

**Narrative Play and Emergent Literacy:
Storytelling and Story-Acting Meets Journal Writing**

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Debates about early childhood curricula tend to pit teacher-centered and skill-oriented approaches against child-centered or play-oriented approaches (e.g., Golbeck, 2001; Stipek, Feiler, Byler, Ryan, Milburn, & Salmon, 1998; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, Milburn, 1995). Current trends emphasize the need for teacher-directed instruction focusing on the transmission of specific academic skills, especially for low-income children. Increasingly, only lip service is paid to the significance and value of play for young children.

We recognize the value of teacher-directed and skill-oriented literacy activities for young children, but the discussion has become too one-sided and unbalanced. Years of developmental research have demonstrated that young children have different interests, cognitive styles, and ways of grasping the world from adults, with important implications for their modes of learning. Thus, we should not be quick to fill up preschool classrooms exclusively with adult-centered skill-based activities that may be foreign to a child's perspective. We need to balance these didactic skill-based activities with more child-centered activities within the preschool curriculum.

Furthermore, this polarization of teacher-directed and child-centered approaches often poses a false dichotomy. Increasing evidence suggests that early childhood education is most effective when it successfully combines both kinds of educational activities (e.g., Graue, Clemens, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004). We hope to contribute to this line of inquiry by showing how teacher-directed and skill-oriented activities themselves can become even more engaging, meaningful, and valuable for children when they are linked to child-centered and play-oriented activities. Thus, we advocate a genuine integration between didactic and child-centered approaches in ways that allow them to complement and support each other.

Play, narrative, and emergent literacy

To create successful child-centered activities, it is important to tap the significance and developmental value of symbolic play for young children. It engages them in ways that simultaneously draw on and mobilize imagination, emotion, cognition, and group life (Nicolopoulou, 1993). We agree with the teacher/researcher Vivian Paley (2004, p. 8) that, in early childhood, “fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills.” This does not involve simply alternating between direct instructional activities and unstructured play. The challenge is to integrate the play element *into* the curriculum in ways that are structured but also foster the children’s own participation and initiative, so that children infuse them with their own interests and concerns.

For promoting early literacy-related skills, activities that systematically integrate symbolic play and narrative can be especially valuable and effective. Play and narrative are closely intertwined in young children’s experience and development—in fact, symbolic or pretend play consists mostly of enacted narratives (for some discussion of relevant issues, see Nicolopoulou 1993, 1997a, 2002, in press—which suggest, among other things, that Vygotsky’s [1933/1967] analysis of play offers important theoretical resources for grasping the developmental interplay between play and narrative). And a growing body of research has argued convincingly that children’s acquisition of narrative skills in their preschool years is an important foundation of emergent literacy (e.g., Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Snow, 1991; Wells, 1995, 1996). Training children in the kinds of technical skills related most obviously and directly to literacy—such as letter and word recognition, phonological processing, and so on—is important but not sufficient. Children must also master a broader range of linguistic and cognitive skills, and these become increasingly important as the child moves from simple decoding to reading for meaning and comprehension (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). The argument advanced by these scholars (with some differences of terminology and

emphasis) is that the skills required and promoted by young children's narrative activity form part of an interconnected and mutually supportive cluster of *decontextualized* oral-language skills that play a critical role in facilitating children's achievement of literacy and their overall school success.

Language use is "decontextualized," in the technical sense used in this research, to the extent that it involves explicitly constructing, conveying, and comprehending information in ways that are not embedded in the supportive framework of conversational interaction and do not rely on implicit shared background knowledge and non-verbal cues. Decontextualized discourse thus raises greater demands than "contextualized" discourse for semantic clarity, planning, and linguistic self-monitoring. Examples of decontextualized language use include various forms of coherent extended discourse such as narratives, explanations, and other monologues, as well as metalinguistic operations such as giving formal definitions, monitoring the grammatical correctness of speech, and so on (e.g., Snow, 1983, 1991). There is solid evidence that "skill at the decontextualized uses of language predict[s] literacy and school achievement better than skill at other challenging tasks that are not specifically decontextualized" (Snow & Dickinson, 1991, p. 185).

For young children, stories are an especially important mode of decontextualized discourse since they pose the challenge of explicitly building up a scenario or picture of the world using only words. To put it another way, free-standing stories are *self-contextualizing* (Wells, 1985, p. 253) to a greater extent than other forms of discourse that young children typically experience and construct. The experience of narratives--both listening to them and telling them--helps to bring home to children "the symbolic potential of language: its power to create possible and imaginary worlds through words" (Wells, 1986, p. 156; cf. Bruner, 1986). In the process, narrative discourse can be especially effective in helping the child prepare to grasp "the disembedded and sustained characteristics" of written texts and "the more disembedded uses of spoken language that the school curriculum demands" (Wells, 1986, pp. 250, 253). And unlike many other forms of

decontextualized language use, narrative is an important and engaging activity for children from an early age (for an overview of research in the area of children and narratives, see Nicolopoulou, 1997a). Thus, preschool activities that mobilize this enthusiasm by integrating play and narrative can play an important role in laying the foundations of emergent literacy and of school readiness more generally.

