

Remembering Why: The Role of Story in Educational Research

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of story in educational research as an empowering method of inquiry. By stepping back and remembering why, the author retells a professional story of practice between her and a colleague, exploring Vivian Gussin Paley's story play in a Grade 1/2 inner city classroom. Moving in and through past and present experiences illustrates the need for story in researching professional practice, the significance of story as a powerful research tool, and the profound understanding of teaching and learning that unfolds as a result of such collaborations. Story creates an ethos in the teaching and research community, uniting theory and practice into a visible partnership.

Keywords: story; educational research; theory and practice



Remembering Why: The Role of Story in Educational Research

Too often the boundaries of facts, figures, and results are experienced as the only reliable and credible means of evaluating teaching and learning. This situation could be transformed by examining the stories of teachers and children within the classroom. Stories “provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects” (Noddings & Withrell, 1991, p. 280). By reflecting on our stories about past and present practice, we can deepen our teaching and learning experience. Being observant and aware enables us to explore and reflect on personal practical knowledge and creates opportunities for pedagogical change (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 2006). In this paper, I discuss a collaborative research project that I conducted as a teacher-researcher in an inner city school. A literacy resource teacher and I used the examination of stories as a method for understanding the children’s learning process. We also collaboratively reflected on and examined our own “stories of experience” about the research and learning process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

It may be argued that the desire to tell stories is innate and central to our existence (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Booth & Barton, 2000; Fulford, 1999; Lewis, 2006). Storytelling has been used to record experience, communicate, and make meaning of the world and our place in the universe (Binder, 2005; Hooley, 2007). The practice of telling stories is ingrained in the social and cultural fabric of societies around the world (Binder, 2005), and socially constructed experiences, understandings, and knowledge are embedded in the stories that we tell and retell (Gee, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Booth and Barton (2000) ask: “If story is a basic way of organizing experience, and if we search for our own stories in the stories of others, can narrative be a form of research that we can employ to examine education and our role in the teaching/learning process” (p. 37)? This query raises the important, and sometimes confusing, distinction between story and narrative. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) argue for a collaborative approach to narrative inquiry—the process my colleague and I followed in our research—where *narrative* can be understood as the examination of our personal stories about our experiences. Elsewhere, they define narrative as “the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.24). Thus, *story* refers to the phenomenon of telling, and *narrative* to the process of inquiry.

The idea for the research presented in this paper grew from discussions between myself and my colleague, Andrea (a pseudonym), about our shared pedagogical belief that an arts-based curriculum can bring about significant changes not only in how students and teachers experience the learning and educational process, but also in how they experience other aspects of their lived experiences. We had two primary research goals. The first was to adapt and implement Vivian Gussin Paley’s (1991) notion of story play into a Grade 1/2 classroom so as to investigate what children’s stories would reveal about the culture of the classroom. Paley’s prolific narratives as a kindergarten teacher and researcher for over 20 years influenced how we viewed the stories children tell, and also our understanding of the significance of teachers as storytellers (Cooper, 2005, 2009). This led to our second research goal, which was to use narrative inquiry to examine our own stories of practice that unfolded both in casual situations and in our professional encounters (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). We created space to pause and reflect on our stories of past and present experience, and thus deepened our personal and professional identities in the story of teaching and learning (Palmer, 1998).

Over the last decade, there has been a shift in how teacher voice is examined in educational research (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin, Huber, Murphy, Orr, Pearce, & Steeves, 2006; Keyes, 2000). Keyes (2000) specifically explores the limited inclusion of early childhood educators' voices in research. She examines teachers' perceptions of research, but most significantly, what a teacher-researcher is and the importance of teachers as researchers. She discusses Vivian Paley, (1986; 1991) and Karen Gallas (1994) as models for teacher-researchers, framing her discussion around the importance of using action research, which has become an important methodology for teachers researching and joining theory to practice.

