



## Commentary

# Getting Back on Track: The Importance of Play and Storytelling in Young Children's Development

Vivian Gussin Paley

### ABSTRACT

In this interview, Vivian Paley describes how her curiosity and love of young children led her to work in early childhood education. She shares some of her own learning experiences with children that eventually resulted in her writing 13 books. As children go to school earlier, there is less and less time for play. This dramatic play and re-enactment is critical for children and constitutes an "original level playing field" in classrooms with wide diversity in culture and language. Finally, she explains that the most important characteristic of an excellent early childhood teacher is that of valuing kindness, in order to create a classroom that is fair and inclusive.

*Can you share with our readers what prompted you to become an early childhood educator?*

**M**y first experiences in a classroom during and after college were with young children and thereafter I enjoyed the experience so much...something told me this is the age that I could speak to. My student teaching was in the third grade, first grade, and kindergarten, and always I felt a sense of excitement being with kindergarten children and preschool children. There is nothing really unusual about this. I don't know how other people pick the age of education that they would want to become involved in, but something about the curiosity and freedom of expression of young children made me pick up some of that same excitement of posing questions and looking for answers in their make-believe worlds.

*Your wonderful books on your classroom experiences with young children show what an excellent observer of children you are. Can you talk about the specifics of how you managed to do this while teaching?*

I found out that observing, listening, recording, re-observing, re-commenting, and writing it all down was the same thing as teaching. I discovered that it was this ongoing narrative that in fact matched the child's own discovery of an ongoing narrative—call it play, dramatic play. It was a very exciting realization for me. It meant that I was always in my own laboratory and the questions that I had would be answered eventually right there. All I needed to do was listen to the children while they played, and join the conversations engendered by play.

*Can you tell us about some of the most memorable events that you have had in your classroom and what you took away from these?*

My goodness, there are so many memorable events, but I would have to say that my realization that the children's play told stories that needed to be re-enacted was one of the most important. My discovery of this next activity beyond play, that was the natural extension of play...all of these stories meant the most to my own development. When children played at home, weren't in school yet, and had so many more hours of play and re-play and a kind of leisurely examination of their own thoughts, their own ideas, with words, without words... the extension of that play onto a written page to be acted out by their own peers was not as necessary as it has become now. When children play in a crowded classroom of 20-25 students...their play needs to be seen again, heard again, on a pretend stage, transposed into a story in their own words.

It was in the writing of "Wally's Stories," where I realized that a child who is pretending to be a dinosaur bumping into block structures and doll corners is trying to tell a story in his own way. In a crowded doll corner and blocks it's hard to tell a story in your own way. A dozen other people are trying to tell their stories in their own way. But if the core of that dramatic experience can be captured in a few sentences, a few scenes, and then re-played, we are on the next Vygotskian step up the ladder. The child is able to re-create the scene by dictating it to an adult, and it is re-enacted on a stage with his classmates. This is a very exciting extension and I still am working to see how this activity can help us with the new approaches to early education. Perhaps the storytelling and acting can bring us back to the original play impetus where it begins.

*What will happen if that is cut out of classrooms?*

We are making changes galore and we don't know what will happen. We are almost cutting out a year, the kindergarten year, of imaginary play, storytelling, invention, leisurely hours of developing an idea, arbitrarily substituting a curriculum that used to be commonplace in the first grade. In other words, here's the situation: we now expect, by the end of the kindergarten year, pretty much what we used to anticipate and plan for by the end of the first grade year. If you think about it, we have eliminated a whole year of storytelling, story invention, characters, plots. What will happen? It takes time to know what will happen.

A lot of people think young children are not as happy in school as they used to be and don't act as nice to each other. I'll tell you something interesting: in a student-teacher practicum I was asked to talk about my book, "Boys and Girls." It was 30 years ago that I did the research, the teaching that led to an analysis of how boys and girls looked at each other and themselves in the kindergarten year. Someone in the colloquium with a great deal of anxiety said, "But how can we do this today, how can we examine kindergarten children the way you did, if we don't see them playing the way you did?" That's a good question. Perhaps these student teachers will discover for themselves ways to bring more play into their classrooms, and how to connect the storytelling and acting to play.

*In your estimation what are the most important aspects of early childhood education?*

In the beginning before early childhood education began "earlier and earlier," when I started teaching, most children started school in kindergarten. When preschool was added, its agenda was play—everyone understood that...keep the children happy...let the little ones learn how to play. As the age of entrance became younger, I took a hiatus from kindergarten and taught six years in the preschool. I was learning so much that in the six years I wrote three books, "Mollie Is Three," "Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays," and "The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter." The best part was that the children were learning the same things I was learning.

The most important pathways to this early education were found in their dramatic play. Being in a place where every kind of dramatic, verbal, social, literary, and cultural idea can be played out, where words themselves can be examined by a dozen children at once...stories all around you, observing how problems are solved by so many different kinds of children coming from so many different places is essential. What a rich addition this is to our children in this technological age. Given that there's nothing we can do about the technology overwhelming us, I prefer not to spend my time thinking

about it, but rather what are the cultural opportunities available if one takes advantage of the storytelling abilities of young children, almost from birth on.