A concrete illustration: Evidence from a Head Start classroom

This chapter presents a concrete example to illustrate and support these claims, based on a teacher-researcher collaboration in a Head Start preschool classroom. The first author, Nicolopoulou, helped to introduce, guide, and monitor a practice of spontaneous storytelling and group story-acting, which integrates narrative and play elements, in the classroom of the second author, McDowell. The third author, Brockmeyer, is a graduate student who assisted in this research. Observations reported here are drawn from the first year and a half of our collaboration, the spring semester of 2003 and the 2003-2004 school year. The evidence indicates that the storytelling and story-acting practice successfully engaged these low-income preschool children and promoted their learning and development—findings that are consistent with previous studies by the first author (e.g., Nicolopoulou, 2002). More unexpectedly, we discovered that introducing this narrative- and play-based activity into the classroom transformed a more directly literacy-oriented activity that was already part of the curriculum, journal writing, making it more engaging and educationally effective. The present chapter focuses on this strikingly suggestive outcome. Our analysis draws on a rich and diverse body of data including the children's stories, their journal entries, our observational field-notes as researchers, and the teacher's own weekly journal and periodic assessments of the children.

The classroom, the children, and the community

This Head Start classroom is one of 5 located in the lower level of an elementary school in a large urban center in the northeastern U.S. This is a neighborhood school in a low-income, disadvantaged area of the city. The student population is almost 100% African American. The neighborhood is isolated from the rest of the city and has high rates of unemployment, crime, and infant mortality. Drug use and other illegal activities flourish, and there are frequent shootings. Housing is generally substandard, the few available jobs tend to be low-paying, health care facilities are inadequate, and few services are available.

To qualify for Head Start, a family's annual income must be below the poverty line established by the federal government: \$15,000 for a family of three. Most of the Head Start children live in single-parent families, have very young mothers, or are raised by grandparents. In addition, some mothers have children close in age, so children as young as age 4 or 5 may be expected to take care of themselves and their younger siblings. A number of the parents are in jail or have been in jail. A large percentage of the children in this Head Start center also have had a family member shot or killed in violent incidents. The school itself can be a dangerous place for young children. The school playground consists of a barren uneven cement yard with no trees in sight. Teachers often take the children to a nearby playground with some old rusting and colorless play equipment, where they must be mindful of glass shards or other remnants of street parties.

Each Head Start class has about 19 children of mixed ages, ranging from 3 to 4 at the beginning of the school year. Each year, some children who entered the class as 3-year-olds continue the following year as 4-year-olds, usually in the same teacher's classroom. The two classes studied were similar in make-up, with roughly equal numbers of 3- and 4-year-olds. During the first year (2002-2003), there were 9 3-year-olds (5 girls and 4 boys) and 10 4-year-olds (5 boys and 5 girls). During the second year, there were 10 3-year-olds (7 girls and 3 boys) and 9 4-year-olds (4

girls and 5 boys). All 5 Head Start classes follow the same curriculum, which combines the city-wide School District curriculum and Head Start performance standards. In the past 10 years, promoting language and literacy development has been an increasingly central focus.

THE STORYTELLING AND STORY-ACTING PRACTICE: A PLAY- AND NARRATIVE-BASED ACTIVITY

The practice of spontaneous story composition and group dramatization examined here was pioneered by Vivian Paley (1986, 1990, 2004) and has been used, with variations, in a wide range of preschool and kindergarten classrooms in the US and abroad (in addition to Paley's own accounts, see Cooper, 1993; Fein, Ardila-Rey, & Groth, 2000; London Bubble Theatre, 2001; McLane & McNamee, 1990; McNamee, 1990, 1992; Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997b, 2002). We introduced it into this classroom as a regular part of the curriculum for the spring semester of 2003, and it was then continued for the entire 2003-2004 school year. In both classes, it was used an average of two days per week. (It can also be conducted more frequently, and in some preschools it is a daily activity.)

This activity offers children an opportunity to compose and tell stories at their own initiative, which they dictate to a designated teacher, and then to act out their stories later that day in collaboration with other children whom they choose. In this classroom, the storytelling part of the activity takes place right after breakfast. The teacher or a teacher's aide sits at a designated storytelling table with the classroom story-book and makes herself available to take the children's stories. Any child who wishes can choose to dictate a story to this teacher, who writes it down as the child tells it with minimal intervention. These storytelling events are self-initiated and voluntary. No child is pressured to tell a story; children are allowed to tell any kind of story they wish; and teachers are discouraged from using this opportunity to correct children's grammar, vocabulary, or

narrative structure. As in other classrooms where this storytelling and story-acting practice is used, there are always children ready to tell stories. The teacher usually takes between 2 and 4 stories per day, depending mostly on how much time is made available for storytelling.

The story-acting part of the practice takes place during group time, when the entire class is assembled sitting in a semi-circle. All stories dictated during that day are read aloud and enacted in the order they were told. First the teacher reads the story to the class; then the child/author picks a character in the story to play and chooses other children for the remaining roles; then the story is read aloud a second time by the teacher while the child/author and other children act it out, with the rest of the class as an audience. When this practice is established as a regular part of classroom activities, all children in the class typically participate in three interrelated roles: composing and dictating stories; taking part in the group enactment of stories (their own and those of other children); and listening to and watching the performance of the stories of the other children in the class.