While action research acknowledges the value of teacher-research in educational practice and can include narrative, this paper addresses the ongoing absence of teacher voice in educational research. By examining Vivian Paley's (1990) story play curriculum and its significance in early learning, and by exploring the role of teachers' stories in educational research, I suggest that the empowerment of voice in educational practice is situated in the student and teacher narratives that unfold in the classroom. By providing these storied lives, I demonstrate how past and present come together and co-create the potential for further learning. I explore questions about classroom culture and what unfolds when children are provided the opportunity to tell stories, both real and imagined. This paper helps clarify both the significance of the storytelling curriculum and the potential of narrative inquiry in educational research.

Story Play

They do not pretend to be storytellers; they are storytellers. It is their intuitive approach to all occasions. It is the way they think. (Paley, 1991, p. 17)

Story play is based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (1991). In a kindergarten lab school setting, Paley would write the dictated stories of her kindergarten children. The children would then act out the stories as she read them. Paley (1991) understood that "the storyteller is a culture builder and requires the participation of an audience" (p. 34). According to Paley (1991), "play is not enough; there must be a format that captures the essence of play while attaching to it a great degree of objectivity. Storytelling and story acting can perform that task" (p. 34). By engaging in, with, and through story, children reveal the complexity of their meaning-making process, interconnecting imaginative and real experiences. The essence of their play embodies a narrative control that allows the adult to gain purpose and meaning from the stories.

By exploring themes, such as friendship and safety, the children would (re)construct their experiences in attempts to define their role in the world. This process revealed to Paley (1991) that "teachers are included in this community of storytellers; the children show us that every story in the classroom influences all others and must be told" (p. 12). In *the boy who would be a helicopter*, Paley (1991) relates the story of Jason, and through her retelling the reader enters into the world of a lived classroom. Paley's story resonates strong recallings, retellings, and reflections where "the character, plot and meaning" (Paley, 1986, p. 131) of her classroom are revealed. Her storytelling curriculum provides a strong pedagogical model for enacting change in the teaching and learning process (Cooper, 2009).

In her study, Cooper (2005) adapted story play to enhance literacy expression and meaning. Cooper found that story play brought playfulness to literacy learning through the lived experiences of the children, leading her to advocate that it can have a sound methodological purpose in literacy learning. Genishi and Dyson (2009) have, for many years, discussed not only

the importance of story in the lives of young children, but children's need for stories. They have demonstrated the value of stories through their educational research. Genishi and Dyson (2009) suggest that "listening to young children talk may reveal this dynamic continuum between telling a story and performing or playing it out" (p. 74). Their approach validates children's discourse as socially constructed and part of the human experience.

Of significance is the research of Cooper, Capo, Mathes and Gray (2007) that challenges current standardized approaches prevalent in early learning through the story play curriculum. Their quantitative study found that children who engaged in the authenticity of the story play curriculum demonstrated considerable growth in vocabulary and overall literacy skills. Their work supports the critical necessity of an inclusive and alternative approach, such as what the story play curriculum provides—not only an oral-based curriculum but also early literacy learning overall. Reinforced is the importance of story in the lives of children and in the teaching and learning process. Supported is the importance of the role of story and the necessity for more research into the benefits of a story play curriculum in early year's pedagogy and practice.

In her most recent book, *the boy on the beach*, Paley (2010) continues her observations of the stories of children at play. Paley draws on correspondence she had with a teacher in Taipei whose class she visited to demonstrate story play. At the end of one her of letters she wrote:

By the way, I have a name for us. We are anecdotists. The dictionary says this is someone who collects and tells little stories. Of course, our stories are all about young children, but I think the name fits. (Paley, 2010, p. 17)

As a collector of children's stories, Paley's anecdotes offer readers a way to enter into thinking about research and practice. Most powerful is the revisiting of what is important in the education of young children. Paley (1986) consistently reminds us to remember this significance through the "imperative of story" (p. 124).

Teacher's Stories in Educational Research

Human beings have lived out and told stories about the living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long.

(Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35)

What do our own stories of experience reveal about our personal and professional identities? As the importance of children's stories in the classroom began to gain recognition, the use of story also evolved as both a credible construct of knowledge and a method of inquiry into teacher experiences (Chase, 2005; Noddings & Witherall, 1991). As far back as 1990, Elbaz, for example, advocated for the use of story as a main motif in teacher educational research; "The story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers, researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense" (p. 31). By *storying* our experiences, the meaning of teaching emerges as a tangible construct and our personal and professional identity can be reshaped (Clandinin et al., 2006). Carter (1993) examined teachers' stories as ways of knowing, and discussed how stories "give meaning to events and convey a particular sense of experience" (p. 8). Her work gave voice to teachers in educational research, something that was significantly lacking during my own professional development. My professional knowledge, gained some 25 years ago, was derived from provincial and board documents, and from guidelines that described teaching methods. Stories of experience from

other teachers were absent from the educational literature as a viable method through which to examine our construction of practice.

But it was the seminal work of Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1991) that was critical to bringing about the conceptual shift in how method and inquiry are viewed in educational research. They positioned the concept of story in research through the following definition of narrative inquiry:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come from a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in an inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking of the experience. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

Adding to this, Leavy (2009) discusses the collaborative nature of the narrative method. It is the telling and retelling of stories that provides a relational quality and allows for an interactive approach on the part of the researcher. In the next section, I discuss the collaborative nature of the narrative inquiry that Andrea and I engaged in. Through the use of story play, we came to recognize the emergent design of story as research and by co-creating the experience we came to use story both as a phenomenon and an inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry: The Story Play Unfolds

Andrea initially approached me to do story play. As a resource teacher, she did not have her own classroom. She would come to my classroom and sit with two to three children per week, recording their stories, and she would read the children's stories so they could then act them out. She became the collector of their stories. Approaching the concept of story play through a specific research focus provided the opening for me as a beginning teacher-researcher to help Andrea formulate a specific inquiry about story play. It allowed us to approach the process from a different lens. Meier and Henderson (2007) maintain that "teachers' professional lives can become research when teachers pay special attention to what they do" (p. 7).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that "when researchers enter the field, they experience shifts and changes, constantly negotiating, constantly re-evaluating, and maintaining flexibility and openness to an ever-changing landscape" (p.71). Donning the researcher's cap was a new experience for me. I needed to be aware of my role as teacher but also of the importance of stepping back and observing when Andrea was working with the children. It was necessary to be aware of both my teacher and teacher-researcher roles throughout the project and to understand how relational qualities were reflected during the experience.

Andrea and I had a professional relationship prior to the research project. An important component of this new teacher-researcher-participant relationship was to acknowledge past and present stories and be open to the new understandings that could emerge. While we had similar pedagogy, our personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) had developed in different settings. Part of exploring the classroom culture through stories was recognizing possible tensions that could arise and working with how two professional identities intersected.

Throughout the research process, we were attuned to issues of ethics, relational responsibility (interpretation), and wakefulness (reflective practice) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My ethics valued Andrea as my first audience. We shared our notes and listened to the interview tape, sharing our responses, and drafting collaborative notes. Relational responsibility was not problematic, although I had to be mindful of her private story becoming public. When outside teacher-researchers enter a classroom setting, they must create a delicate balance for trust, the honouring of stories, and interpretations.

Formal data collection took place over a 2-month period and included ongoing dialogue between Andrea and myself during weekly meetings, an interview I conducted with Andrea, and field notes. Field notes included details of the weekly visits including Andrea's insights from the story play sessions, both of our observations from the children's dramatization of their stories (story acting), and sharing of our documentations. We collaboratively examined the children's classroom culture through stories told and dramatized and our own personal and professional identities. I extended my role as teacher-researcher in terms of exploring Andrea's process.

An initial question posed by Andrea shaped the emergent quality of the analysis: What components of class culture are we seeing in the story plays? As Paley (1995) suggests, "Story is the essential culture builder and learning tool of any society or family or classroom" (p. 93). Weekly discussions allowed us to analyse what occurred in the classroom. We collaboratively identified the themes that emerged from the children's stories and enactments. Our own stories of past and present experience also emerged as contributing narratives to the exploration of the lived classroom.

