One Authentic Early Literacy Practice and Three Standardized Tests: Can a Storytelling Curriculum Measure Up?

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The current study was designed to assess the vocabulary and literacy skills of young children who participated in an authentic literacy practice, i.e., Vivian Paley's "storytelling curriculum," over the course of their respective prekindergarten or kindergarten years. We asked: How do prekindergarten and kindergarten age children, who participate in the storytelling curriculum over the course of the school year, perform on pre- and postmeasures of AGS/Pearson Assessments' Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) (3rd ed.) Form IIIA, and Whitehurst's Get Ready to Read!, as compared to those young children in the same grade with similar backgrounds and in the same or similar school settings who did not participate in the storytelling curriculum? Results show that in comparison to same-age children in like settings, participants in the storytelling curriculum showed significant gains in both vocabulary knowledge and literacy skills. These findings underscore the possibility of supporting both beginning and experienced teachers in using authentic literacy activities to prepare children for literacy learning, while maintaining their service to a wide range of other developmental issues. They also call into question the prevailing trend to abandon such classroom practices in favor of a skills-centered approach to curriculum.

Introduction

In The Child and the Curriculum, Dewey (1902/1990) writes of the tension between psychology and subject matter in the early grades:

"Discipline" is the watchword of those who magnify the course of study;
"interest" that of those who blazon the "Child" upon their banner. (p. 188)

In reading education, the tension between a child-centered vision of learning and a subject-matter based one has long been represented as authentic vs. skills-based instruction. In actual practice, a skills approach dominated early reading curricula in the first and second grades throughout most of the last century, though the well-known "great debate" flourished as to exactly what skills should be emphasized (Chall, 1968; Sadoksi, 2004; Stahl, 1998). A "reading readiness" curriculum, including work on shapes, fine motor
skills, and concepts like sequence, dominated the kindergarten year well into the 1970s, when direct instruction in skills became more common. The late 1980s and 1990s witnessed the rise of the “reading wars” between proponents of phonics and whole language approaches (Stahl). In recent years, the reading wars have given way to a “balanced” approach (Sadolski), where authentic practices are comingleing with skills-based ones. “Balanced literacy” is a popular idea with many teachers and teacher educators, who tout its mix of affective and cognitive learning opportunities. Growing support for it, however, has not countered several other trends in early literacy to be addressed in this article—trends that are threatening the future of authentic literacy activities in prefirst classrooms.

First is the press for accountability. In a shift from decades of practice, the question of what, how, and when children learn to read is no longer the exclusive domain of universities, teacher education programs, or local school districts. Increasingly, it is the privy of federal agencies, political appointees, and for-profit entities. Under their combined influence, accountability in early literacy learning means something new in early childhood education: standardized tests or assessments of literacy subskills, often in conjunction with state and federal standards that target specific goals. A prime example of an accountability-driven early literacy endeavor is the Reading First Initiative (Title I, Part B) of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the national education legislation passed in 2001 (www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/finalrule/2002-4/1202a.html). States and school districts that receive Reading First funding must teach and then test five literacy subskills in the primary grades: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Yell & Drasgow, 2005). In addition to funding, other “high stakes” outcomes associated with mandated testing include pupil retention and school rankings.

Despite the widespread controversy surrounding the sudden rise in testing young children, it should be noted that the trend is not limited to children in kindergarten and the primary grades. Meisels (2006) reports that the “most extensive use of high-stakes testing has taken place in Head Start” (p. 2), the well-known intervention program for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds.

The second concern of early childhood educators around early literacy instruction is the “push down” of formal reading instruction—in its historical sense of decoding and encoding—from first grade to kindergarten, from prekindergarten to the nursery classroom. Content usually incorporates highly formalized instruction in phonemic awareness and activities related to letter recognition, reproduction, and word study. Critics claim that in order to cover test content, teachers must make inappropriate demands on young and very young children, including too much inactivity required by direct instruction and premature expectations around symbolic and metacognitive thinking. Just as significant is that time spent on these academic subskills means a concomitant decrease in traditional curricula around play, story, and movement that spur oral language development and allow for teacher guidance in language (Dickinson, 2002; Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Early childhood educators’ third and perhaps greatest concern is the move away from free-ranging oral language activities. More than any other, this shift is likely to have prolonged impact on early literacy development, and, by extension, on all later academic achievement (Biemiller, 2006; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Scarborough, 2002; Snow, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Watson, 2002). Without a strong oral language base, young children are less likely to meet success in early reading. They are also likely to have difficulty in making a timely leap from speech to writing, and thus fail to reap the reciprocal benefits of writing on reading proficiency. Clearly, the implications of an anemic oral language program in prefirst classrooms affect all young children’s experiences. Yet, research suggests that children who enter first grade with the language habits and
dispositions reflective of middle class usage and child rearing practices can still perform adequately or better (Snow, Tabor, & Dickinson, 2001). The stakes are far greater for children who depend on very early schooling to prepare them to meet the language expectations of the first and second grade curriculum (Strickland, 2000).

One persistent response to the oral language disparity between middle-class children and their peers from lower socioeconomic groups has been a call for changes in parenting norms (Barbarin, 2002). This proposal has obvious practical, and, to some degree, ethical limitations. The good news is that early childhood programs have long played a key role in bridging the gap between home and school. The bad news is that given the very real limitations of time, resources, and district demands, many early childhood educators must decide, if they are given the chance at all, between the long-term advantages of a holistic oral language approach to early literacy and a curriculum that emphasizes test content. A Hobbesian choice? Or a false dichotomy?

