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Still on Stage!

Engaging Children in Telling and Acting Out Stories to Impact Learning

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Nearly forty years ago, attendees at NAEYC's 1987 Annual Conference were invited to visit Vivian Gussin Paley, the teacher and writer who contemplated children's stories and fantasy play and who popularized the idea of children dictating stories to their teachers and acting them out. As described in a September 2011 interview in *Young Children*, Paley believed that the combination of *story dictation* (children telling stories, and teachers writing them down) and *story acting* (dramatizing the dictated stories without props) gives children opportunities to express themselves, grapple with their concerns, and shape events (Dombrink-Green & Paley 2011). Paley described make-believe (which is inherent to story acting) as a key "thinking tool" for children (91).

Story dictation was not unique to Paley's setting. Yet she was novel in making it a central activity and pairing it with children's enactments of their stories (Wiltz & Fein 1996). Long before she passed away in 2019, Paley predicted that these joint practices

would endure the passage of time (Lindfors & Paley 2004). Indeed, they continue to be adopted by teachers and explored by researchers like us (the authors) in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries.

As applied researchers, we introduced story dictation and acting to educators living in Quebec, Canada, via professional development workshops held from 2019 to 2021. We worked with three preschool teachers, one kindergarten teacher who taught 4-year-olds, and six kindergarten teachers who taught 5-year-olds. We went on to study the children's stories, the interactions among teachers and children during these activities, and the impact of story dictation and acting on the 4-year-old children's language and narrative skills.

In celebration of NAEYC's 100th anniversary, we revisited the *Young Children* archive to gather information on the reasons for engaging children in story dictation and acting and the procedures for doing so. Our aims were to honor the contributions of Paley and *Young Children* authors in this area; to (re)generate interest in the practices, given our conviction of their value; and to guide interested teachers in bringing the practices to their settings. To identify articles in the archive, we entered and combined relevant search terms (such as *story*, *story dictation*, *story acting*, and *drama*), selecting the ones that focused on Paley's approach to children dictating stories and acting them out. In this article, we summarize the benefits of story dictation and story acting, then outline how these practices can be implemented. We close with general guidelines and a few key resources, but we encourage readers to consult our reference list for information most pertinent to their needs.

The Benefits of Story Dictation and Story Acting for Children

While Paley saw story dictation and story acting mainly as platforms for children

to share their thinking and connect with peers, researchers have investigated the practices' effects on children's knowledge and skills in various domains, including early language and literacy. Findings in this area have been positive:

- In a groundbreaking study, McNamee and colleagues (1985) found that 4- to 6-year-olds who engaged in dictation combined with acting told stories that were more complex and coherent than children who only dictated stories.
- Research has shown that children who engage in the practices over time show greater gains than their peers in receptive vocabulary (Cooper et al. 2007), story comprehension (Pesco et al. 2022), and storytelling (Nicolopoulou et al. 2015).
- Story dictation and acting can foster children's print awareness and composition skills, each of which are important for later writing (Pesco & MacLeod 2024).

Story dictation and acting can also benefit children's psychological, emotional, and social development (Cooper et al. 2007; Cremin et al. 2013; Nicolopoulou et al. 2015). In *Young Children's* September 2013 issue, Mariana Souto-Manning proposed that the practices can affirm children's cultural identities and serve as a way to teach "from a cultural difference paradigm" (74). She noted the activities' consistency with Latino/a values regarding oral storytelling and collaboration. She also described one Latino teacher who used story acting to explore themes of oppression and power with the children in his class. These are important matters for pedagogy (Cooper 2021) and in keeping with Paley's view that fairness is at the forefront of children's concerns (along with fantasy, friendship, and fear).

Because they involve child choice and opportunities for cooperation, story dictation and story acting can contribute to a democratic classroom culture (Mardell &

Kucirkova 2017). They can also foster inclusivity: In the classrooms we observed, we found that even reluctant storytellers eagerly acted in others' stories and participated as audience members. Further, nearly all of the children eventually contributed stories of their own.

