

# Paley's Practice

## Storytelling, Story Acting, and Early Learning

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In the early years, children's librarians traditionally lit a candle at the beginning of each storytime. The altered atmosphere helped transport children mentally to a land of stories. The candle was blown out at the end of the session, bringing them back to the library. Although this tradition has not endured (due perhaps to the invention of smoke alarms), storytelling remains an effective tool that can be used by librarians.

Storytelling is powerful, not only for the listener but for the teller as well. "When a child tells a story, he not only means something, feels something, refers to an event; most important, he DOES something."<sup>1</sup> They may be sharing part of their life and identity, attempting to make someone laugh, or trying to make sense of an experience. Storytelling invokes creativity and imagination and helps children work through social, emotional, and cognitive challenges. Coupled with story acting and writing, it supports multiple early childhood domains and skills.

Here we share information about the storytelling practice pioneered by the late preschool teacher/researcher Vivian Paley.

### Storytelling and Story Acting

Paley is credited for creating a formal program that uses both dictation and dramatization systematically in storytelling (ST) and story acting (SA),<sup>2</sup> where children individually dictate stories that are written down by an adult. They then gather around a designated "stage" to act out their tales.

First-hand accounts of this practice can be found in some of Paley's books, *Wally's Stories: Conversations in Kindergarten*,<sup>3</sup> *The Girl with the Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape their Lives*,<sup>4</sup> and *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*.<sup>5</sup> Although these practices are not commonly used today, they are valuable tools children's librarians should consider using, and they provide new ways for emphasizing the early literacy building tools of Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR).

### Storytelling (Dictation)

Dictation can take place one-on-one or in front of a group. Stories are limited to one page and as children share, the adult provides gentle scaffolding by offering prompts or asking clarifying questions.<sup>6</sup> See how an adult helps a child articulate her story in the Boston Listens program <https://www.bpsearlylearning.org/storytelling/dictation>.

### Story Acting (Dramatization)

During the dramatization phase, the story's author and the remainder of the children are called to assemble around the stage. The story's author chooses the part they would like to play and the remaining actors can be

chosen from a class list or from the order in which they are seated. Children may not act a second time until everyone has had a turn and children can decline to participate. The adult reads the story as the children play their parts and may offer some direction. See how dramatization is facilitated in Boston Listens <https://www.bpsearlylearning.org/storytelling/dramatization>.

Readers can find more information on ST/SA and its impact in *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley*,<sup>7</sup> *Storytelling in Early Childhood: Enriching Language, Literacy and Classroom Culture*,<sup>8</sup> and the article, “Vivian Paley’s Storytelling. Story Acting Comes to the Boston Public Schools.”<sup>9</sup>

## Benefits of ST/SA

### Language and Literacy Skills

- **Vocabulary.** It is widely accepted that reading aloud to children supports vocabulary development.<sup>10</sup> It has also been shown that children who have their oral language written down or participate in storytelling/story acting (ST/SA) experience vocabulary gains and it allows participants to experience new vocabulary in authentic ways.<sup>11</sup>
- **Narrative Structure.** Narrative skills are a significant predictor of reading ability and ST/SA can promote these skills.<sup>12</sup> Children learn how stories work, what they are composed of, sequencing, character and plot development, and about the writing process.<sup>13</sup> The research suggests “ST/SA provides a bridge between the contextualized speech of young children and the decontextualized language of books and writing.”<sup>14</sup>
- **Print and Phonological Awareness.** ST/SA supports children’s awareness of written language.<sup>15</sup> As children share their stories, they watch as the adult scribes, moving left-to-right and top-to-bottom, leaving spaces between words, and adding necessary punctuation. They learn print has a purpose. Also, as children’s stories are written, they have opportunities to learn about letter-sound connections and spelling.

### Social and Emotional Development

- **Community Building.** An ST/SA framework creates diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces for learning. All children are invited to express themselves and all levels of participation are welcome (e.g., single words, gestures), which contributes to their overall sense of worth.<sup>16</sup> The children and teacher together shape the rules and stories that impact individuals and the larger learning community.<sup>17</sup>
- **Self-esteem.** ST/SA operates from a strengths-based perspective. All input is valued and as children become more

## The Process in Practice

What could ST/SA look like in practice at a library or childcare center?

The library could offer a weekly program with registration.

- Establish ground rules (e.g., turn-taking, acceptable stories and actions, voluntary participation).
- Draw name cards of children who will have the opportunity to share their stories that day.
- Dictate stories in the front of the group.
- Invite children and adults to act out the stories.
- Make stories visible to others (e.g., create books with children’s text and illustrations, share videos, invite the community to a performance).

Librarians could partner with teachers to train together so the program continues when the librarian is not present.

- Share a story (your own or something traditional) for the kids to act out, then facilitate ST/SA with the group, having a set number of children participate.
- Offer the program as a family engagement workshop or series after school or during the weekend.

comfortable with ST/SA they are more willing to participate.<sup>18</sup>

- **Self-regulation.** The ability to self-regulate or inhibit an automatic response until a situation has been processed, is critical to school and life success.<sup>19</sup> In ST/SA children practice sitting quietly, taking turns, and following rules so all community members can effectively participate.

### Creativity

Adele Diamond notes, “The essence of creativity is to be able to disassemble and recombine elements in new ways.”<sup>20</sup> As groups of children generate and dramatize their stories, it is not uncommon for them to recycle or remix themes and elements that may have appeared in other texts and performances to create something new.<sup>21</sup> It has also been shown that children who participate in ST/SA author their own imaginative texts with distinct themes.<sup>22</sup>

## Motivation

Children, in general, enjoy engaging in pretend play and like telling stories. When they are given the opportunity to act

out their own stories with friends and perform in front of an audience, they may be motivated to compose more.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, many are keen on producing stories that will be popular with their peers.<sup>24</sup> &

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