The Problem

Influential curriculum guides for early childhood curriculum, including Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 1999), describe language-rich, authentic activities in the service of literacy development, such as restaurant or firehouse “centers,” and writing activities like “postman” or snack sign-up. While these activities meet the usual criteria for authentic learning experiences, the early childhood community has resisted assessing their educational efficacy through the type of standardized testing or formal assessments called for in today’s climate of accountability (Meisels, 2006). For one thing, it is generally assumed that, unlike their skills-based counterparts, the impact of these activities is not easily tested. However, without some standard measure of efficacy, authentic curricula in today’s educational climate are left vulnerable to the increasingly prevalent charge that they fail to advance young children’s early literacy. Does this mean that the press for accountability spells the veritable end of authentic literacy practices in the early childhood classroom? As noted, this presents a theoretical and professional conflict around best practice that is relevant to all young children (and to those who would prepare their teachers). But, a skills-dominant curriculum, lacking in rich and free-ranging oral language opportunities and play with text, poses more serious harm to young children already on the margins of school preparedness by virtue of their inexperience with middle-class language experiences. These include children from low-income families, those whose home language is not Standard English, and those whose families are disengaged from school expectations.

This dilemma leads us to the following questions and the focus of our study: What happens if we take a second look at standardized testing and authentic literacy experiences? What might we learn from standardized measurements about the role play-based, language-rich curricula play in early literacy development? In other words, can the case be made that various authentic literacy activities do not “measure up” before they are investigated?

The Study

This article reports on a study of the impact of an acclaimed authentic early literacy activity, Vivian Paley’s (1981) “storytelling curriculum,” on prekindergarten and kindergarten children’s early language and literacy development over the course of the school year. Participants in the study included, but were not limited to, low-income and English-language
learners, who are typically marginalized by oral language and text-related expectations of the standard early literacy curriculum. After conducting a review of the relevant research, we accepted Meisel's (2006) claim that "accountability calls for information about whether or not something happened" (p. 17). Given the high ratio of teacher–child interactions around language and text inherent in Paley's storytelling curriculum (described below) analogous to that found in middle-class homes, we hypothesized that regular participation might have a positive impact on participants' vocabulary and knowledge of beginning skills—two essential components of an early literacy skill set. We looked to well-known and commonly used assessments, designed to measure the degree to which individual children possess these particular attributes (Gullo, 2006). We asked: How do prekindergarten and kindergarten age children, who participate in the storytelling curriculum over the course of the school year, perform on pre- and postmeasures of the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), and Whitehurst's Get Ready to Read! (GRTR!) as compared to those young children in the same grade with similar backgrounds and in the same or similar school settings who did not participate in the storytelling curriculum? Mindful of the many negative aspects associated with testing of young children, we sought to eliminate or reduce these by, first, allowing the children time to be comfortable with the researchers through repeated visits to the classroom prior to assessment, and, second, allowing the children to decide against participation in both pre- and posttesting.

Significance

The significance of this study lies in its merger of several concerns facing the early childhood community today: the push for accountability regarding young children's early literacy learning; the push down of academic expectations into the prefirst grades; the push in of culturally biased expectations around oral language and literacy experiences; and, finally, the push out of curriculum that focuses on broader developmental issues. The "uses of storytelling in the classroom" (Paley, 1990) embrace inclusive, play-based, holistic reliance on story in the service of psychosocial development, which has been linked to literacy and narrative development (Cooper, 2005; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Nicolopoulos, 1996, 1997). The storytelling curriculum's impact on young children's oral language and literacy subskill development has not been assessed previously, however. An underlying question for this article is whether it "measures up" as a prototype for authentic literacy activities that serve both development and academic ends for all children.

Oral Language Development

The body of literature on young children's oral language development is large and beyond the scope of this article. We have, therefore, limited our review to the characteristics of oral language development at school entry that is considered relevant to short- and long-term literacy learning. A separate section is provided on the storytelling curriculum.

A salient thread throughout the research is that young children's early literacy success, and thus their long-term profiles, is most predicated on their oral language characteristics at school entry when they are between 5 and 6 years old. More notably, successful characteristics are highly correlated with middle-class (especially White and professional) usage, as well as competencies derived from middle-class child rearing practices around language in the first 5 years of life (Snow et al., 2001). Vocabulary development is one example. Hart and Ristley (1995, 2003) find that by their third birthday middle-class
children "have heard 30 million more words than underprivileged children." This fact alone advances middle-class children's receptive and expressive vocabularies, linguistic ability, reflective reasoning, abstract thinking, and overall background knowledge in ways privileged by school expectations. Similarly, Snow and Dickinson (1991) write that middle-class children are also habituated from infancy into the understanding and use of decontextualized language. The Early Childhood Learning Study (ECLS) (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) reports that young White children—significantly overrepresented among the middle class—regularly outperform their African American peers—disproportionately underrepresented—on measures of early reading subskills, including beginning sounds, ending sounds, and letter recognition.

Middle-class parents also advantage their prefirst children by directing their attention to text and print in ways that cultivate comprehension skills. For example, story-related talk often includes such observations as, "The third little pig was the smart one, wasn't he?" Understanding the reciprocity between print and talk is assisted through regular informal experiences (such as responding to environmental print, learning letters, and drawing) that lead to writing. Finally, Heath's (1983) seminal study of parent-child talk in different racial and socioeconomic communities finds that middle-class parents further advantage their preschool children educationally through a style of verbal communication that prefigures not only the teacher's forthcoming question-and-answer expectations, but orients their children towards the overall demands of texts as related to school tasks.

Early childhood advocacy organizations, in particular the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), have long emphasized authentic, or "naturalistic" (Gronlund, 2006), oral language practices between teachers and children. NAEYC's highly influential program of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1998) recommends the following:

Teachers encourage children's developing language and communication skills by talking with them throughout the day, speaking clearly and listening to their responses, and providing opportunities for them to talk to each other.

