

March 2009

Imaginary Stories in School: First Steps Toward Literacy

Gillian Dowley McNamee
Erikson Institute

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Child Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McNamee, G. D. (2009). Imaginary Stories in School: First Steps Toward Literacy. *Occasional Paper Series, 2009* (22). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2009/iss22/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.



IMAGINARY STORIES IN SCHOOL: FIRST STEPS TOWARD LITERACY

gillian dowley mcnamee

In a preschool classroom, a few weeks into the school year, a shy three-year-old named Hala dictates the following narrative to her teacher while watching two new school friends, twin sisters, playing together nearby.

My mommy and my daddy and my sister and Hala are eating at home.
Lana and Sharice are eating cookies in their home.

A few minutes later at large-group time, the teacher narrates Hala's story and guides the children in acting it out. Hala, who has said very little in school to date, mimes the actions along with the other children. Hala's narrative captures a moment of awareness about her classmates' out-of-school lives: that when the children are not in school together, each one is at home doing similar things (in this case, eating).

Preschool children who dictate stories that are acted out with peers in a classroom setting that also includes opportunities for pretend play are primed for written, as well as oral, language development. The teacher leading these activities anchors children's thinking, narrative, and social skills in activities where peers and teacher help individuals grow "a head taller" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102) through interactions in the group. This essay examines the ways that Hala and the other children in Vivian Paley's classroom grow a head taller from participating in these activities, and the role their classmates and teacher play in this process.

Paley is a preeminent early childhood teacher who has written twelve books documenting young children's learning through play and storytelling. Her writings explore several types of narratives in school, including pretend play, the pivotal experience for children listening to each other while also creating and expanding into narratives the ideas that fill their minds all day long. Paley illustrates how play in school affords children the chance to gradually harmonize the many disparate experiences and thoughts each brings to the classroom, creating community activity with common purposes, and more specifically, literary ones (McNamee, 2005).

The connections between the goals of schooling and children's learning in play and storytelling are controversial. Learning through play is child directed, following the path of children's own thinking, and therefore not easily assessed using current testing and experimental study designs. Since the result of such learning cannot be predicted, standardized, or controlled by adults, teachers are pressured to eliminate time for play. Children listening to adults is the preferred primary discourse pattern of learning in schools. This essay holds that to forgo opportunities for children's pretend play and conversation around storytelling in school is to distort the very nature and development of language and literacy. Narratives from Paley's classroom are examined to demonstrate the rich learning taking place, and how educators can track children's imaginary stories in play and story dictation for evidence of the learning central to the goals of schooling: learning to develop and articulate ideas while listening to and responding to both peers and teachers.

In pretend play, young children take on imaginary roles while creating and imitating actions, gestures, and/or the talk of characters. Its most fully developed form in school involves collaboration with at least one other person (Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2009). In such play, the emphasis is on children working together to coordinate roles of various characters within a play episode. Together, children create a story with problems and resolutions that ebb and flow as they sustain interaction inside an evolving story line. They negotiate character roles, circumstances, and possibilities for how a story will unfold. Such play requires flexibility in thinking and acting while reconciling multiple points of view about a hypothetical situation being constructed in the moment.

Pretend play has value and place in school because it depends on and is built out of words, which are the foundation of literacy development. In the pretend scenarios children construct, talking is the building block: "Pretend this is the place where the animals live and this is their food..." Children elaborate, edit, revise, and start anew, assigning meanings and identities using available props: blocks, scarves, cups, and plates.

Paley (1990, 2004) discovered that a powerful role for teachers is to invite children at play to dictate a short story to them. That same day, the teacher gathers the class to act out those stories. Children's dictated stories derive from several sources: their imagination, play and other interactions and conversations with peers in the classroom, family experiences, stories or books they have heard, and—as in Hala's case—thoughts they have as they play. Story dictation gives children

practice in taking the raw material of imagination, thinking about it, and transforming it into the currency of schooling: spoken and written language. During dramatization, the child's mental image of action and dialogue become embodied in words and gestures. Story dictation and dramatization help young children enter the school culture of reading and writing fueled by their imaginations and curiosity about how ideas work; when they take the hypothetical stance that the medium of play invites, they develop those ideas in words. How might learning and development happen in such activities?

