Classroom Storytelling Project Methodology
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Suggested Guidelines for Implementation of Paley’s “Storytelling Curriculum,” excerpted from “Fair and True: Vivian Paley’s Philosophy of Early Childhood Education” by Patsy Cooper

Storytelling Methodology

- **Where children sit.** The child/author should sit to the left of a right-handed teacher/scribe and to the right of left-handed ones so that the teacher’s arm does not block the child’s view of the writing.

- **Carbon paper.** Carbon paper is used to make an instant copy of the story so that the child can take his or her copy home and the teacher has one to read to the class and later put in the class binder of stories or the child’s portfolio.

- **Name and date.** Before the child begins to dictate, the teacher writes his or her name in the left-hand corner and the date in the right. The teacher should say out loud what she is writing.

- **How to begin.** First time storytellers might need some help to get started. Others are too shy or inexperienced to dictate stories at first. It’s okay to offer suggestions until the child gets used to the process. (“I really like those new sneakers. Would you like to tell a story about the day you went shopping?”) Sometimes it’s merely a matter of offering a beginning or a way in. (“Some stories begin ‘One day’ or ‘Once upon a time’ or ‘Once there was a little boy.’ Would you like to start that way?”)

- **Length.** Stories are limited to one page due to time restrictions. Children who press to tell more should be taught about installments, chapters, and “to be continued”.

- **Subject matter.** The fewer the restrictions on subject matter the better (except the obvious—bathroom stories, explicit sexuality, unkind descriptions of other children, and so on.) There may be some stories of family violence that need to be told, but might not be dramatized.

- **Echoing.** As the teacher writes, she echoes back to the child what he or she has just said. (“One—day—a—bear—came—to—dinner!”) This keeps both the teacher and the child on track and calls his or her attention to the words being written.

- **Hesitant storytellers.** If the child hesitates between thoughts, the teacher casually encourages her or him to proceed. (“Yes? And then what happened?” or “Okay. Go on. I’m ready.”)

- **Writing and narrative development.** The teacher helps the child expand on his or her thought by engaging in a conversation about the story. (“Wow! You must have been really scared when the monster came. Did you scream? Would you like to put that in the story? “What did the baby do that made everyone laugh?”) Sometimes it helps for the child to think ahead to the dramatization. (“Tell me what the kids are going to do when they are tigers in the play. Maybe you could put that in your story ahead of time.”)

- **Skill development.** The teacher indirectly points out or asks questions about decoding, such as beginning sounds, double consonants, and rhymes. Occasionally she asks the child to spell a word that is a challenge for him or her. (“Do you remember how to spell floor?”) Grammar and punctuation mini-lessons can also be easily inserted. (“Where should I put the quotation marks?”)

- **Editing and revision.** Editorial questions regarding sequencing, narrative development, and so on can be asked of the storyteller at any time. (“So, your mama took you to the store and then to school. Is that right?”). Dictated stories are rarely revised, though they can be if one is particularly special to the child.

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289
• **Read the story after it is done** When the child is finished dictating, the teacher rereads the story to make sure she “got it right.” She automatically makes any changes the child requests.

• **Choosing the cast** After finishing reading the story, the teacher reminds the child that he or she needs to choose a cast. First, she calls attention to the possible cast by underlining the characters in the written story. It is assumed the author will play the lead, though it is not a requirement. The child chooses his cast from the class list, noting who has not had a turn yet in this cycle. He or she may choose as many characters as there is room on the classroom’s “stage” (dramatization area). Usually this will be four to six actors and covers the main characters in most stories. When necessary, the audience is asked to “imagine” the rest of the characters. The teacher writes the cast names and their parts on her copy of the story because it is difficult to remember who’s who when it comes time to dramatize later in the day.

Extra tip: Teachers should be upbeat, involved scribes. (“NO kidding? Oooh, that’s scary.” “Hey, I like this part where the fire engine talks.” “A deep blue, gooey-gobblin’ day?—I love it!”)

**Dramatization methodology**

• **Keep it simple** Do not think in terms of rehearsals or props.

• **Gather the class in a semi-circle** The teacher begins by announcing who wrote a story that day. In turn, she asks each author to come stand beside her while she reads the class his or her story.

• **Calling the cast** The teacher announces who in the class will play which roles and asks them to come stand “offstage.” (A small rug helps to mark the spot. Actors move on to the stage as required.)

• **Reread while cast acts out the story** As the teacher rereads the story once more, the chosen actors act as the story line dictates.

• **Dialogue** The teacher pauses before any dialogue to see if the child remembers his or lines. If not, the teacher simply repeats them, and the child repeats after her. Improvisation is welcome, except where it changes the author’s intent or distracts from the overall play.

• **Directing the action** The teacher should feel free to interrupt the dramatization with suggestions. (“Zoe, the little bear is very upset to find his porridge eaten all up. Can you look upset like the little bear would?”)

• **Curtain call** After “The End” the actors join hands and take a bow while the audience claps.

**Dramatization of Adult-authored Stories**

Children love to act out adult-authored books, too. This is a key opportunity for them to learn how good stories are constructed (beginnings, middles, ends, problem, solution, and so on). It also extends their vocabulary and knowledge of sophisticated sentence structure. The method is the same except usually the teacher, not a child, chooses the case. Dramatization of a favorite book can occur as many as five-dozen times before the children want to move on.