Impact and significance of the storytelling and story-acting practice

This is an apparently simple technique with complex and powerful effects. Both theoretical considerations and extensive experience suggest that the combination of *storytelling* and *story-acting* components is key to its operation and educational effectiveness. Children typically enjoy storytelling for its own sake; but the prospect of having their story acted out, together with other children whom they choose, offers a powerful additional motivation to compose and dictate stories. Furthermore, one result of the fact that the stories are read to and dramatized for the entire class at group time is that children tell their stories, not only to adults, but primarily to each other; they do so, not in one-to-one interaction, but in a shared public setting. The *public* and *peer-oriented* dimension of this activity helps to create a *community of storytellers* in the classroom, enmeshed in

the ongoing context of the classroom culture and the children's everyday peer-group life. In classes using this activity, children regularly borrow and re-use themes, characters, plotlines, and other narrative elements from each others' stories; however, they do not simply copy these elements, but appropriate them *selectively* and then flexibly adapt them in composing their own stories (e.g., Nicolopoulou, 1997b, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Paley, 1986, 2000; Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001). Thus, participating in this practice helps the children to form and sustain a shared culture of peer-group *collaboration*, *experimentation*, and *mutual cross-fertilization* that serves as powerful matrix for learning and development.

While this is a structured and teacher-facilitated activity, it is simultaneously child-centered. The children's storytelling is *voluntary*, *self-initiated*, and *relatively spontaneous*; each child is able to participate according to his or her own individual interests, pace, inclination, and developmental rhythms. At the same time, this activity draws on the power of peer-group processes and their emotional and social-relational importance for children (Maccoby, 1998). In addition, the group story-acting integrates a significant *play* element into this narrative activity—not only in terms of the children's involvement in narrative enactment itself (which is a central feature of pretend play), but also in terms of other kinds of peer interactions that typically accompany children's social pretend play (including the selection of actors for role-playing; the turn-taking involved in alternating between participation as actors, actor/authors, and audience members; and so on).

Thus, this activity engages and mobilizes a range of children's interests and motivations in an integrated way, including play, fantasy, and friendship. There are strong indications that it helps to promote oral-language skills that serve as key foundations of emergent literacy, as well as other important dimensions of school readiness. In addition to the accounts and examinations of this storytelling and story-acting practice mentioned earlier, there have been some efforts to systematically evaluate its effects on young children's learning and development and to clarify the

developmental mechanisms involved (e.g., Groth, 1999; McNamee, 1987; and work by Nicolopoulou cited below). Overall, this work provides evidence for three basic findings.

First, both middle-class and low-income children show consistent enthusiasm for and engagement with this activity (e.g., Cooper, 1993; Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997b, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Richner 1999; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Paley, 1990, 2004). Second, participation in this activity significantly enhances the development of narrative skills for both middle-class and low-income preschool children (McLane & McNamee, 1990; McNamee, 1987; Nicolopoulou, 1996, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 1999), and there is evidence that it also promotes the development of a wider range of decontextualized oral-language skills—though this has so far been tested only with low-income Head Start preschoolers (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 1999). Third, this activity promotes preschoolers' literacy awareness. Children display fascination with the process of having their words (and other children's) written down on paper, and in various ways show that they are actively thinking about the connections between thoughts, spoken words, marks on paper, the arrangement of text on the page, and the transformations of spoken to written representation and back (e.g., Cooper, 1993; Fein, Ardila-Rey, & Groth, 2000; Groth & Darling, 2001). In addition, there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that participation in this activity also promotes some important dimensions of young children's social competence (including capacities for cooperation, social understanding, and self-regulation), but that line of research is still in process.

Patterns of storytelling in this Head Start classroom

As indicated earlier, the storytelling and story-acting practice was conducted for one semester during the 2002-2003 school year (i.e., spring 2003) and both semesters during the 2003-2004 school year. During the spring semester of the first year, the 19 children in the class generated

a total of 84 stories. Every child told at least one story, and 6 of them told between 6 and 16 stories apiece. During the second year, the 19 children in the class generated 177 stories, slightly more than double the previous amount. Again, every child told at least one story, and 11 told between 6 and 24 stories over the course of the year. In both years, the children telling substantial numbers of stories included both girls and boys. This point is worth noting, because the teachers' experience in this Head Start program is that the boys tend to be considerably more reluctant than the girls to participate in writing-related activities.

Children tended to compose longer stories over time; and, within the same classroom, older children tended to compose longer stories than younger children. At times, children made it explicitly clear that they regarded telling longer stories as a conscious goal and a desirable achievement, proudly declaring that "*I told a long story*" or "*I filled up the whole page.*" When they encountered the one-page limit for a dictated story, some children even asked the teacher to write around the edges to make sure that they filled up the whole page. In these and other ways, the children displayed a keen awareness of the relationship between their oral compositions and the written record of their story in the storybook.

We will focus here on the *types* of stories told by the children and their transformations over time. Some of the key distinctive features of the children's storytelling in this Head Start classroom can be highlighted by contrast with patterns in other classrooms where this storytelling and story-acting practice has been observed. These have mostly been in preschools serving children from middle-class backgrounds, and in these classrooms the children overwhelmingly choose to tell fictional or imaginary stories, rather than "factual" accounts of personal experience like those presented in show-and-tell or sharing time (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Paley, 1990, 2004). They also tell their stories overwhelmingly in the third person (even in cases where they insert themselves or their friends into the stories as characters). Research in narrative development suggests that the

connection between these two characteristics is not accidental. Middle-class 2-year-olds seem to begin by telling mostly first-person personal narratives, but they soon move toward a wider range of narrative forms, including fantasy narratives and fictionalization of the self (Nelson, 1996). And when young children have extensive exposure to book-reading and to literacy-oriented modes of discourse, they grasp at an early age that stories are typically told in the third person unless they are accounts of their own experience, thus establishing a distinction between the “author” of the story and the characters within it (e.g., Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

