

3 Creating a community of storytellers

Private Stories

There was a princess. Then she went home.
Then she went out again. Then the king come. And the king said
'What are you doing princess?'
'Chasing butterflies!'

(Mira, age 4)

Suddenly everyone wants to dictate a story

Soon after Storytelling and Story Acting is introduced, it becomes apparent that the majority of children want to get involved and will queue for long periods of time, waiting to tell a story.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, keeping a register of who has told a story ensures all children are given this opportunity. You can also let everybody on the list for that day know when their turn will happen. Then they can get on with other activities whilst they wait.

Some children will want to listen to the stories of their peers regardless of whether they are due to dictate. I often have groups of children clustered around me whilst I scribe, taking note of one another's images and deciding on the ones they will they add to or ignore. Storytelling is a communal activity.

Supposing someone never tells a story

There are very few fixed rules for Storytelling and Story Acting. However, there is one that I believe is sacrosanct:

No child should be forced or coerced or feel obliged to tell a story.

This seems very straightforward, but I have seen adults turning to a child and saying,

Melisa, surely you have a story today. You must have a story; you are such a great storyteller. Maybe you could tell a story about the trip we took to the shops the other day, or you could tell a story about what you like doing. There must be a story in there somewhere; you're not normally so quiet. Perhaps it could be a story about a lion, or a dinosaur, or a monster. Come on, are you sure you have nothing to say?

This is accompanied by the child staring at the teacher or looking down or continuing with what she was doing. Never to my knowledge has it resulted in a story. I wonder in these circumstances whether if everyone stopped talking, that would give the child a chance to speak. But by the time silence arrives, the damage has been done.

Compare this monologue to what happened the first time I saw Vivian Gussin Paley working with a group of children in Indianapolis.

VIVIAN: (Speaking to a boy who has been hovering around the Story Table for a long time)
Would you like to tell a story?

(The boy shook his head.)

VIVIAN: That's okay; you can be a story listener.

(The boy smiled and seemed to grow a bit taller.)

The next day, the boy was first in the queue to tell a story.

Why do we feel the need to coerce children into doing things? Perhaps we believe it is for their own good; perhaps we expect them to cope; maybe we think that everyone should have a turn. We know how it feels when we are pushed into doing something we don't want to do. Anxiety is the same emotion, regardless of age.

My experience has taught me that if I wait and don't put any pressure on the children, they will always come forward eventually.

Never stop asking or making opportunities available

Although my philosophy is never to force anyone to join in, I believe it is equally important to never stop inviting them to get involved.

On the flip side of coercion there is another issue that feels more damaging.

It is far too easy to write someone off. I have heard it happen in more classrooms than I can bear to count. Someone decides that this group of children can and this group of children can't.

Unfortunately, in my own schooling I was too often placed in the group of children who couldn't. Although that was hard, it does mean I notice and look out for these children now.

I hope you won't recognise any of these statements: *She is too difficult. He's not clever enough. She never joins in. He can't sit still. She's uncreative. He's too shy. She's too loud. It's not worth asking them.*

I've been given all these reasons for why a child might not join in. My thoughts are always the same: he's a child, he might change, or she might see the value of something in a little while that she hasn't seen just now.

Never stop asking.

Every time I do a Storytelling and Story Acting session, I always ask the child who said 'no' the previous week if he or she would like to tell a story. Whatever the child replies is okay. She can be a story listener, and the following week I'll ask her again.

We must give children the opportunity to surprise us.

By regularly checking in this way, I have had many occasions where children with selective mutism have told me their stories.

In one setting there was a four-year-old girl who had never spoken to an adult other than her parents.

Each week I asked if she would like to tell a story, and each week I reassured her that her head-shaking refusal was acceptable.

Then one day she whispered the word "Princess" in my ear. When we acted out the story, she walked around the stage, her head held high, the image of a princess who chose not to talk.

Where to scribe Private Stories

In Vivian Gussin Paley's book *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* (1990), she describes the place where story dictation is taken.

A large round table we call the Story Table . . . here sit the story tellers, picture makers and paper cutters, watching, listening and sounding forth . . .

(Paley 1990)

Should you decide to create a Story Table, this needs to be an inviting place, filled with activities, like drawing, sticking or bricks. Children may choose to sit and listen to the stories being dictated, cutting and gluing whilst they wait their turn.

Story Tables should be filled with a range of creative materials. Try to be nonprescriptive; otherwise the objects provided might influence the stories the children tell. A table covered in dinosaurs or toy cars will probably results in stories themed around these objects.