(p. 127)

Further recommendations include engaging individual children and groups in conversation about real experiences. Watson (2002) writes that certain forms of talk, such as metalinguage and abstraction, are more relevant in literate cultures as a result of literate influences, and that children's proficiency in them leads to a bidirectional learning curve wherein the more competent they are in and about the language of texts, the more texts they can read, and competency increases. When applied to early schooling, Cochran-Smith (1984) and others report that "read-alouds" are instrumental in this process. Parallel to and woven throughout language experience, Bredekamp and Copple also advocate embedding print and writing opportunities in authentic activities, including:

learning particular names and letter-sounds combinations and recognizing words that are meaningful to them (such as their names, names of friends, phrases like "I love you," and commonly seen functional words like exit).

(p. 131)

The historical bias towards authentic literacy activities in prefirst early childhood education reverberated in the whole language movement of the 1980s and 1990s (see Goodman, 1986; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). The difference is that, whereas the former
was long associated with the prereading phase, the latter is seen as reading and writing instruction in the primary grades and throughout elementary school. Stahl and Miller's (1989) review of the literature on whole language, however, found its greater value in a "readiness" perspective, including kindergarten, rather than a beginning reading and writing one.

Teachers are seen to play different roles in fostering language development. Dickinson and Sprague (2002) suggest that, although teachers may become surrogate mentors of language and continue to foster young children's oral language development away from home, they may possibly underutilize their potential impact on language development when engaged in direct instruction. They report that teachers engage more in intentional, efficacious conversations and more talk about past and present events during free play than in large group times focused on specific skills. Others (Stahl & Miller, 1989; Watson, 2002) caution that an emphasis on oral language development without a concomitant emphasis on features of print will not advance emerging literacy in the classroom.

The Storytelling Curriculum

Paley introduced the storytelling curriculum in Wally's Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten (1981) without reference to its usefulness to oral language development or literacy subskills. For Paley, its main purpose then, and in all recent iterations, is to offer young children an opportunity to tell their classmates "what they are thinking about" (p. 66). Its tools are what Paley refers to as storytelling and story acting, also referred to by Cooper (1993, 2005) as dictation and dramatization. In brief, though the storytelling curriculum varies somewhat from classroom to classroom and teacher to teacher, it has two basic components. The first is the dictated story, in which the teacher—or scribe—is an active participant, freely asking questions that help clarify the child's intention ("Is this part a dream or did the little boy wake up? Should I write that?"). Sometimes, she offers assistance ("Are you thinking of the 4th of July?"). and, in a variation on Paley's original plan (Cooper, 2005), sometimes instruction ("Look here, a th word, like we talked about in the mini-lesson today"). Story content is almost always, if not exclusively, determined by the child. The second component is the dramatization of the story by the author and his or her chosen classmates. In this part, the teacher acts as director, while the remaining children constitute the audience. Again, the teacher reserves the right to interrupt, as she talks with the author and actors about staging, improvising dialogue, and so on. As a result, the ensuing drama resembles rehearsal more than opening night.

Guidelines for implementation can be derived from Paley (1981; 1992, 1997, 2004). Cooper (1993, 2005) offers a methodological overview based on extensive professional development with teachers in the Houston area and colleagues in the School Literacy and Culture Project in the Rice University Center for Education. One feature of the storytelling curriculum that is especially relevant to the study is its inclusion of second-language learners in classrooms where all instruction is conducted in English. Teachers cooperate on a variety of methods, from key vocabulary and peer assistance to small objects and "show me," to help the child see his or her story written down and acted out, however limited his or her English proficiency. (See Figure 1 for a methodological overview.)

Though dictation and dramatization activities were not new to early childhood education when Paley (1981) wrote Wally's Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten, she gets credit for bundling them into a unified and regular focus of classroom life (Cooper, 2005). The storytelling curriculum fits Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino's (2003) definition of an "authentic learning" opportunity in that it allows participants to "meaningfully
Methodological Overview of Paley's Storytelling Curriculum

Storytelling/Dictation

Where children sit The child/author should sit to the left of 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 one home and the teacher has one to read to the class and later put in the child's file or portfolio or Class Book of Stories.

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.)

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 teacher and child on track as it calls attention to the words being written.

A hesitant storyteller 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 grammar and punctuation minilessons can also be easily inserted. ("Where should I put the quotation marks?")

Figure 1. Methodological overview of Paley's storytelling curriculum.
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 a child desires to.

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 that the author will play the lead, though this 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-gobbly day?—I love it!”)

Story Acting/Dramatization

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

Gather the class in a semicircle  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 ask 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 her 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 cast. Dramatization of a favorite book can occur as many as five to a dozen times before the children want to move on.

Figure 1. (Continued).

construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems that are relevant and interesting." To be clear, "real-world problems" in the course of very young children's storytelling are mostly psychosocial in nature (e.g., sibling rivalry) and, though often borrowed from real life (e.g., good guys vs. bad guys) are usually filtered through the imagination. As such, it is ideally suited to children's explorations in language, from the use of new vocabulary, to moving in and out of tense and time frames, to the articulation of decontextualized and abstract thought, exemplary of what Snow et al. (2001) refer to as "extended discourse" in which all new readers and writers must become proficient. (See Figure 2 for sample stories and a sample excerpt from transcript.) From this perspective, the ability to tell coherent stories is a by-product of both scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) and function. For teachers, the storytelling curriculum provides a model through which they can model narrative discourse and create opportunities for children to try their hand at it.