There is less research on this storytelling and story-acting practice in preschools with children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. The available information indicates that fictional stories predominate there as well, but intriguing variations have also appeared. One example is provided by a Head Start class previously studied by Nicolopoulou, in a different state from the classroom discussed in this chapter; the location was semi-rural rather than urban, and the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the children were Hispanic or non-Hispanic White, with no African Americans (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 1999). These children were eager to participate in both storytelling and story-acting, but for the first three weeks they did not display effective familiarity with some of the basic, minimal conventions for telling a coherent and self-contextualizing story. They simply listed a string of characters and sometimes mentioned other relevant elements, usually without providing any explicit actions or descriptions for the characters, relating them to each other, or constructing coherent sequences of actions and events. This phase of protonarrative groping ended with the emergence of a shared fictional genre that was rapidly adopted, elaborated, and modified in various ways by all the children in the class. This narrative paradigm was a third-person fictional scenario that centered on a wedding, featuring the two linked characters of Wedding Boy and Wedding Girl, combined with aggressive violence by animals or other characters. The other kinds of stories told in the class were also third-person

fictional narratives.

The Head Start classroom examined in the present study displayed a different pattern. All the children were able to tell simple but coherent free-standing stories from the start, and the length and complexity of their stories increased over time. This was true for both the spring 2003 semester and the 2003-2004 school year, and for both younger and older children in each class. On the other hand, these were usually not third-person fictional stories. At the beginning, most stories took the form of personal narratives told in the first person—featuring the child, family members, and friends--and third-person narratives always remained a minority. Here is the first story told by one of the 3-year-olds in spring 2003:

I went to the movies. I was watching Scooby-Doo at the movies. And my friend was at the movies with me. And we were eating popcorn and chips and my mom was with us too. And my god-mom too. I have two god-moms. And Rose was with me too. The end. (Taylor, 3-4; 2/28/03).

And here is one of the earliest stories in that class, told by one of the older children:

I went walking and my brother went to the store and we went to the playground. After we went home and drunk some ice tea. We went to the park with our dad. Then mom said, "Let's take a ride around your uncle's house." Then we went to ride our bike at our uncle's house and then we went to the swimming pool and then we went to our bed. Then we went to the Spiderman movie at the movie theater. (Damian, 5-4; 2/11/03).

However, to describe these simply as narratives of personal experience would be incomplete and misleading. The story just quoted, for example, may appear to be a realistic story about events from the child's everyday life. But as the previous discussion should have made clear, many of these children do not actually have the "normal" carefree lives they portray in stories like this one.

As the classroom teacher, the second author had extensive information about the children and their families, and was able to confirm that many of the incidents described in such stories did not occur, and in some cases could not have occurred. Children who described outings with their fathers had fathers who did not live with them, whom they saw infrequently at most, or who were in jail; and it was very rare for any of these children to be taken for an outing in the park by an adult male. Or children described visiting certain friends' houses for sleepovers when, in fact, this never occurred. To a considerable extent, the children used such stories to portray stylized or idealized pictures of their everyday lives, disguised as factual accounts. So their stories often had a significant fictional dimension—usually including an element of wish-fulfillment fantasizing—despite being framed in apparently realistic terms.

Furthermore, even when the children included more obvious fantasy elements in their stories—such as cartoon action heroes, dinosaurs, or fairy-tale characters—they often continued to present the stories in the form of first-person personal narratives. The fantasy characters were portrayed as doing things together with the author and his or her friends. For example, here is another story by the older child just quoted:

Me and Spiderman and Batman went to the movies. Then we played together. Then we do flip flops together. Then Batman flied up to his car. Then I sprayed my webs up there. Then we all drive the car. A real car. Then we beat up the bad guys. Then Batman flied away and I swung away with my webs. Then we sat together. Then we saved the world. Then we got in the house and we watched scary movies. We watched "Scream." Then we heard the bad guys. We saw the bad guys movie and how they beat the world up. Then we saved the world. Then a dinosaur hurt the world and we had to flip the dinosaur over to his country. Then we played the guitar. Then we made an iced tea stand. Then we were in the woods. Then we broke our toy.

When we heard the bad guys say “let’s take over the world” we saved the world once again. Then we saw them doing karate. That’s the end. (Damian, 5-4; 2/28/03).

Over time, there was an increasing tendency toward third-person storytelling, but the consistent use of the third person never became predominant. Instead, many stories took a transitional form, with an unstable mixture of first-person and third-person storytelling.

To capture these developmental patterns in the children’s storytelling, we coded all stories told during the 2002-2003 school year in terms of two dimensions: the type of narrative voice used (first person, third person, or mixed) and the type of world depicted. The second variable had three categories: (1) *actual*, involving accounts of past events that happened or could have happened; (2) *wishful-possible*, describing activities and events that are realistically possible in the everyday world of children and families, but which we knew the child had never actually experienced (e.g., all the children visited the teacher’s home and had dinner with her, or the storyteller described visiting the home of other children in the class to play or have sleepovers when we knew this had not occurred); and (3) *wishful-impossible*, describing events that could not have occurred (e.g., the teacher was one child’s baby, the children drove the teacher to her home, the child swung on his Spider-Man webs) and/or including fantasy characters from books, TV, movies, and so on.