Assessing Children's Narratives for Learning

Accounting for young children's learning and development as a function of their interactions with one another as well as with their teacher is a challenge for educators. How can we trace the influence of multiple sources of thinking on the path of an individual child at a moment in time? While almost every developmental theory of the twentieth century ascribes a central role to play in children's development, only that of L. S. Vygotsky (1978) includes an explanation for the influence of the group on an individual's development. His theory begins with the premise that "it is through others that we develop into ourselves" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 161). He reversed the commonly held notion that development begins within the individual and gradually becomes subject to the influences of socialization and one's culture. Instead, in his view, the child's mind is undergoing transformation in relation to interactions with family and community right from the start. It is others—siblings, peers, and adults—who provide the incentive, vision, and means for how we step out into the world in more challenging, sophisticated ways. Vygotsky (1978) called this progress from a current stage of development toward the next *activity in a zone of proximal development*.

Vygotsky went further, saying that play creates the zone of proximal development. It is the capacity to be lead into interactions with objects, people, and ideas in new ways, beyond what we have currently envisioned, that marks us as uniquely human. Vygotsky's theory offers the opportunity to consider more closely the dynamics of learning among young children who play and tell stories in school. In the following set of narratives from Paley's preschoolers, the paths of learning from individual to the group and from the group to the individual are illuminated as images are developed and examined over time in the children's imagination, play, and dictated and dramatized narratives.

Children's School Stories

During one of the years that Paley was teaching in preschool, she became ill and was hospitalized. When it became evident that she would not be returning to the classroom for several weeks, she asked if I would join her assistants in working with the children. As her former student teacher, I was comfortable accepting. I was familiar with the routines she had established for the early weeks of school, and other than not being able to play the piano (as she did daily), I was ready.

The school day began with play activities in various areas of the classroom. During that period, the teacher was available to write down children's dictated stories. Stories dictated on 5.5 x 8.5 inch paper limited the time a teacher spent with individual children. This also contributed to children creating more focused, well-developed narratives over time, as opposed to rambling strings of events. Next, when they heard the piano playing begin, the children came together for group time. This included singing, movement activities, performing children's dictated stories, a read-a-loud that the group often acted out, and sharing news about projects that had developed that morning. The children came from their various activities, skipped or danced around the edge of the rug to music, and then sat down, leaving the center of the rug clear for the story dramatizations.

The following stories were dictated and acted out by three-year-olds at group time, during their teacher's absence.

I have a finger puppet show. (Lana)

While she spoke, Lana wiggled her first two fingers to indicate that her story was recreating the finger motion we had been doing for several days to accompany a poem about a rabbit hopping. That same day, her close friend Sharice, sitting near her at the story table, elaborated on the finger puppet show idea as she told the following story:

The puppet jumps. The puppet's going to be in my hands.

When acting out both stories, the whole class participated, holding up their hands to act out the rabbit hopping with their fingers.

The next day, Nicole told a story where she listed as many names of children as she could. She also named the action she wanted everyone to engage in:

shaking their feet around. This recalled a moment from the day before, when we sang the “Hokey Pokey,” where “you put your right foot in and shake it all about.”

Everyone goes in my story: Benjy and Nicky and Sam and Dawn and George and they all shake around their feet.

Several days later, Sam told a story which began with what was becoming a favorite story routine: naming as many children as one could and inviting them to “go in there,” that is, to go in the middle of the rug to participate in the dramatization.

Then Randall, Rob, and Katy, and Nicole can be in there. Andy can go in there. They shoot with their fingers. Shoot shoot shoot shoot shoot! Sarah can go in there. And Chloe can go in there, and Nicky. Benjy can go in there. Then they make designs with their fingers.

The shooting with their fingers was a reference to the farmer chasing Peter Rabbit out of his garden at gunpoint. The making a design with their fingers was a reference back to the poem of the hopping rabbit.

Rob, who was sitting next to Sam during the dictation, revisited the puppet show action and the gun shooting in the following narrative.

I am going to do a puppet show story and just me and using my fingers. They all shoot the bad people. They go on the bridge.

Soon after, Benjy dictated a one-word story: “Water.” When the class acted out this story, the group made various swimming gestures as they pretended to be in water. The next day, George created a story using the water idea that became the children’s benchmark for comedy.

An elephant and an alligator fell in the water with shoes on. They then fell back in the water.

The children roared with laughter at this idea of falling in the water with shoes on. They asked to act this out many times.

Several days later, Lana dictated a narrative that held the group spellbound.

