’ collective analysis of the video helped Sarae and her colleagues gain a deeper appreciation for the learning that occurs during such dramatizations. Not only did the children involved not hurt each other as they pretended to fight, but they engaged in an elaborate choreography that involved much coordination and thought. The teachers concluded that they should be more open to story themes often favored by boys. (To view the video and hear the analysis, see point number six at the previously noted web page.)

Scaffolding

Beyond writing down children’s words, the teacher’s role in dictation is subject to some debate. Some proponents of ST/SA, like Trish Lee (who introduced ST/SA in England—to learn more, visit the previously noted web page), maintain that teachers should act merely as scribes and not offer any input during dictation. They worry that questioning undermines children’s ownership of (and ultimately their interest in) storytelling, and assert that children’s narratives develop without adult prompting.

BPS educators embrace the notion that in dictation, a teacher’s role is to provide gentle scaffolding, asking children questions such as, “Does anything else happen?,” “What did [a character] do then?,” and “How did you feel when that happened?” This means asking only a few questions during a dictation session; dictation should never resemble a cross-examination. It’s important to note that teachers’ questions are motivated by curiosity and the desire to better understand the storyteller’s thinking. The input of peers who may be present during dictation can also serve as gentle scaffolding.

A teacher consideration in understanding the way children tell stories is the influence of their cultural backgrounds (McCabe 1997). Cultures have different ways of organizing stories, and teachers unfamiliar with a particular cultural style of storytelling may evaluate children’s stories as underdeveloped or disorganized. For example, some African American children tell stories of interconnected events rather than stories with a beginning, middle, and end (McCabe 1997). BPS teachers learn about the different narrative styles of the cultures represented in the class and keep them in mind as they support individual children’s storytelling.

Making Time for ST/SA

Even though storytelling/story acting does not require a great deal of time (about five minutes for each dictation and three minutes for a dramatization), finding time for four or five stories can be a challenge. BPS teachers include a dedicated time—approximately
20 minutes—for ST/SA in their daily schedules, offering children predictability and ensuring that the activity takes place. Administrative support is critical for ST/SA to be understood not as an extra to be squeezed in, but as an important part of the kindergarten curriculum.

The Importance of Making Stories Visible Beyond Classroom Walls

Key stakeholders (educators, families, policy makers, community leaders) need to understand the value of storytelling/story acting within the dynamic of an American, urban, public school system. This is important because, despite the research demonstrating the program’s educational benefits, ST/SA has a public relations problem—children think it’s fun. In today’s educational climate, where rigor is a byword, those not familiar with early childhood development may wonder about the value of an activity based in story and play.

Researchers (Cremin et al. 2013) recommend cultivating stakeholders’ understanding of the benefits of ST/SA by (1) clearly aligning ST/SA with existing standards (such as the Common Core State Standards [www.corestandards.org] or the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Criteria [NAEYC 2007]); (2) articulating the ways ST/SA promotes language and literacy development; and (3) creating materials specifically for policy makers explaining why ST/SA is important.

Along with following these three recommendations, BPS educators have also made children’s learning through ST/SA visible outside the classroom. On two evenings in the program’s pilot year, the Boston Children’s Museum hosted 100 children and their teachers from 13 different classrooms on the Kids’ Stage (a child-friendly theater in the museum). The children dramatized selected stories for their extended families and community members. Like storytelling/story acting in the classroom, this was a magical experience. Making the learning of ST/SA visible has supported efforts to expand its use to Boston Public Schools first and second grade classrooms, providing young children with a deeper experience that will give meaning to their literacy learning throughout school and life.

References