Researchers have investigated the storytelling curriculum from a variety of psychosocial angles (Cooper, 1993; Dyson, 1997; Hurwitz, 2001; Katch, 2001, 2003; Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1998; Sapon-Shevin et al., 1998; Wiltz & Fein, 1996). Research on its direct relationship to literacy development includes a focus on narrative development (McNamee, McLane, Cooper, & Kerwin, 1985; Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997). Wolff (1993) theorizes that, as described by Paley, telling and acting out stories fosters the child's ability to move beyond "here-and-now" language to "there-and-then," an essential task of narrative development and comprehension. In addition, Cooper (1993, 2005), Dyson (2002), Dyson and Genishi (1993), and Mason and Sinha (1993) argue that the storytelling curriculum offers informal-but-deep support for young children's acquisition of secondary literacy subskills, including symbol making, and concepts about print. Again, to date, no study has investigated the impact of the storytelling curriculum on young children's pre- and postperformance on standardized and formal assessments of oral language development and literacy subskills.

Method

The study was designed to compare control (3) and treatment (3) public school classrooms of same-grade children in the same school district or school building, representing two school districts. All teachers were expected to follow the school-mandated literacy curriculum.

Research Team

All members of the research team were at the time of the study closely associated with the School Literacy and Culture Project in the Rice University Center for Education. All have
Pretest story from Ramon, ELL prekindergarten male

October 14, 2004


The End

Posttest story from Ramon, ELL prekindergarten male

April 27, 2005

The Running Big Bad Wolf

A big bad wolf killed all the people. He ate them. He went to the park and ate the fish. The shark was in the water. The shark ate the bad wolf. The shark was playing with him friends. They drink water. The alligator was in the water, too. They were fighting. The alligator won. He went to drink from the water fountain. He went to the park doing exercise. The daddy at the water fountain said, “Stop fighting.”

The End

Sample transcript of teacher (J)/child (G) interactions during story telling/dictation

Giovanni’s Story

October 16, 2005

J: “Stand over here ‘cause I want to be close by you. All right Mr. Giovanni. Let’s put your name G – I – O – Vanni. This is Giovanni’s sixth story! You ready? Do you have a good idea for your story? What’s it going to be about?”

G: “A silly wolf.”

J: “A silly wolf-I can’t wait to hear it!”

G: “And he was flying!”

J: “He is silly! He had wings?”

G: “Yeah, he made it out of paper.”

J: “Oh, I cannot wait to hear this story...so ‘A silly wolf was flying.’ Is that how you want to start it?”

G: (nods)

J: (Echoes & writes) “Tell me again how he did that.”

G: “He made his wings out of paper.”

Figure 2. Sample pre- and poststories and sample transcript.
J: (E&W) (Pause)

G: "He didn’t know how to blow houses down because all of them were made out of bricks."

J: "Ah, OK." (E&W)

G: "He picked on... the chicken... he, he, he... picked on the wolf and he went like, ‘OW!’"

J: "He picked on him or he pecked on him? Which word?"

G: "Pecked on him."

J: "He pecked." (Echoes as she writes) "The chicken, he pecked—that’s a good word"— goes back to writing "he pecked on the wolf and he said—What?"

G: "He said, 'Yow!'"

J: "Yowch!" (Chuckles) "OK... So that poor wolf, the poor silly, flying wolf got pecked by a chicken, huh?" (Chuckles) "And he said, 'Yowch!'" (Pause)

G: "A dog came and bit him."

J: "He’s having a very bad day." (E&W) "A dog came and bit him."

G: "He said nothing."

J: "He said nothing? He was just quiet about that, huh? Do you want me to write ‘He said nothing?’"

G: (Nods)

J: (E&W)

G: "And then a bear came."

J: "Oh no, I notice your animals are getting bigger and bigger—first one was little, then a middle-sized animal, now he’s gonna get this bear." (Prepares to write.) "Did you say a big bear or just a bear?"

G: "A big bear."

J: "Then a big bear—"

G: "A big, big huge BEAR!"

J: (Chuckles at his enthusiasm) "A big, huge bear came." (E&W)

G: "Then he knocked him on the head."

J: (Chuckles again) "He knocked him on the head." (E&W) "Then what?"

G: "He stilled."

J: "He stilled? You mean he was frozen like that?"

G: "He is frozen and he can still move."

Figure 2. (Continued).
J: “He can still move?”

G: “Uh-huh. He was frozen and…”

J: “He was knocked on the head and that made him like frozen, like that?” (Dramatizes)

G: “Uh-huh. And then someone put water on him and the ice came off him.”

J: “Oh! So he was still—he was frozen.” (Writing) “And then what happened? Someone did what?”

G: (Unintelligible)

J: “Wait a minute, let’s go back to the frozen part.” (Rereads) “He was still, he was frozen. You said something about someone poured water…”

G: “They poured water on the ice and then it, he, he, the water got off him.”

J: (Writing) “So, they poured water on the ice…”

G: “Then it got off the wolf.”

J: (E&W) “Can I ask you a question real quick? Who is they? Who poured the water?”

G: “Jaylen.”

J: “Jaylen.” (Laughs, writes “Jaylen poured water on the ice.”)

G: “I want to make a long story!”

J: “It’s getting pretty long! OK, so now your wolf is not frozen any more, so then what did he do—the flying silly wolf?”

G: (Pause)

J: “He’s not frozen any more so he can do whatever he wants.”

G: “The bear put him on a jelly bean.”

J: “On a jelly bean? So now I’ve got a wolf sitting on a jelly bean? Is this true?” (Laughs) “OK.” (Rereads the last two sentences quickly) “The wolf got on…”

G: “The title is ‘The Wolf.’”

J: “The title is ‘The Wolf?’ That’s right, because it’s all about a wolf. OK, so the wolf got on… what color were the jelly beans?”