Overall, both boys and girls told substantially more first-person than third-person stories, but there was a shift away from first-person stories over the course of the year, with an increase in the proportions of mixed and third-person stories. Between the fall and spring semesters, the proportion of first-person stories decreased from 50% to 24% for the girls and 69% to 35% for the boys, whereas the proportion of third-person stories increased from 0% to 28% for the girls and 8% to 25% for the boys. The existence of gender-related differences in these results is not surprising, since gender differences of one sort or another have consistently been found in previous research on young children’s spontaneous storytelling (e.g., Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997b, 2002; Nicolopoulou et

al., 1994; Richner & Nicolopoulou, 2001); but in this case there is no need to explore them further, since the basic tendencies point very clearly in the same direction.

With respect to the type of world depicted in their stories (see Figure 2), both boys and girls showed clear shifts in the direction of more fictional or imaginary stories, though only a minority of their stories were framed in a straightforward third-personal fictional form, even when their content had a substantial fantasy element. For both boys and girls, only a minority of their stories were “actual” personal narratives. In the fall, this proportion was higher for the boys—39% as opposed to 11% for the girls—but by the spring the proportions had decreased to 0% for the boys and 4% for the girls. Between the fall and the spring, the girls’ stories shifted from a solid preponderance of wishful-possible stories, with 85% wishful-possible and 4% wishful-impossible, to a dominant role for wishful-impossible stories, with 57% wishful-impossible and 39% wishful-possible. By comparison, the boys shifted more directly from “actual” personal narratives to wishful-impossible narratives. They told 46% wishful-impossible stories in the fall—a much higher percentage than the girls—and 15% wishful-possible. In the spring, 96% of their stories were wishful-impossible and 4% wishful-possible.

There are good reasons to believe that the children’s participation in the storytelling and story-acting practice promoted these developments, though it is not yet possible to demonstrate this with the data available. What the results do indicate clearly is that the children were actively engaged in this narrative- and play-based activity, that the character of the stories they told changed substantially in the process, and that the direction of this development was toward the increased prominence of what Wells (1985, p. 253) and others have described as a central and distinctive function of narrative language: “its power to create possible and imaginary worlds through words”

As noted earlier, for over a decade this Head Start program has placed increasing emphasis on children's acquisition of literacy-related skills. Since 1997, one technique used for this purpose is a version of journal writing widely used in kindergarten, first-grade, and elementary classes (Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999). This is intended to promote basic skills for both reading (e.g., letter recognition, letter/sound knowledge, word-concept) and writing (e.g., print knowledge and fine motor skills).

Since few of these Head Start children have mastered reading and writing, this journal writing activity focuses on children's drawings accompanied by teacher-assisted written descriptions, interpretations, and identifications of these drawings. The intention is to introduce writing through drawing (an approach discussed in more general terms by, e.g., Dyson, 1989). The activity takes place daily at the beginning of the day. As the children finish eating breakfast, individual children are invited to come to a designated journal writing table, where the teacher or an assistant is ready to facilitate the activity. In this classroom, the journal writing table is across the room from the table used for story dictation.

Each child has his or her own journal book, constructed by the teacher using two pieces of colored construction paper as covers, with the child's name written on the front cover in large capital letters, and 10-15 sheets of white paper inside. Between journal writing sessions, the books are kept by the teacher. The adult first indicates a new journal page by writing the date in the upper right corner of the page (e.g., "March 5, 2003"). The child then uses colored markers to make a journal entry on this dated page—by drawing a picture, scribbling, or both. When the journal entry is finished, the child brings the journal back to the adult, and together they compose a written account of the entry. The adult asks the child to explain the pictures and other markings and writes down the child's answers at the bottom of the journal page. (In cases where the child does not answer, the adult writes down simple descriptions of the items drawn on the page, reading these

aloud to the child as she does so.)

Some children (most often girls) are always eager to do journal writing; others (most often boys) sometimes need a bit more persuasion. But all the children in this Head Start classroom participate in this activity, and usually fill up several journal books during the year. As explained below, we were able to examine the journal books of 8 children from the 2002-2003 school year. The mean number of journal entries by the girls during the year was 25, versus 19 entries for the boys. These quantities are roughly typical for most years in this classroom.

The development of children's journal entries

The development of the children's journal entries typically passes through several characteristic phases. Since a number of children enter this Head Start classroom as 3-year-olds and continue the next year as 4-year-olds, it is possible to sketch out a two-year overview. At the beginning, the journal entries are just free-form scribbles. The children do not yet depict recognizable objects. When the adult asks them to talk about their picture, the children often remain silent, so the adult provides descriptions of the child's drawing and writes them down, being careful not to impute representational meanings: *This is a red picture*", *Takia is using the color blue.*"

Within a few months, the children's scribbles become more differentiated and organized. They often draw circles and ellipses that are cleared of the whorls and lines that used to fill their scribbled drawings. Over the period of several months, children complexify their drawings by adding distinct figures inside the circle or ellipses, including dots, smaller circles, or lines. They now also begin to interpret these drawings as "things" and to give representational meanings to them such as *persons*," *my pop pop*," or *a motorcycle.*" At times, they bring their picture to the adult, saying gleefully, *Look, I made a monster.*"

In the next phase, especially among late 4- and beginning 5-year-olds, children begin to

adopt stereotypic pictorial depictions: a house is a pentagon, a sun is a circle with lines extending from its surface, a flower is a circle surrounded by ellipses, and so on. Children know what they have depicted, telling the adult “*This is a house,*” and they often announce in advance what they are going to make to the adult and others nearby. Finally, they begin to combine representations of people and things to make simple scenes: “*This is a house, a girl, the sun, and the letters.*”

Starting about the same time that the children recognize that their lines can represent things, we also see the beginnings of *kid writing*. This is the term used by Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) to capture the range of young children’s early writing efforts, from imitative proto-writing to rudimentary forms of actual writing. Kid writing includes any marks intended to represent letters, words, or phrases. In this classroom, it occurs most frequently among 4- and 5-year-olds, though it may begin earlier.