One school decided to place a silk cloth on their Story Table to signify to the children that they were taking stories. Another created a Story Hat that the teacher wore whenever she was available to act as a scribe. She walked through the setting wearing the hat, and children with a story found her.

I often end up perched on the floor between a range of activities and a large group of children. Once there I am stuck, until the last of the group has finished dictating. On sunny days, scribing stories outside is lovely, and stories told under umbrellas in the rain can be equally fun.



Figure 3.1 Surrounded by children

The best position for scribing

When you are scribing Private Stories, sit so that the child can see your writing. If all the child is looking at is your elbow or the upside-down book, the opportunity to make the link between the spoken and the written word is lost.

I am right-handed, so I sit the child on my left side. People I know who are left-handed angle their book slightly so that their words can be seen. However you write, take time to think about the view of the page you are presenting to the child.

With the rise in e-mails and texting, how often do children see writing? Don't lose this possibility.

Storytelling is a communal activity

Our kind of storytelling is a social phenomenon, intended to flow through all other activities and provide the widest opportunity for a communal response.

(Paley 1990)

When a group of children are listening to another child telling a story, sometimes they make comments. At first this can be disconcerting. I have been asked if I want them to be quiet or whether the teacher should move them away. But storytelling is closest to fantasy play, and anyone can join in and suggest ways to shape it.

If a child speaks during the dictation of another's story, it's a form of engagement. It might be they are making a comment: 'I'm going to have a lion in my story'. Other times it's to ask if the lion is going to eat the mouse. This is what happens in children's play; ideas and thoughts come into the arena and act as fuel for the rest of the group.

If someone is intervening a lot, perhaps by suggesting that a certain character, a giant for example, should be included in a friend's story, rather than trying to ignore the child, I turn to the storyteller and ask, 'Do you want to have a giant in your story?'

If the child says yes, then the child has accepted the offer and it will get incorporated into the tale. If not, then I tell the first child that maybe he can have a giant in his own story.

The storyteller has the absolute right to accept or reject the suggestions offered by his or her peers. If another child is persistent, invite the child to tell his own story later. The great thing about stories is that we all have our different versions.

Learning to listen, word by word

The hardest thing about scribing a story is learning to record the words accurately. As adults, we might listen carefully, but sometimes we hear things in the way we understand them, which might not be in the way the child has said them. With very young children, we may get the gist of what they are saying or understand a couple of key nouns, but the difference between scribing a story and having a conversation is that when we scribe we need to comprehend word for word, exactly what is being said.

It is also easy to interrupt or try to steer a child without realising we are doing it. (See Chapter 9.) Perhaps we are asking them questions to pin them down. If a child mentions a star, we may think that it is in the child's best interest to be prompted to describe the star. I worry that such prompting can make the child think he is wrong, and suddenly his star, so clearly seen in his own eyes, begins to lose its value.

There is a time and a place for prompting and asking questions, but Helicopter Stories doesn't need this. Our role is to listen and write what the child dictates and to ask questions only to clarify the points we do not understand.

Despite this, do not be afraid to interrupt a child whose sentences go on for ages. If you want to capture verbatim what the child is saying, you will need to work together to slow down her speech. (See Chapter 2.)

Children do stop talking as soon as you begin repeating their words, and between the two of you, you can set a pace to which you can write.

Some people worry that by interrupting a child they break the flow of their thinking, but whenever I watch colleagues scribing, I am always amazed at how children recall their sentences word for word, even when they have been cut off midflow.

Remind the child that you can't write as fast as she can speak and ask her to help you so that you can record everything exactly as she says it.

A conversation or a story

Sometimes a child will start a conversation before beginning to tell her story. I always try to have an awareness of the difference between when children are talking to me and when they are dictating. This is something that took me a long time to realise, as when I first started scribing I thought I had to write down every word.

Try to distinguish the difference in tone and expression as the child seamlessly jumps from story to conversation and back.

Going from a conversation into a story might look something like this:

ELISA: My story is similar to David's story. It's a scary story, and you only hear it on Halloween.

There were two ghosts and they came out of a well.

The first two sentences are conversation. The storyteller is setting the scene. I don't need to write these words down, although I might refer to them when I introduce Elisa's story to the class.

ADULT: Before Elisa told me her story she said that it was a bit like David's story from last week. She also told me that it was a scary story, that you normally only hear at Halloween. Elisa is going to be one of the ghosts in her story.