G: “Yellow.”

J: “OK, can I put that in your story? The wolf got on the yellow jelly bean.”

G: (Nods)

J: (E&W) “Then what happened?”

G: “He ate it.”

J: (E&W) “Did he like jelly beans?”

Figure 2. (Continued).
G: (Nods)
J: "Did you want me to write that—'He liked jelly beans'-or just skip it?"
G: (With enthusiasm) "Write it!"
J: (E&W) "Oh, I wish I had an artist who could draw a picture of a flying wolf who likes jelly beans...All right." (Rereads last sentence)
G: "Then there was a girl who ate the whole wolf."
J: "A girl—like a people girl?"
G: (Nods)
J: (E&W) "Then there was a girl...what did she look like?"
G: "She looked like an Indian 'cause she was brown."
J: "Should I put that in?" (E&W) "Then there was a girl. She looked like an Indian."
(Interruptation from child saying they found a cocoon. J says, "Good for you!" then returns to the story.)
J: "She looked like an Indian because she was brown. (Pause) An Indian from India or a native American?"
G: "From Asia."
J: "Should we put 'She was from Asia?'"
G: (Nods)
J: (E&W) "All right." (Rereads last two sentences. "She looked like an Indian because she was brown. She was from Asia.") "Now tell me again what this girl did."
G: "She ate the wolf."
J: "OK. She ate the wolf."
G: "And then a boy came and a bear. They looked the same!"
J: (Distracted by another child) "And then a boy came."
G: "And then a bear."
J: (E&W)
G: "And they looked the same!"
J: "The boy and the bear looked just the same?" (E&W)
G: "It's getting closer!"
J: "Yes, you've about got your whole page here." (Rereads 'And then a boy came and then a bear. They looked the same.') What did they do?"
G: "They went to a person."

Figure 2. (Continued).
J: “Who?”
G: “They went to an artist.”
J: “Can I write that? That’s a good word.” (E&W) “OK, and what did they do when they found the artist?”
G: “They said, ‘Hello,’ and then they went back”.
J: (Writes with no echo) “What did the artist do?”
G: “He was painting ... he was painting a flying wolf that likes jelly beans.”
J: “They said hello and then they went back. Should I write what the artist was doing?”
G: (Agrees)
J: “So how should I say it?”
G: “The artist was writing a flying wolf that likes jelly beans.”
J: (Chuckles) “OK, was he writing or painting?”
G: “Painting.”
J: “OK, The artist was painting a flying wolf... we’re at the end.”
G: “We’re almost there so we can get a long story.”
J: “It’s long, but you’ve got to leave me some space because we’ve got a lot of friends in this story.” (Finishes echoing and writing) “That liked jelly beans.”
G: “It’s almost getting closer.”
J: “It’s very close ’cause we have to have room to write here. Shall I read it to you first, then we’ll pick whose gonna be in it? ‘The Wolf. A silly wolf was flying. He made his wings out of paper. He didn’t know how to blow houses down because all of them were made of brick. The chicken, he pecked on the wolf and he said, ‘Yeowch!’ The dog came and bit him. He said nothing. Then a big, huge, huge bear came and he knocked him—oh, I skipped a word—he knocked HIM on the head. He was still. He was frozen. Jaylen poured water on the ice and it got off of him. The wolf got on a yellow jelly bean. He ate it. He liked jelly beans! Then there was a girl. She looked like an Indian because she was brown. She was from Asia. She ate the wolf. Then a boy came and then a bear. They looked the same. They went to an artist and they said hello and then they went back. The artist was painting a flying wolf that liked jelly beans.’ That’s awesome. So who’s gonna be the silly (laughing) flying wolf?”
G: “Julius.”
J: “Of course he is.” (Julius is G’s good friend and he had also walked up to the table during the last few sentences of the story.)
G: “Jerald’s gonna be the chicken.”
J: “I thought Toby was gonna be it, but that’s a good pick. Jerald needs to be in this story.”
   (Another child. “Chicken? Chicken is a funny name.”)
J: “This class loves that word!” (Brief aside as J explains to researcher that Toby started that. “When he first came to pre—K he liked to call people ‘Chicken Head.’ We asked him not to call people animal names, so then, in order to get the name chicken in he would say something like ‘chicken pot pie’ and it’s the way he says it that everybody just roars, so now chicken’s a funny word.”)
J: “All right, we’ve got a chicken here. Who’s gonna be the huge, huge bear?”
J: “Oh we skipped somebody. We need a dog.”
G: (Answers previous question) “Allejandro.”
J: “We need a dog.”
G: “That’s gonna be Ms. Mandelli.” [The student teacher.]
J: “Ms. Mandelli. She’ll do a good job. And you said Alejandro will be the bear?”
G: “Uh-hum.”
J: “And Jaylen—who’s gonna be Jaylen? Jaylen could be his own self.”
G: “Toby. And Julius is going to be the chicken.”
J: “No, you said Jerald, Julius is going to be the flying wolf.”
   (Julius: “I can be the chicken and the flying wolf too.”)
J: “No, you have to just be one. OK, we need a girl—an Indian girl from Asia.”
G: “Shairah.”
J: “And we need a boy.”
G: “That’s gonna be Alexia.”
J: “Alexia” (a girl) “is going to be a boy? And I need an artist—is that going to be you? Who’s gonna be the artist?” (Pause) “You’re not in the story, do you want to be in it?”
G: “I want to be the artist.”
J: “OK, I didn’t want you to forget yourself. OK, we’re done.”
G: “Now it’s time to clean up.”