As children’s drawings become more defined and organized, they begin to include some kid writing. At first, the children do lines or squiggles that imitate adult writing. These are placed near the date written by the adult or within the parallel lines at the bottom of the page where the adult writes what the child says. As the year goes on, children begin to intersperse their drawings with recognizable letters. Kid writing is encouraged as part of this activity. The adult may ask the child what he or she wrote and then write the response under the kid writing. At times, some children may become fascinated with kid writing, and their journal entry may consist mainly of letters rather than pictures.

When storytelling and story-acting meets journal writing

The big surprise for us was the impact that storytelling and story-acting had on journal writing. There were strong indications that children’s participation in the storytelling and story-acting practice increased their engagement with the journal writing activity, enriched its operation,

and enhanced its effectiveness. These effects became apparent during the 2003-2004 school year, especially during the spring semester, when the children themselves established a link between the two activities.

From journal descriptions to stories

The most striking change began in February of 2004, when the children started to narrativize their journal entries. Rather than the simple descriptions that the children typically gave for their pictures-- "*This is a house, a girl, the sun, the letters*" (Danaja, 5-2; 2/17/04, Journal entry)—many of them now used the drawing as the basis for a story. For example, the girl just quoted did a drawing, similar to the previous one, that depicted a house, 2 sliding boards, a tree, a flower and a girl). However, instead of simply describing these objects, the child told the teacher the following story:

Sliding Board

Me and Fatimah is going to the store. Then we went to get the bad boys. Then we went to get Taylor. And Taylor ran away from us. Then we went to get Danaja. Then we went to Miss Judy's house. Miss Judy took a picture of us. Then we spent the night over Miss Judy's house. The bad boy beat us up. (Danaja, 5-3; 3/8/04, Journal entry).

This tendency was not restricted to one or two children. During the spring, child after child began to shift from offering the typical descriptions that this teacher had heard children tell year after year to full blown stories. In the process, the length and complexity of their journal entries increased substantially. In January 2004 another child made this characteristic journal entry: "*This is the grass, and the sky, and my cousin, and me, and the sky, and the apple tree*" (Taylor, 4-7; 1/6/04, Journal entry). In February this child, after drawing two hands, told the teacher the following story about her picture:

This is me and my cousin and first it started to snow and we picked snow up and then we put our hands up and then we had a snowball fight. Then we went inside the house and we had some hot chocolate together, then marshmallows. And then we went upstairs and watched a scary movie. And then we went to sleep and when we woke up all my friends came over to my house and then we went to the playground then we went to the store and got some candy and then we went home and ate it and then we went to sleep. The end. (Taylor, 4-9; 2/24/04, Journal entry)

Even the boys, who in previous years were typically less interested in journal writing (and in some cases had to be actively coaxed in order to elicit journal entries) became more active and enthusiastic about this activity. Again, this change coincided with a shift from journal descriptions to journal stories. For example, one 4-year-old boy who had given descriptions of his pictures in the fall--“*This is a happy face*” (4-4; 9/25/03, *Journal entry*) or “*Daryl and Joshua are playing together*” (4-5; 10/16/03, *Journal entry*)—began to shift to narratives in February:

I was a Power Ranger. Then they go home. Then Daryl said to me, “Who are you?” We saw bad guys. Yazid and Niger are the bad guys. Fatimah and Brent are the power rangers. But Fatimah is not the power ranger. Fatimah was the bad guy. Then we saw Lawrence and he was the bad guy. Me and Daryl wacked Lawrence. Then we wacked Fatimah. Then we punched Fatimah. I pushed my watch and my hands turning green then I pushed my time watch. Then my arms turned red and green. Then Daryl’s hands turn green. Then his arms turned red. The end. (Joshua, 4-9; 2/18/04, Journal entry)

Overall, 14 out of the 19 children in this class told stories for their journal entries (and the 5 who did not were, for one reason or another, the least involved in classroom activities in general). In the previous 7 years that McDowell had used this journal writing activity in her class, she had never

observed children providing stories rather than simple descriptions for their journal entries. The most plausible explanation is that the storytelling/story-acting practice provided a model for the children in creating stories and improved their narrative skills, and that as they mastered this storytelling mode they were able to apply it flexibly to the journal writing activity—which, in turn, increased their enthusiasm for journal writing. In addition, as this pattern became evident, the teacher and her aide began letting children act out their journal stories in the story-acting part of the storytelling/story-acting practice, and these public presentations undoubtedly helped encourage other children to narrativize their own journal entries. In this respect as well, integrating the two activities helped to catalyze a transformation in the journal writing activity.