Let's go back to "peekaboo," the beginning of story. The adult didn't invent it—the adult merely added some more words...the infant not yet having gotten to that stage. But it's the infant who begins the story: "Where is that nice smiling person? Gone. Will she come back? I'm afraid. Ah here she is, back again. Peekaboo, peekaboo." This is the beginning of the child as his own narrator. It is the child's job in our cultural history of mankind—this is the learning tool, the job of asking her own question and then playing around and finding out the options. What we tend to do is bring the answers, the adult-established answers, to so many subjects earlier and earlier into a child's life. Now, what is the task of early childhood? I would say, number one, to learn to listen to others—and you do want to listen to others when they're telling you stories and to learn to express your own narrative. You want very much to give them back the gift that they have given you. And then, we play around with the combination of a half a dozen different narratives and see where they go: "What if the mother and baby do this? What if there's noise at the door? What if there's a big wind and it looks like a hurricane? What if the bad guy comes and where is Superman? Are the pirates good or bad? Are pirates always bad?" No end to it. It is the beginning of abstract thinking, of concentration, of focusing on a subject, and focusing on people.

The good news is we can easily make changes in the direction of early education. Two years ago, for example, the director of early childhood education in the Boston public schools happened to be down in Orlando when I gave a talk for NAEYC, which I called "Who Will Save the Kindergarten?" He thought that was an interesting title—that's why I gave it the title, to interest people—and it spoke to him. His name is Jason Sachs, by the way. He came back to Boston and before a year was up, before several months were up, he imagined all of the Boston kindergartens and four-year-old groups, some 350 classrooms, taking one-third of their curriculum and train teachers to bring storytelling and story acting into their classrooms. To my mind it is a major way of saving the kindergarten, and re-integrating these narratives into the entire life of the kindergarten and preschool. They're going into their second year in Boston, with more classrooms added to the storytelling/acting curriculum.

In a few weeks I'm on my way down to Houston, Texas, to help them celebrate the 25th year of storytelling and acting in their early childhood centers; the stories are there if we provide the structure. It does not interfere with any other curriculum that the school has planned, and is the glue that can hold everything together.

By the way I should mention that in London, England, they have been doing what they call the “Helicopter Project” for 20 years. It is named after “The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter,” and entails storytelling and story acting in their early childhood, especially inner-city classrooms, where you have a dozen different languages being spoken at once, and great collections of immigrant groups. The project is expanding throughout England.

It’s been a long time since “Wally’s Stories” [in 1981] where I first discovered for myself the storytelling and story acting curriculum. It makes more and more sense now all these years later. It took us a very short time, as these things go, to suddenly switch to a kindergarten that looks like first grade. *It’s a very short time* since we began this new kind of kindergarten. I’m sure it’s very much the same in Canada, am I correct? We shouldn’t be surprised if suddenly teachers, principals, parents, grandparents—everyone is aware that it’s gone too far. It shouldn’t surprise us that it might take a little bit longer to get back on track. And I think we can manage to do it. Why? Because every new class of little children doesn’t know what’s been going on, luckily can’t read or write. They know they have come into this world to invent stories, they know that’s why they’re here. They’re here to play and to find out where they belong in a group and how that group creates a community. If you look at everything that’s going on in kindergartens and in some preschools, and you think about this, the storytelling, story acting activity is the only *level ground*. You can bring children from all levels of society and background, rich and poor and middle, hearing the King’s English at home, hearing no English at home, and you put them into an environment where there are playful scenes that they all imagine, dictate, and act out, and you are hard put to say which child is in special education, which is in a regular classroom, and which young child is in a gifted classroom. Here we have the original level playing field. All the children, even the children without spoken words, for one neurological or experiential reason or another, see the story acted out in their heads and can be helped to put it on the stage with their own classmates. It is the levelling and uplifting activity and we can’t do without it.

*What particular qualities then should school districts look for in potential early childhood teachers?*

First, find teachers who really enjoy being with children, who really like little children. We want people who are curious about what children say and do. They are curious about finding out what children already know and how this innate knowledge can be used to create a conversation, an ongoing conversation. Most of what you look for in an early childhood educator, it seems to me, is not different than in a teacher who teaches middle school or high school. To be more precise, you want someone who is nice to every child and sets an example, a very visible example, of being nice

to all children, to other teachers, to parents...who is kind, someone who has thought a great deal and continues to think about the value of kindness as one of our earliest learning opportunities.

I would want teachers who look for opportunities every day to make children happy, and who find ways to make their classrooms fair, equitable, and inclusive. Now that's something that I would treasure and promote.

And for all of us who teach young children, let us wonder: Why is play everything in the world to them? How do we teach children to be kind to each other? How do we use their love of play to bring good conversations into the classroom?

More and more I think that what we are lacking in bringing up children and, indeed, in our own lives, are *good conversations*, starting at age two and three. How well can we carry on good, interesting conversations, tell good stories that grow into other good stories. The storytelling classroom gives all of us our best beginnings to a lifetime of learning. Luckily, children are born to be storytellers. They will remind us of how it is done.

## References

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**Vivian Gussin Paley** writes and teaches about the world of young children. She examines their stories and play, their logic and their thinking, searching for meaning in the social and moral landscapes of classroom life. A kindergarten teacher for 37 years, Mrs. Paley brings her storytelling/story acting and discussion techniques to children, teachers, and parents throughout the world. Mrs. Paley received the John Dewey Society's Outstanding Achievement Award for the year 2000, and, in 2004, was named Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts by the National Council of Teachers of English. Her books include *The Kindness of Children* (Harvard University Press, 1999), *In Mrs. Tully's Room* (Harvard University Press, 2001), *A Child's Work* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), and *The Boy on the Beach* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).