Giovanni’s story

The Wolf

“A silly wolf was flying. He made his wings out of paper. He didn’t know how to blow houses down because all of them were made of brick. The chicken, he pecked on the wolf and he said, “Yeowch!” The dog came and bit him. He said nothing. Then a big, huge, huge bear came and he knocked him. He knocked HIM on the head. He was still.

Figure 2. (Continued).
considerable experience in both implementing Paley’s storytelling curriculum and conducting related professional development. Cooper (1993, 2005) has written previously about it. Capo and Mathes acted as mentors to the three treatment classroom teachers around the storytelling curriculum. After several visits to each classroom to get acquainted with the children so as to make participation in the study easier, they also conducted the pretesting and later the posttesting. Capo and two other researchers collected data on teacher–child interactions as stories were dictated and acted out. This latter data was not analyzed for this study.

Classroom Selection

The study took place in two public prekindergarten, kindergarten, and mixed-aged classrooms in lower-and mixed-income communities in southeast Texas. Treatment and control classrooms were grouped as pairs with matching grades, community and family demographics, and school-mandated curriculum. Approximately 75% of the study children qualified for free or reduced lunch. Roughly half of the participants, including all of the prekindergarten classrooms and the treatment kindergarten classroom, were designated as English Language Learners (ELL). Although qualifications for ELL designation varies from district to district and even school to school, all of the children had been evaluated by school personnel as competent enough in English to participate in the study and perform reliably on the selected instruments. All classroom instruction took place in English. Both the kindergarten and mixed-age treatment and control classrooms were in the same elementary school building. Because one of the prekindergarten treatment classes was the only one in the building with ELL students, district administrators identified a class in another elementary school that matched the treatment school in ethnic makeup and family backgrounds.

Treatment Classroom Teachers

Each treatment classroom teacher had participated previously in a professional development program conducted by the research team on Paley’s storytelling curriculum. Each had implemented it for at least 1 year prior to the study, and had served as a mentor to new residents in the program. Dictation and dramatization of children’s stories, the core of the curriculum, as well as ongoing dramatization of quality children’s literature, took place routinely in each of these teacher’s classroom at least four times per week. In the study year, each treatment teacher taped the storytelling process. The storytelling curriculum was considered an addition to each school’s recommended literacy curriculum.
Control Classroom Teachers

The control classroom teachers were randomly assigned to the study by virtue of the factors mentioned above. None of the control teachers had received professional development in the storytelling curriculum, though all had attended an information session on the study. (See Figure 3 for an overview of descriptive data.)

Subject Participation

Approximately 92% of 124 children in both control and treatment classrooms returned permission slips to participate in pre- and posttesting. Regardless of permission to participate, all children received a picture book for returning the permission form. All teachers received a box of books to supplement their classroom library. Every effort was made to obtain pre- and posttest measures on each eligible child, though children were allowed to refuse to participate at any point, and several did. Some scores could not be obtained due to continuing absences, families moving away, and scheduling conflicts. In the end, pre- and postscores were obtained from 95 children.

District permissions, identification of control classrooms, and parental permission were obtained by early November, when pretesting began. Posttesting began in mid-April, beginning with the classrooms that were tested first during the pretesting sessions, allowing for approximately 4.4 months from pretest to posttest for all subjects.

Treatment

Although all children in the classroom participated in the dictation and dramatization activities, only those children with parental permission were followed for the study. Participating teachers each took dictation and then dramatized children’s stories 4 days a week. Stories from quality children’s picture books or other forms of literature were acted out by small groups of children on the 5th day. The dictation process generally required 10 to 15 minutes of one-on-one teacher/child interaction per story. Two classrooms set the goal of recording and acting out two children’s stories each day, while the third teacher chose to do only one. Neither is an unusual schedule in storytelling classrooms (Cooper, 2005), though Paley strongly states a preference for greater frequency (personal correspondence). In each of the classrooms, teachers took dictation at a classroom table in full view of the other children in the class. Teachers sat directly beside the participating child, positioning the paper so that the child could clearly see what was being written down. Teachers echoed each storyteller’s dictated words as they scribed to ensure that the children’s words had been captured exactly as intended or modified, if necessary. Teachers also paused to ask both clarifying and extension questions. Stories were limited to one page in length due to time constraints. At the story’s close, the author chose which classmates would represent given characters in the forthcoming drama. All dramatizations took place the same day in which the stories were dictated. Children were asked to imagine props and nonessential characters. Teachers helped extend the children’s dramas early in the year by asking prompting questions or having the audience suggest possible ways to act out a given part. As the year continued, children took over greater control of the director’s role in their own dramatizations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Pre–K Treatment</th>
<th>Pre–K Control</th>
<th>Kindergarten Treatment</th>
<th>Kindergarten Control</th>
<th>Mixed-age (3–5) Treatment</th>
<th>Mixed-age (3–5) Control</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10+ years teaching; prior professional development in storytelling curriculum</td>
<td>10+ years teaching; no prior association with storytelling curriculum</td>
<td>10+ years teaching; prior professional development in storytelling curriculum</td>
<td>5+ years teaching; no prior association with storytelling curriculum</td>
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<td>full-time assistant</td>
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<td>assistant for pull-out programs full day</td>
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<tr>
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<td>½ day (a.m. &amp; p.m.)</td>
<td>full day</td>
<td>full day</td>
<td>full day mixed age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
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<td>20–22</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom demographics</td>
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<td>ELL dominant; wide variety of cultures; similar SES/community</td>
<td>1/3 ELL, wide variety of cultures; similar SES/community</td>
<td>1/3 ELL, wide variety of cultures; similar SES/community</td>
<td>English only; variety of cultures; disperse SES/communities</td>
<td>English only; variety of culture; disperse SES/communities</td>
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<td>Children's previous experience with storytelling curriculum</td>
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<td>none</td>
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<td>some</td>
<td>some of the older children</td>
<td>none</td>
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<td>none</td>
<td>1 per day; 5 days a week; 1 dramatization of children's book</td>
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<td>PPVT; EVT; GRTR!</td>
<td>PPVT; EVT; GRTR!</td>
<td>PPVT; EVT; GRTR!</td>
<td>PPVT; EVT; GRTR!</td>
<td>PPVT; EVT; GRTR!</td>
</tr>
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<td>district test of narrative &amp; writing</td>
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</table>

Figure 3. Data sources.
Assessments

The research team chose commonly accepted and widely used measures of children's oral language and early literacy knowledge. The prekindergarten children were given the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT) and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), as well as Whitehurst’s Get Ready to Read! (GRTR!) screening tool for kindergarten readiness. The kindergarten children were given only the EVT and the PPVT.