Greater interest and engagement in journal writing—a comparison

As we have noted, one aspect of this transformation was that children became more interested and engaged in the journal writing activity. In comparison with the 2002-2003 school year, in 2003-2004 there was a surge in the number of journal entries by the girls, and an even more dramatic increase by the boys.

Since these phenomena became apparent to us only during the 2003-2004 school year, we had not systematically examined the children's journals the previous year, and most of the journals from the 2002-2003 class were no longer available for analysis in the present study. However, 8 children from that class had continued in the 2003-2004 class, so that their journals had been retained by the teacher. Therefore, in order to carry out a systematic comparison, we selected a sample of 8 other children from the 2003-2004 class who had not been in Head Start the previous year, and who matched the age distribution of the first sample in 2002-2003. Comparing these samples from the two classes, we found that in the 2002-2003 class the average number of journal entries per child was 25 for the girls and 19 for the boys, and the corresponding figures for in 2003-

2004 class were 39 for the girls and 46 for the boys.

These children not only made more journal entries in 2003-2004, but also showed a stronger interest in the journal writing activity in other ways. Several of them began to decorate the covers of their journal books, and a few (mostly girls) even created their own journal books—actions that McDowell had observed very rarely in all the previous years of using this journal writing activity in her classroom. The children also appeared to spend more time on their journals and to draw more detailed pictures. But at this point we do not yet have comparative data to confirm (or disconfirm) these impressions systematically.

Enhancing writing

Another comparison brings out an association between the integration of these two activities and an increase in the children's literacy awareness and print knowledge. This involves the use of kid writing by the young 3-year-olds (3 to 3½) in the samples from the two classes (2 girls and 2 boys from 2002-2003 vs. 4 girls and 1 boy from 2003-2004). In the 2002-2003 sample, only 2 children (both girls) included kid writing in any of their journal entries. In the 2003-2004 sample, all 6 children included kid writing in many of their stories.

Overall, the percentage of journal entries with kid writing (mean proportions) for this age group increased from 16% in 2002-2003 to 53% in 2003-2004. A more detailed comparison by semesters is even more suggestive. Spring 2003 and fall 2004 were the two semesters in which the storytelling/story-acting practice was in use for one semester. In fall 2002 it had not been introduced, and in spring 2004 it had been in use for two semesters. A comparison reveals sharp differences between these three categories in the percentages of journal entries with kid writing: fall 2002, 7%; spring 2003, 25%; fall 2003, 28%; spring 2004, 64%. Other indicators also show a clear increase in writing skills and print knowledge for the young children in the 2003-2004 class.

Higher proportions of these children were writing alphabet letters, invented spelling, writing from left to right, and using a return sweep when writing.

A new form of narrative kid writing also emerged. On days when the teacher did not have time to write down a story to go with a child's drawing, and had to postpone that for another time, some children even began to pretend to write their own stories (that is, several parallel lines of invented spelling at the bottom of the page or on the facing page). For example, Daiyonna drew a picture on one page, and on the opposite page created several lines of kid writing, after which she announced, "*This is Daiyonna's story*" (Daiyonna, 5-6; 5/6/04, *Journal entry*). Again, this was an instance of kid writing never previously observed in this classroom.

Narrative skills, narrative thinking, and journal writing

One of the most striking examples of the fruitful integration of storytelling with journal writing was provided by Takia, a girl in her second year of Head Start who was receiving services for significant cognitive and speech delays (as her often disconnected stories attested). One day in May 2004 she created her own journal book, using two pieces of purple construction papers for the front and back and four blank pages inside, which she stapled together. She worked diligently the whole morning, first constructing the book on her own and then drawing a series of pictures. After the group story-acting, she continued drawing, and later brought the book to the teacher to see. She had written "TOT" (invented spelling) on the cover and drawn the picture of a figure with a head, body, smiling face, and very long arms. She said it was "*Tuney the frog,*" and this figure was repeated on the first page.

When the teacher praised her initiative, Takia told her that she also had a story, *Tuney the Frog*. The teacher sat down and took dictation while Takia told her where to write. She had drawn a picture on most pages of the book, and these pictures were all part of her story. Takia turned the

pages as she finished dictating what she wanted on each page. Each drawing had a different topic, but the presence of Tuney throughout the story gives it some continuity.

First page: *Tuney ate the fox. And Tuney said she ain't like no Foxes.*

And she said "I'm going back home" because she took the letter off the ground.

Second page: *And then she found a yoyo and then she was playing with it at home*

[picture of yoyo].

Third page: *And a crocodile came out of the egg* [detailed picture of egg]

Fourth page: *She [Tuney] said "Can I have a cup and can I have a bag"?* [picture of bag]

Fifth page: [picture of cup]

Sixth page: *And then they was going to exercise.*

Seventh page: *And then she said, "No, you can have a car 'cause I like cars. They're good."*

It's an airplane car.

Eighth page: *And then Tuney and her mom were looking at the new house.*

The end.

The story is not especially sophisticated, but for a child like Takia, this represented a remarkable achievement. Amazingly enough, Takia seems to have worked out a story (or some part of it) in her own mind and illustrated it in the journal book before she told it to the teacher.