These findings suggest that story dictation and story acting can play a positive role in creating a caring community of learners, which is a key part of both developmentally appropriate practice and early childhood program standards (NAEYC 2020, 2025). Moreover, as Souto-Manning proposed, story dictation and story acting can be a vehicle for advancing equity (NAEYC 2019).

In the September 2006 issue of *Young Children*, kindergarten teacher Jane Rothman wrote about how she integrated story dictation and story acting into her teaching after participating in a demonstration led by Paley. We refer to Rothman's article and others in the *Young Children* archive as we explore the steps involved in implementing these practices, which include

- Introducing story dictation and story acting to children
- Gathering stories
- Scaffolding story dictation
- Observing story content and form
- Inviting storytellers and peers to act out the stories
- Scaffolding story acting

A discussion of each follows.

Introducing Story Dictation and Story Acting to Children

In her *Young Children* article, Rothman described how she introduced story

dictation and story acting to children in her class. She “explained, simply, that we were going to tell stories and act them out” (71). She designated a carpet as the stage for acting, but teachers can use masking tape to delineate a performance space on the floor. Rothman established how acting roles would be assigned (a point we elaborate on later in the article), then transcribed a few stories in front of the class and invited children to act them out.

In our research, we followed similar procedures with two adaptations: First, to prepare children for engaging in and watching story acting, we elicited their prior knowledge related to pretending, acting, and viewing a performance. Second, to boost children’s confidence in themselves as storytellers, we read aloud two to three stories told by children of a similar age (gleaned from Lee 2016) and guided children in acting them out.

Gathering Stories

Educators can gather children’s stories in a variety of ways. Rothman, for example, “would go to the block area, tables, even the sandbox, to write down a child’s story” (71). She, a teaching assistant, or an adult volunteer recorded children’s stories on loose sheets of lined paper as the child watched—a strategy that can foster print awareness (Pesco & MacLeod 2024). In our research, teachers gathered stories in 6- by 8-inch notebooks with colorful hard covers that we purchased at a dollar store.

Once a child completed their story, the adult read it aloud and identified the characters, allowing the author to choose which one they wanted to play. Rothman gathered a few stories daily, as did Paley. This is feasible because it usually takes just a few minutes for children to tell stories and act them out.

Scaffolding Story Dictation

While many children volunteer stories they already have in mind, Carrie L. Lobman and coauthors noted in their May 2015 *Young Children* article that teachers can also “find a story to be told” (94) by building on their observations of children; a teacher might, for example, prompt a story related to a child’s play experience or an interest expressed at circle time.

Once a child begins dictating their story, researchers and educators have varying opinions about how much the “scribe” should intervene. Some teachers, like those studied by Nicolopoulou and colleagues (2022), ask questions only to check whether a child wants to add to their story or has finished it. In contrast, Sally C. Hurwitz shares in her September 2001 *Young Children* article, “The Teacher Who Would Be Vivian,” that Paley favored asking questions to clarify meaning. After listening to a story about a father who flew to the moon in search of his son “who was magic” (had magical powers), Paley asked if the father was magic too. When the child said no, Paley said, “The reason I asked is that he was able to go up to the moon to look for the boy.” This led the child to clarify his intent.

Like other Paley followers, we lean away from routinely prompting for story elements during dictation to avoid taking over a child’s stories. However, we encourage teachers to foster children’s knowledge about story structure and themes through other activities and to observe whether children gradually transfer that knowledge to their own storytelling. Past issues of *Young Children* offer many activities and strategies to support story comprehension and storytelling. These include creative spin-offs of Paley’s approach, such as those explored through teacher research and teacher inquiry:

- Ron Grady wondered about and engaged children in story dictation based on photographs of their own play in “The Play’s the Story: Creating Play Story Booklets to Encourage Literacy Behaviors in a Preschool Classroom” (2021).
- In “The Power of Child-Created Texts and Puppetry: Nurturing Preschoolers’ Social and Emotional Development” (2024), Kiyomi Umezawa and Emiko Kurosawa Arakaki inquired about and encouraged children to dictate stories about puppet characters, then use the puppets to act those stories out.