There were two ghosts . . .

Conversations sometimes creep into the middle of a story. A child might be dictating about a cat and then stop to ask if you have cat or to share with you that he really likes cats.

ANTHONY: *Once there was a big black cat.*

I've got a cat, I really like cats. Do you have a cat?

The big black cat saw a mouse.

I enjoy watching the seamless way children jump from narration to conversation and back again, with a fluidity that demonstrates how natural story is for them, a comfy slipper that they pull on and slip off as the need takes them.

Silence during Private Stories

Sometimes during a private storytelling session, a child comes forward to tell a story and then falls silent. In Chapter 2, I suggest a strategy for when this happens around the stage, but sometimes in Private Stories it is just you and the child, and you're unable to ask for suggestions from others in the room.

The first thing I do is to give the child permission to think. Quite often the child will put herself into a thinking position and I tend to mirror this, as if I am with her, contemplating. I do this instinctively. I realised only recently how closely my body language gets to that of the child when I am scribing their stories.

Mirroring creates a silent rapport between you and the child. There is research into the feeling of security and closeness that is created when someone mirrors our actions, and I often find myself able to empathise when I copy a physical position. It also informs me whether the person is relaxed or anxious.

I also make sure the child does not feel rushed. After a few minutes I might look at him and smile. After a little more time I might ask if he still has a story or if he wants to play.

Sometimes when I ask this, the child will skip off relieved, and I realise all he needed was the chance to sit and feel what it was like to get ready to tell a story. If the child answers no, we sit for a while longer. I might ask if he knows what character is in his story, or I might wait. Often for these children, all that is needed is time before the story emerges.

When a child is thinking, I ask minimal questions and do a lot of silent listening, rather than filling in the gaps with my own voice. If I had to tell a story, I'd think for a while to take a moment to find my topic and the way I wanted to start. Children are no different. It's hard to reflect when you are bombarded with questions.

A five-year-old boy called Jonathan tried to tell me a story for weeks, but every time he sat down he grew silent. After thinking for a while, he always went off to play.

In Story Acting he was confident, and in conversation he was articulate, but something about the process of thinking of a story got in his way. Too many ideas came into his head. I could feel his brain having ideas and rejecting them and having other ideas and rejecting these. At the age of five, this boy was censoring his creative brain.

Then one day he sat by me and told a satirical tale. It was as if he needed to comment on the situation before he was free to tell other stories.

One day, when Trish was doing Helicopter Stories, Jonathan really wanted to do one, but he couldn't think. And then his teacher said that his story didn't have to be fantastic. So Jonathan thought of a story that was just a little bit good.

After that Jonathan's stories soared. (See top of Chapter 7.)

One-word stories

Storytelling and Story Acting help me re-examine my definition of story. Children's stories might not contain the standard beginning, middle and end, they may not have a linear narrative that is supposedly essential, and they may be just one word.

In her book *Mollie Is Three: Growing Up in School* (1988), Vivian Gussin Paley encourages the children to share with her their ideas about story. If she is unsure about something, she talks to the children and asks for their opinion.

One incident arose when a boy called Fredrick told her a story. Fredrick hadn't told a story before, although he often listened to the older children as they dictated theirs. As he sat next to Vivian Gussin Paley, ready for his turn, he said one word:

'Fredrick'.

Vivian tried to find out if there was more to his story. She asked questions: what did Fredrick do? Did he go to school? The real Fredrick wasn't interested. He had finished his story, and his story was Fredrick.

When they went upstairs to act out, Fredrick ran to the centre of the stage and smiled. The other children smiled back, but Vivian found herself compelled to

. . . yield to the teacher's role. *"Is there anything different about Fredrick's story?"* I ask. *"Because he is Fredrick,"* Libby answers. *"Right, but I wondered about a story that has only one word."* John, nearly five, responds quickly. *"It's not one word. It's one person."* Of course. A person is a story. Fredrick need not do something to justify his presence in the story.

(Paley 1986)

One-person stories are fairly common with the younger children I work with.

A three-year-old once told me the story 'Jaws'. The storyteller had never shown an interest before, and even during this dictation, he hovered long enough for me to write his name at the top of the page and underneath it the one word that was to be his masterpiece. Then he was off.

When we acted out his story, he stood at the edge of the taped-out stage, and as I read his one word, 'Jaws', he put his hand upon his head to represent a fin and ran as fast as he could to the other side. As he ran, he hummed repeatedly the first two beats of the *Jaws* theme tune. The other children laughed, and his teacher was enthralled. This was a boy who 'never joined in'.