Although this particular example is exceptional, it is a powerful illustration of how the storytelling and story-acting practice can be integrated effectively with the journal writing activity, and how its effects could help to transform and enrich the latter. In the process, the journal writing activity was endowed with new meanings and possibilities for the children involved.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It would be premature to draw firm conclusions on the basis of the data from just two years' classes in one Head Start classroom. But as our preliminary analysis has tried to show, there are good reasons to believe that the children's participation in a narrative- and play-based activity, the storytelling and story-acting practice, transformed the character of their participation in a more directly literacy-oriented activity, journal writing, and substantially increased both its appeal and its educational value. Building on findings from previous research on this storytelling and story-acting practice, our analysis also suggests that the key to understanding these effects lies in the distinctively powerful ways that this storytelling and story-acting practice combines the elements of narrative, play, imagination, and children's peer-group life.

Introducing a narrative element into the journal writing activity seems to have been the crucial catalyst for its transformation and increased effectiveness, and the evidence suggests that this narrativizing tendency was linked to the children's participation in the storytelling and story-acting practice. This participation not only improved the children's specifically narrative skills. Through composing spontaneous stories and listening to the stories of other children, they gained a stronger understanding of how they could use language to create self-contextualizing possible worlds—thus promoting a cluster of cognitive and language skills extensive research has identified as among the crucial foundations for emergent literacy—and they applied this orientation to their participation in journal writing.

As the children participated in the storytelling and story-acting activity, they came to understand how they can use language to create self-contextualizing possible worlds (in telling and enacting stories), and this affected the way they approached journal writing. The special appeal of the storytelling and story-acting practice, in turn, stems from the way this narrative-based activity engages and mobilizes a range of children's interests in an integrated way, including elements of play, imagination, and friendship. In addition to tapping children's existing abilities and enthusiasm

for narrative expression, it is also a voluntary, child-initiated, and peer group-oriented activity--and it is fun! Children are allowed and encouraged to tell any story they wish, at their own pace, reflecting their interests, concerns, and abilities. This helps children feel that what they have to say is valuable and important and that adults value it. Furthermore, as Paley (2004, p. 5) reminds us, "... the dictated story is but a half-told tale. To fulfill its destiny it is dramatized on a pretend stage with the help of the classmates as actors and audience and the teacher as narrator and director." The fact that their stories are acted out for the rest of the class gives children additional motivation for storytelling and helps to create a shared public arena for narrative collaboration, experimentation, and mutual cross-fertilization within the classroom peer-group culture.

These findings bring us back to support some larger arguments about early childhood education and development with which we began. Rather than focus in excessively narrow and one-sided ways on teacher-directed, didactic, and skill-based activities, early childhood education needs to balance these with child-centered and play-based activities that successfully build on and mobilize young children's own abilities, motivations, and modes of understanding. And rather than treating these two approaches as mutually exclusive, we should seek to combine them in ways that allow them to complement and enrich each other. As we have argued here, for promoting crucial literacy-related skills in young children, activities that systematically integrate symbolic play with narrative can be especially valuable, effective, and rewarding.

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Figure 1: Story-Voice (2003-2004 Stories)

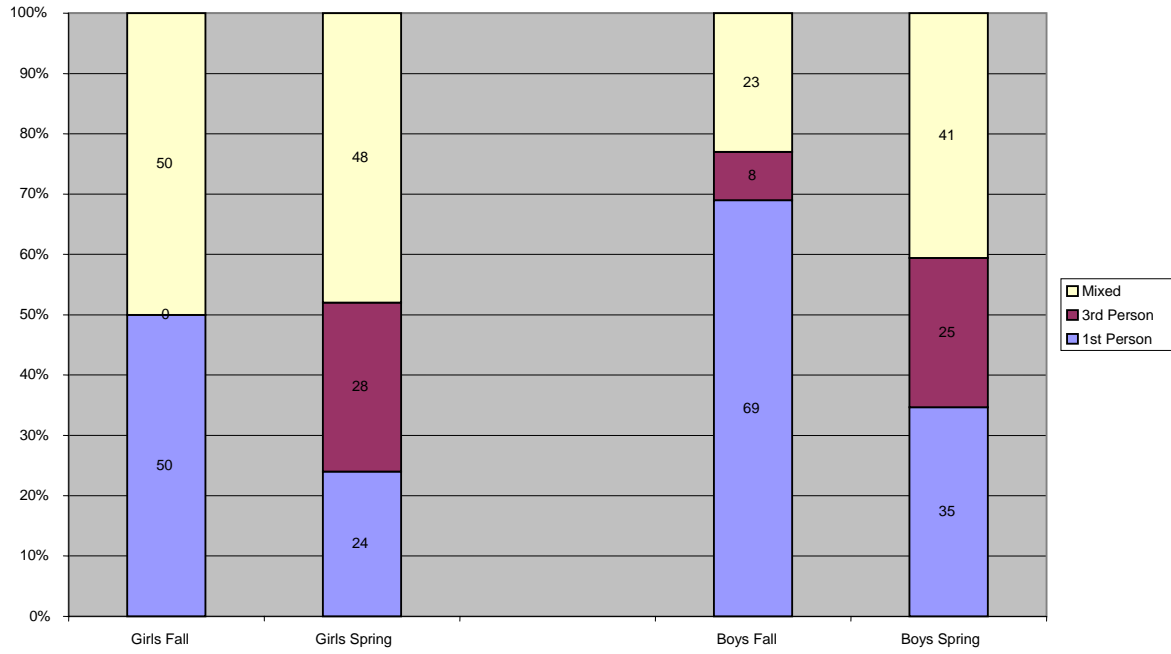


Figure 2: Type of World (2003-2004 Stories)