Observing Story Content and Form

Children’s dictated stories can be a rich source of information about their interests as well as their understanding of what a story entails. Teachers might notice that children borrow content from their peers (McNamee et al. 1985; Faulkner 2017; Tariq 2024), perhaps to fit in (Cooper 2017) or elicit the same positive reaction (such as laughter) that another child’s story received (McNamee et al. 1985; Faulkner 2017). They also reuse content from storybooks and media (Tariq 2024). Thus, educators can expect story dictations to reveal children’s individual concerns and interests as well as influences from peers and the broader culture. While the issue of potentially sensitive topics (intense violence, intimate details about family life, sexual content) was not raised in the *Young Children* articles we reviewed, Lee (2016) and Cooper (2017) provide ideas for how teachers might respond to these.

Story dictations also give teachers an opportunity to observe story structure, which tends to vary among young children due to differences in language and narrative skills as well as cultural variations in storytelling (Schick & Melzi 2010). For example, while some kindergartners in our study provided characters, settings (a place and/or

time of events), and plots, other children recounted just one event, named or described characters but provided little action, or told stories that were disjointed. As Rothman (2006) noted, some children’s stories might be descriptive and even poetic (see “Examples of Story Dictations” for an illustration of this variety).

Examples of Story Dictations

The following stories illustrate the diversity of children’s dictated stories. The first three (reported in Tariq 2024) are taken from our research and are translated to English from French. The last two are from Rothman 2006 (73).

There was a knight who killed dragons. He killed all the dragons.

Two little elves were walking. They were walking outside. There was one that fell. The other one went into the house. The mom saw the boo-boo of the elf that hurt himself. Mom put a Band-Aid on it.

Once, someone wanted to play soccer. Then he scored a goal. He took a medal. He went to hide it in his room. He was proud. His parents brought him to eat ice cream! He chose a chocolate one. It was a big day.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, live in my front yard a tree. One a branches so long it touch another tree. And a rock there, under the tree branch. I bring my doll out, and I put my doll on the rock and I sing to her. The rock looked like a cradle and the branches looked like a room.

The sun is big and burning. The bees are out. The ocean is calling, “Spring, Spring.” The flowers are growing. The birds are chirping. The cactus is saying, “Spring in Mexico.” And the wind blowing.

Inviting Storytellers and Peers to Act Out the Stories

To begin story acting, a teacher reads one of the dictated stories to all of the children. We encourage educators to invite the storyteller to stand beside them during this time to acknowledge authorship. While reading, educators should pause to assign

acting roles as characters appear in the story. Rothman used a *go-round*, in which she assigned roles from left to right, in the order that children were seated around the stage (2006). As Paley believed, this strategy avoids competition among children and fosters inclusion (Wiltz & Fein 1996). Next, the teacher reads the story again, pausing for children to enter the stage and act out their parts. This is a standard procedure among Paley followers.

In her *Young Children* article, Rothman also described the active role that children in her class took to develop guidelines around story acting. These included rules to avoid teasing and to take turns. Other directives included “Don’t go around and be silly”; “Be quiet as a mouse”; “Just pretend to touch, but don’t really do it”; and “Only seven on the stage at one time.” These rules showed that her class had “assumed ownership of the process” (2006, 73). We have observed educators establishing routines around dialogue (asking children to recite a story’s dialogue in unison rather than giving a speaking role to a single child) and rituals to end the acting sessions (such as clapping softly).

Scaffolding Story Acting

When a story is skeletal or disjointed from an educator’s point of view, children can still act it out. This may prompt the author to enrich their story or to turn to peers or their teacher for help. In the March 2018 issue of *Young Children*, Bonnie Ripstein shared her unique approach in “‘There’s a Story in My Picture!’ Connecting Art, Literacy, and Drama Through Storytelling in a Kindergarten Classroom.” She invited the kindergartners in her class to act out stories that were reflected in pictures they had painted. She recorded the acting and later watched the videos with the children. This prompted them to share questions they had about the stories. As she expressed, this

“reflection and peer review helped the children see what was missing or needed to change, so their stories would be clearer to everyone. They began to question each other about the stories, leading authors to add more details to their work” (20).