The unexpected

Adewale was three years old when he came to England. He started at the nursery immediately. I was running Storytelling and Story Acting sessions throughout the first few weeks of his stay. At the time, he spoke very little English. During the first session he willingly participated in the acting of stories and seemed quietly confident. After that, when children dictated, he listened, but he always shook his head when I asked if he wanted a go.

Then one day, a few weeks into my time in his classroom, he walked over to me.

'Do you want to tell a story, Adewale?' I asked.

He nodded. Then he looked at me, placed one hand on his chest, and said, 'Adewale!'

I stared at him for a moment.

'Do you want me to write that down?' I asked.

He nodded and bent forward to watch me as I wrote the first line of his story. He smiled, straightened his back and again placed his hands on his chest.

'Adewale!'

'Do you want me to write that as well?' I said, and for the second time that morning he nodded, bent forward and watched as I wrote. A third time he placed his hand on his chest.

‘Adewale!’

This time I did not need to ask if he wanted me to write it down. He bent forward and watched my pen move along the paper, writing his name for the third time. And then again, a fourth time and a fifth, exactly the same routine, the same bent head, checking to make sure I recorded his words.

Finally he stood up, raised his arms in the air, elbows bent, hands open, pointing up to the sky:

‘And this is Adewale’.

Having finished, he went to play while I pondered on his words.

Adewale, Adewale, Adewale, Adewale, Adewale, and this is Adewale.

In the Story Acting, Adewale walked to the centre of the stage. As I read his story, he placed his hand on his chest and repeated the gestures he had used earlier that morning, ending with his arms raised in a celebration of his name.

The other children looked in awe. This was powerful. It touched every one of us. Here was a child, new to the country, the nursery and the language, and he stood before us, proudly telling his story. He had arrived.

Sometimes the pressure of teaching grammar or creative writing means we feel trapped into correcting the words children use or insisting on beginnings, middles and ends. When children dictate Helicopter Stories, they know that whatever they say, it will be written down exactly. Without this, Adewale’s story would never have been possible.

Imagine, if filled with good intentions, I had said to Adewale, ‘That’s not a story, that’s your name’. The magic of Adewale’s arrival ceremony would have been lost. It is so easy to destroy these moments, to not really listen to what the child is saying or to be governed by our own worries of where a story is going.

By the fourth and fifth ‘Adewale’ I was secretly concerned. Supposing I filled my page with his name? How could I make good theatre with that? But for me, the lesson from Vivian Gussin Paley is to take those risks, trust where a child is going, even if it seems unclear. By letting the child lead, I hope we will both find answers and take our first steps together at the beginning of their journey.

I have a mantra: ‘Trust the child. Trust the child’. I use it when I am unsure. I chant it silently to myself and give the child a moment longer before I judge the situation with my adult brain.

A new once upon a time

The mummy cook. The daddy watches the telly. And I went on the bus and had dinner with mermaids.

(Jemima, age 3)

Jemima always started her stories with the words *‘The mummy cook. The daddy watches the telly’*. After this version of ‘once upon a time’ she had adventures or travelled on buses to fantastic places, but before any of this could happen she had to establish her norm.

I was with Jemima’s setting for ten weeks, so I had plenty of time to scribe her stories. They never deviated from this opening line. The other children noticed it. When I sat Jemima in front of me and began reading her story, the class chanted, ‘The mummy cook. The daddy watches the telly’. It became the refrain for all her stories. If this phrase disappeared, we’d have been disappointed. I cringed at the way she saw the world and smiled at how she identified the distribution of labour. But there was something about her intuitive understanding of story structure that touched me.

The quest story-form model always presents the hero in his or her ordinary world. This has to be established before we enter the world of the extraordinary. Jemima's opening phrase, her 'once upon a time', established her ordinary world, before the adventure. Whether conscious or unconscious, there was something grounding about the two worlds contained in her stories.

Prompts for storytelling

I try not to prompt children, but sometimes I find this question can be helpful if used sparingly:

'And then what happens?'

As a reserve question, for a child who is struggling, this phrase may offer a guiding hand. Be careful not to ask it too much, as you may find yourself falling into the trap of asking it after every sentence and then cutting the child off when he comes to the end of the page. This question invites an action which, if overused, can result in shaping the child's story.

When I first started scribing, I didn't understand that young children's stories might contain only characters and little description. In those days I often found myself asking, 'And then what happened?' to prompt action.