I want water in my story and a puppet show too. I would like to run around while people play the piano and sing “The Train Is A Coming.” All the people can go in my puppet show. They all run around. Everyone can bring pictures they painted and pasted and drew.

Lana’s narrative contains references to many of the story ideas that had emerged over the past few weeks in this community of authors: water, puppet shows, everyone being in the story, running while holding pictures. She also signaled her wish that her first teacher return to school, the one who played the piano and led them in singing, “The Train Is A Coming.” She did not name Mrs. Paley, but she knew how to reference the activity that only this teacher could lead. This story was a significant one for everybody; children and teachers alike “got it.” The power of its message could not be measured in terms of grammatical cohesion, dramatic episodes, or any conventional standard. Yet, this child’s skill in gathering up the important class rituals, story themes, and the memory of their absent teacher brought the group the gift of togetherness that a work of art achieves.

In subsequent weeks, the children’s stories continued to reference and expand upon their favorite themes: the puppet show, falling in the water with shoes on, and bringing pictures to the group. They had found a common set of images to further their thinking in playing, storytelling and acting together.

If anyone makes some pictures they can bring them to my story. They shoot the bad people. There’s a puppet show and we sing “The Train Is A Comin” and it is great fun. (Randall)

A wicked witch falls in the water with her shoes on and she laughs. She falls in again. She does that again. 2 wicked witches, 3 mans, 4 ladies, they fall in the water. (Katy)

Cinderella put on her raincoat to go outside in the rain to the ball. And then she meets Prince Charming. She falls in the water with her shoes on. She comes back home. She washed her clothes. (Sarah)

Cookie Monster eat all the cookies and then he eat all the carrots. And then he eats all the chocolate chips. Then the people fall in the water with their shoes on and they take off their dresses. And Cinderella puts a rain-coat on her head and the big cheese falls in the water. (Hala)

In each of these stories, the children developed as authors of oral and written narratives. They advanced their imagery, sense of humor, and language skills, framing episodes of action as their friendships, playfulness, and eagerness to come together in school to think further about emerging ideas in a sustained way deepened. Their play, storytelling, and acting provided common ground for this learning.

Summary

In play, storytelling, and acting, thinking is public and shared—open for input while simultaneously offering ideas for the taking. When children participate in dramatic play in a prepared environment rich with opportunities for literary, mathematical, and artistic experiences, they try out their thinking against a diverse set of possibilities provided by their peer group and teachers. Ideas are offered, exchanged, abandoned when they are not working, and expanded on in daily interactions with others who are eager to participate in the give and take. The doing of stories in play opportunities, dictation, and dramatization helps children listen to one another and examine ideas and their logic as they take on different roles in various scenarios. Three-, four- and five-year-olds who are not yet masters of the written word are quickly drawn to and build upon the mechanisms of the oral storytelling culture that play offers. They benefit from their teacher's assistance in creating their written narratives, which they then listen to, modify, and transform in play and subsequent dictated stories.

The stories presented here point to a complex landscape of learning, shaped by the children who are guiding one another as well as receiving guidance from their teacher. The key to the children's learning is the connections and shared references they develop that derive from their history of experiences together. The few weeks of storytelling from Paley's classroom provide evidence of the rapid progress that children made in representing and discussing their experiences and transforming their insights, given time, support, and acknowledgement from a willing teacher. In giving children time to play each day, and in facilitating storytelling and dramatization of children's narratives, a teacher allows ideas and insights to be opened up for consideration in a way that lets the larger group

benefit from the experience. Through play and storytelling, participants share ideas and approach subjects from many points of view. When a new idea emerges, the insights run deep, as they did in Lana's story. Everyone contributed to that story in some way, and everyone benefited from her poetic expression about the past and present. This study of children's play and related stories in school suggests that a class of children who are listening, imagining, and investing in each other's learning are pursuing goals for schooling that we may want to ensure are a part of every early childhood classroom.

References

- Hirsch-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., Berk, L. and Singer, D. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in school*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McNamee, Gillian Dowley. (2005). "The one who gathers children": The work of Vivian Gussin Paley and current debates about how we educate young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 25, 275-296.
- Paley, Vivian Gussin. (1990). *The boy who would be a helicopter: The uses of storytelling in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Paley, Vivian Gussin. (2004). *A child's work: The importance of fantasy play*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1981) The genesis of higher mental functions. In J. Wertsch (Ed.), *The concept of activity in Soviet psychology* (pp. 144-189). Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.