Findings

A priori it was determined that subjects would need to have valid pre- and posttest scores on both the PPVT and the EVT to be included in the analysis, as the basic measure of analysis is change from pre- to posttest score. Through this criterion, a basic data set was established, since these two measures were administered to all subjects. The basic data set included 58 (32 pre-K/26 K) treatment subjects and 37 (16 pre-K/21 K) controls.

As indicated in Figure 4, the important result is that the changes in both the PPVT and GRTR! tests were significantly greater for the children in treatment classrooms (p < .05, one-tailed). Change in each test was defined as the postscore minus the prescore for each child. An independent samples t-test (SPSS, Chicago, IL, Version 12.0, 2003) was used to evaluate the null hypotheses that there was no difference between the treatment and control classrooms in any of the change scores (PPVT, GRTR!, and EVT) versus the hypothesis that the treatment groups improved more. Homogeneity of variance was satisfied for all comparisons (p > .5).

Children in the treatment classrooms improved an average of 4.5 points (+ 1.0 sem) on the PPVT, while children in the control classrooms improved only an average of 0.7 points (+ 1.3 sem). This difference is significant (t90 = 2.23, p = 0.013, 1-tailed) and the

![Figure 4. Change in test scores.](image)
The effect size of this difference is 0.49, which is considered to be a moderate effect and to be educationally significant.

Children in the treatment classrooms improved an average of 4.0 points (+ 0.7 sem) on the GRTR!, while children in the control classrooms improved only an average of 1.7 points (+ 1.1 sem). This difference is significant (t(41) = 1.8, p = 0.038, 1-tailed) and the effect size of this difference is 0.60, which is considered to be between a moderate and large effect and to be educationally significant.

There was no significant difference between children in the treatment and control classrooms in their change on the EVT (t(90) = 0.95, p = 0.175, 1-tailed), though the difference was in the predicted direction with treatment classrooms showing slightly greater improvement (4.5 + 1.1) than control classrooms (2.9 + 1.3). Standard power analysis (Cohen, 1988) suggests that significantly greater improvement after treatment could be demonstrated (α = .05, β = .2) with 278 children in each group or about six times the effort herein accomplished.

Figure 4 shows the changes in each of the three tests in both treatment and control classrooms. Positive changes indicate that the score improved. To summarize the significant results, the PPVT and GRTR test scores improved more in the treatment classrooms.

Figure 5 shows the average pre- and posttest scores for the PPVT and for the GRTR! tests in the treatment and control classrooms. None of these means are different between the treatment and control classrooms (p > .13 for the pretests and p > .65 for the posttests, respectively). The trend in the treatment classrooms being more steeply upward was evaluated with the change scores described above. Significance in the individual change scores (Figure 4) and not in the group means (in Figure 5) indicates that each individual needs to be their own control (by comparing pre- versus posttest scores) in order to detect the effect of the treatment in this sample. Such subject-to-subject variance within each group is expected.

Discussion

In her most recent book, A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play (2005), Paley writes that, if academic success is the goal, the early childhood community cannot afford to dispense with a play-based curriculum. Like many advocates (Pelligrini & Galda, 1993)

![Graph](image-url)
of a traditional, play-based early childhood curriculum in the kindergarten and below, Paley argues that the best preparation for later academic success, from symbolic thinking to comprehension to problem solving, is the development of the imagination through play.

This study does not reject or attempt to measure the storytelling curriculum’s impact on the young child’s imagination or other developmental goals. It was designed to ask if it meets more standardized goals, specifically vocabulary (PPVT and EVT) and reading readiness (GRTR!). Findings reveal that both English Language Learners and English-only speakers who participated in the storytelling curriculum made significant gains in vocabulary knowledge, as measured by the PPVT. They further suggest participation also significantly impacted prekindergarten children’s performance on the GRTR! Though in the predicted direction, flat scores on the EVT for both groups are hypothesized to be related to the children’s English limitations, despite the districts’ appraisal of their abilities. Researchers felt that in contrast to the PPVT and GRTR!, the demand for expressive language on the EVT exceeded many of the children’s expertise or comfort level at that time.

The importance of the findings related to the PPVT and GRTR! is immediate and significant for teachers and teacher educators interested in Paley’s storytelling curriculum. The findings extend the storytelling curriculum’s educational efficacy beyond its established psychosocial and narrative value to specific academic gains increasingly necessary to justify implementation. The significance is amplified by the fact that its participants were considered greatly at risk for entering first grade without sufficient language and literacy skills, including lower income, nonstandard English speakers, English Language Learners, and other children whose home life cannot guarantee the free-ranging oral language experiences around the creation and exploration of language and text that are imitative of middle-class homes and associated with early literacy success in school. The findings should also be of great interest to teachers, teacher educators, and advocates of authentic early literacy curricula in general.