While teachers’ contributions to story acting vary from class to class and even from story to story, both research and our experience indicate that educators do more (and in our view, *should* do more) than simply read the text, assign roles, call the actors to the stage, and watch the acting. In a September 2011 interview with *Young Children* editor Meghan Dombrink-Green, Paley suggested that teachers play an important role in probing children’s ideas during story acting. She gave the example of a teacher observing a character’s persistent barking during story acting and asking, “I wonder why the puppy’s barking so much?” (91). Paley also suggested teachers might elicit ideas from children about how to manage logistics, asking questions like “How can we make room in the spaceship for another ninja?” (91).

In our collaboration with teachers, we recorded and analyzed videos of story acting (Pesco et al. 2022), noting the various scaffolds that teachers provided (see “Scaffolds for Story Acting” on page xx). Overall, we found that they offered diverse support but did not take over. By intentionally scaffolding children’s stories while creating space for their ideas and agency, the teachers stayed true to the spirit of story acting.

Scaffolds for Story Acting

Educators can use the following strategies to encourage children during their story acting.

Strategy	Examples
Add sound effects, exclamations, or words to enrich the story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add sound effects (“beep-beep”) or exclamations (“Uhoh!”) • Add descriptive words. (“The little cat was walking around.”) • Provide alternative vocabulary (dove for went in the water). • Add temporal markers (“And then . . .”).
Guide children as they act out their stories.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite actor or audience input. (“How can you show ‘He called the ambulance?’”; “Does anyone have an idea about how to show ‘wrapping gifts?’”) • Offer comments. (“He’s swimming” to a child unsure of how to act out “The boy was at the beach.”) • Demonstrate a way to act out a role (such as pretending to use a rolling pin to depict baking).
Elicit or comment on a character’s internal state at key moments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions. (“How did the girl feel when she won the medal?”; “Why was he so mad?”) • Comment on emotions. (“Oh, the wolf is lost! It must be worried.”)
Clarify characters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer explanations. (“Glouton—that’s the green ghost.”) • Replace subject pronouns with nouns. (“The dragon attacked” instead of “He attacked.”)
Praise or remark on the acting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer comments during the story, without adding to it. (“What a great idea—a standing cat! Why not?”) • Comment once the acting is complete. (“That was terrific!”)

How to Get Started

While the logistics of story dictation and story acting are relatively simple, the practices rely on teachers being keen listeners and observers. We suggest that educators think about the curriculum they follow and their pedagogical practices to determine how these practices could complement or expand upon them. It also may be helpful to consider recruiting one or more colleagues to try out the practices and share their experiences. (The teachers we worked with found this very helpful.) Above all, educators are called to remember and follow in Vivian Paley's footsteps: To approach children's stories with curiosity and remember that story dictation and story acting are intended to be lively and fun!

Further Readings

Teachers can deepen their knowledge about story dictation and story acting by tapping into the following resources (see reference list for publication details).

- *Storytelling in Early Childhood: Enriching Language, Literacy and Classroom Culture*, by Teresa Cremin and colleagues. 2016.
This book explores how story dictation and acting impact children's language, literacy, interactions, and classroom life.
- *Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories: Storytelling and Story Acting in the Early Years*, by Trisha Lee. 2016
This book provides many tips derived from Lee's hands-on experiences as director of MakeBelieveArts, a UK organization that promotes Paley's approach.
- "Story Telling and Story Acting: Family Engagement," from the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood.

bpearlylearning.org/storytelling/family-engagement.

This segment focuses on how to involve families in story dictation and story acting.

- “Storytelling and Story Acting with Vivian Paley,” from Kentucky Educational Television. ket.org/program/storytelling-and-story-acting-with-vivian-paley/storytelling-and-story-acting-with-vivian-paley.

This video features Vivian Paley as she helps kindergartners act out their stories.

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Diane Pesco, PhD, formerly Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, retired in 2025. The article is inspired by Diane and Andréanne’s collaboration with teachers in initiating story dictation and story acting in their classrooms and research emanating from that project.

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