One day a boy told me the story 'Apple'. Rather than leave it there, I pressed him for more.

'Butterfly' was his reply.

'And then what happened?' I asked, hoping to find the relationship between the apple and the butterfly.

'Cat', he said, followed by 'Duck'.

He looked into the air, and I encouraged him for more. 'Egg', he said. I glanced up to see what had caught his focus. It was then I spotted the alphabet frieze. 'Fish, Goat, House' was his next phrase.

'Is that the end?' I said, desperate not to write down all 26 words that loomed above me.

'Insect', he replied, smiling.

This story is a slightly exaggerated version of what actually took place, but this incident made me question how often I should ask the question 'and then what happened?' Nowadays I prefer to ask 'Is there any more to your story?' This is less judgemental. It sends a message to the child that her story is in her control. One word, or one short sentence, can be a story. As children's narrative language develops, they always incorporate more.

Once the story is over

When the child has finished dictating her story, go through the following process:

- Read the story back to the child, underlining every character.
- Find out which character the storyteller wants to play and draw a circle around it.
- Ask any clarifying questions.

Choices of character

Because children choose which character they play in their own stories, you can find out a lot about what interests them.

Sometimes a shy child will act as the superhero and astonish the room with a confident portrayal of magical powers. It shouldn't surprise us, after all, Superman is a geeky news reporter, and Spiderman is the quiet Peter Parker. When children are taking on heroic roles, it is traditional to wear them as a costume and feel powerful in the land of make-believe.

Sometimes I am amazed for other reasons. A boy once asked to be the flower in his story. There were dogs and children, but he chose the flower. When he acted it out I understood why. As the flower grew, the boy danced around the stage, opening his arms to represent the petals.

I was training Mary Watkins, one of MakeBelieve Arts workshop's leaders, in Helicopter Stories several years ago, when a boy told her a story about a spaceman who flew down to Earth in a rocket. Mary turned to the boy and said,

'I can guess which character you want to play. You want to be the spaceman?'

The boy shook his head.

'I want to be the rocket', he said. She circled it, but when he skipped off she told me that she thought the spaceman was the better character and that she was shocked that he hadn't chosen that one.

When the time came to act out the story, the boy placed his arms in a circle, bent at the middle and span around the stage, making spaceship noises. Mary smiled. Now she understood why he wanted that role.

Afterwards we talked about the danger of assumptions or of seeing the story through our eyes and closing ourselves off to the children's ideas. The boy's spaceship was far more imaginative than either of us could have visualised, but this would have been missed if Helicopter Stories became too directive.

Mary still acknowledges this event as 'one of my biggest learning experiences. Trust the child and you get moments of magic'.

Clarifying questions

Once a story is finished, you may need to ask questions to clarify the actions. It might be that you want to know if the 'he' that is mentioned later in the story is the Prince from earlier. It might be that you are unsure if the storyteller wants some children to play the house or the castle. Ask questions that will help you to lead the acting out.

Number of characters

If there are any characters, where the number is unspecific, ask the storyteller the quantity she requires once the story is finished. For example, there may be baddies or fairies in the story, and you have no idea how many there should be. If the child says a high number, say 100, use this time to negotiate, being realistic about how many children will fit onto the stage and how many there are in the group.

Be careful you don't limit the number of some characters and not of others.

Supposing ten fairies seem manageable, so you readily agree to have that number. Then another child asks for eight baddies and this feels too large.

The vital last step

Once you have taken several Private Stories, you are ready to go back to the stage and act these out, completing the process with the vital last step.

Scribing Private Stories – summary of points

- Keep a record of children who want to tell a story and those who already have.
- Never coerce a child into dictating a story.
- Let children who don't want to tell a story feel positive in their role as 'Story Listener'.
- Keep asking children even if they don't say yes immediately.
- Remember that storytelling is a communal activity.
- If you create a Story Table, fill it with a range of creative materials.
- Always refer back to the storyteller to check whether he wishes to include characters suggested by his friends.
- Understand that the hardest thing about scribing is hearing exactly what young children say.
- Try to distinguish between when a child is having a conversation with you and when she is dictating her story.
- If a child decides not to speak during Private Story dictation, wait and don't pressurise him.
- Understand that children's one-word stories actually contain *one character*.
- Try asking 'Is there any more to your story?' if a child stops talking for a while.
- Once the story is finished, ask any clarifying questions that will enable you to support the acting out.
- If there are several of one character, check how many there are supposed to be once the story is finished.

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