In recent years, the limited empirical evidence demonstrating the academic relevance of such practices in the classroom has left teacher educators, teachers, and other school district personnel unprepared to defend their selection of them. First, looking beyond the storytelling curriculum, the findings underscore the gains to be had in preserving the early childhood tradition of authentic early literacy curricula, and call into question the prevailing trend to abandon such free-ranging oral language curricula in favor of a skills-centered approach to early literacy. Working backwards from the outcomes, the findings ultimately lead to the question that most concerns teacher educators and teachers: What notable aspects of the storytelling curriculum account for the children’s progress in language development and skill knowledge? That is, what happens inside the curriculum to support early literacy success in these areas? Which aspects of the storytelling curriculum might be most appropriate to integrate into the literacy curriculum of teacher education?

Transcript analysis and story content suggest four aspects of storytelling curriculum are plausibly responsible for its success, which may have application to other authentic literacy curricula. The first is the way in which the storytelling curriculum marries language experimentation and exploration to young children’s living and learning agendas. Dictation and dramatization, which depend on language and little else, make it possible for them to share what happened last night, to satisfy their curiosity about the squiggles on the paper, or to act like superheroes on stage with their friends. Hence, their motivation to become storytellers—language users—increases automatically. In addition, it makes sense that as children get more experience with the process and more exposure to the possibilities of language to convey their ideas more accurately, their vocabulary increases and
language use matures, as does their knowledge of print. A glance at the sample set of sto-
tories from ELL prekindergarten Ramon (Figure 2) reveals an over 200% increase in the
sheer number of words in his story from the beginning of the study to the end. Even more
telling is his growth in sentence construction and semantics.

outside. The End.”

April 27, 2005. “The Running Big Bad Wolf A big bad wolf killed all the
people. He ate them. He went to the park and ate the fish. The shark was in the
water. The shark ate the bad-wolf. The shark was playing with him friends. They
drink water. The alligator was in the water, too. They were fighting. The alli-
gator won. He went to drink from the water fountain. He went to the park doing
exercise. The daddy at the water fountain said, ‘Stop fighting.’ The End.”

The second factor in the storytelling curriculum’s success appears to be the way in
which language and knowledge of print is teacher fostered and scaffolded (Vygotsky,
1978). As the sample transcript (Figure 2) reveals, the process requires teachers to engage
in informal, but directed interactions with individual children, highly imitative of dis-
course interactions in middle-class homes. For example, the teacher (J) in the sample
transcript engages the child (G) through language that is inferential, inviting, and personal, yet
it never fails to lead G on. Her opening stresses both use and skills, starting with attention
to the letters that begin his name, and moves quickly to clear narrative expectations.

J: “Stand over here ’cause I want to be close by you. All right Mr. Giovanni.
Let’s put your name – G – I – O – Vanni. This is Giovanni’s sixth story! You
ready? Do you have a good idea for your story? What’s it going to be about?”

The child, in turn, accepts help from the teacher to both express and expand his ideas as she puts them on paper.

J: “Oh no, I notice your animals are getting bigger and bigger—first one
was little, then a middle sized animal, now he’s gonna get this bear.
Did you say a big bear or just a bear?”
G: “A big bear.”
J: “Then a big bear—”
G: “A big, big huge BEAR!”
J: (Chuckles at his enthusiasm) “A big, huge bear came.”

He allows her to help him attend to the sounds of words and other
nuances of language.

G: “He picked on . . . the chicken . . . he, he, he . . . picked on the wolf and
he went like, ‘OW!’
J: “He picked on him or he pecked on him? Which word?
G: “Pecked on him.”
J: “He pecked. (Echoes as she writes) The chicken, he pecked—that’s a
good word—he pecked on the wolf and he said . . . . What?”
These type of interactions also occurred when young children dictated portions or versions of their favorite children’s books, thus strengthening the children’s relationship to and command over common texts.

Teachers and teacher educators may also want to consider two other findings in the data that go well beyond the goals of this study, but that we hypothesize impact the storytelling curriculum’s potential for language and literacy development. They are worth noting because they are so often overlooked in preparing young children for academic achievement. The first is the inclusive nature of the dictation and dramatization activities. As Ramon’s stories suggest, no proficiency in any area of development, including language and subskills, is required to tell stories or act them out. There is no possibility of failure or need for remediation. The only criterion is, as noted at the beginning of the article, “interest” (Dewey, 1902/1990). In this case, it is the desire to join the community of storytellers and actors. Second, interest in participation is possibly increased by the fact that a common practice in the three storytelling classrooms is the free choice of content. Inspiration may have come from a book. But it may also have come from home, the television, the movies, or a peer. Borrowed and repeated themes are frequent. In this sense, the storytelling curriculum validates who the children are, what they know, and what they care about. When combined with the other aspects of the process described above, the storytelling curriculum offers young children fair and unrestricted access to and growth in the “discipline” (Dewey) of language and literacy.

Conclusion

The positive impact of Paley’s storytelling curriculum on young children’s vocabulary and skills knowledge suggests that it is a viable alternative to the skills-dominant and teacher-neutral early literacy curricula increasingly prevalent in prefirst classrooms around the country. As such, it offers a model of what curriculum can look like and what teachers can do to support early literacy success that is as child friendly and inclusive as it is effective. Findings direct researchers, teacher educators, and teachers to continue their advocacy of both the storytelling curriculum and other free-ranging, teacher-scaffolded oral language opportunities in the early childhood classroom. As discussed, the current climate of accountability has increased the need for early childhood classrooms to provide curricula that represent fair and equitable imitations of home life, relevant to the academic demands of the upper grades. To this end, the need for early childhood teachers to retain their historical focus on oral language-based curricula that are directed at fair and equitable goals for young children—like the storytelling curriculum—has never been greater.

References