Teacher Stories

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. (King, 2003, p. 2)

The day before our interview session, Andrea and I had noticed how one child had not been included in the story acting. Her school attendance was irregular. She also had difficulty forming relationships with the other children. Andrea and I endeavoured to help her form relationships with the other children; unfortunately, the other children were not including her in the classroom community. As we sat down for the interview, Andrea said, "Let me tell you a story." Drawing past into present, she told a similar story about a child in her classroom several years earlier and how through story play the child had become included. By relating this story about a child she once taught with similar difficulties, Andrea's past and present professional practice unfolded. This framed the interview discussion.

Andrea's Story

Andrea's philosophy of education emerged out of an approach that valued children's voice, the arts, and building community. When I asked her about the arts in her practice, she replied:

I believe in integrating everything. What is important is the input, the talk, the visual, the experiential. What I look for is how the children express it back. The arts are perfect for this. I can't see the arts and literacy separate, or for that matter from science. Singing, dancing, and drawing-the children draw on their experiences to form a new story. (Andrea, interview, February 12, 2001)

Andrea's belief in the arts as a critical part of early childhood education also emerged out of her own personal and professional life experiences. This informed and shaped her philosophy of education:

The job of early childhood educators is to create a classroom where children find themselves as learners, find their own style for learning. Learning loses spirit if we just teach skills. The arts make learning personal. If it comes through you, it's yours. What comes out is shared. It becomes part of the classroom. I hope to find in the plays the personal stories. Where do the stories overlap? Where do the children identify, for example, which part of your story would I like to try and which part do I have to tell, act out? Where do I find acceptance? (Andrea, interview, February 12, 2002)

Andrea considered herself to be from the *old school*, where building classroom community and honouring children's voices were an important part of the teaching and learning process. She believed that it was important for teachers to make meaning out of children's experiences by listening to their stories. She viewed children's growth holistically and considered their voices to be an important part of learning. Andrea respected the spirituality of children; their mind, body, and soul connections (Miller, 2007). She believed that their inner landscapes emerged and were made public through storying and the arts.

Andrea had discovered story play when teaching kindergarten at an alternative school. She was interested in how the children in my classroom would respond. There were many differences between the two settings. Her class had been more homogeneous with more verbal support at home. Mine had a high population of English language learners; there were a myriad of languages and cultures interacting in the classroom. Andrea explained why she originally approached me to do story play:

I saw you valuing children's expression. Your program brings that out a lot through drama and painting. The kids are also the right age. There is a range of development from oral expression to writing. I thought you'd be interested in another dimension of story building and meaning-making. I was also curious what the children would do with it. I felt you'd be willing to talk to me. It would be richer to do this together. I could help you think of your role and find perhaps where the gaps in the room might be. Our roles are different but we need each other. (Andrea, personal communication, February 27, 2002)

As Andrea and I talked, it became clear that we had many pedagogical connections. We continued to explore these connections during our weekly discussions. Through telling, retelling, and reflections, Andrea and I deepened our "interpersonal reasoning" (Noddings, 1991, p.157), where flexibility, attention, and care became tantamount to our interdependent process.

Ritchie and Wilson (2000) argue that "the development of a professional identity is inextricable from personal identity" and that teachers can begin to "author their own development" (p.1) through story. It was through our weekly discussions that another important connection emerged, which was the work of Robert Coles. As we talked, it became evident that his work held significance for us both. Coles (1989) wove life, teaching, and his practice as a psychiatrist into his "call for stories." He situated the role of storytelling in what he learned from his patients. Through active listening and respect, Coles not only experienced these stories but also used them to examine his own personal and professional story. "Their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (Coles, 1989, p. 30). Coles extended his ideas on stories when

working with children. What resonated for us was Coles' (1992) accounts of children's lived experiences through drawing and stories. Paley (as cited in Lindfors, 2004), too, reflects on the contribution that Cole's documentation of children's voices had on her own writing and early work with young children.

My Story

My reflections and story emerged as a result of the discussions Andrea and I had. Though I needed to step back in the role of researcher, I re-entered as teacher during the story acting sessions. It was here that theory, practice, and inquiry were brought together. I, too, recognized the need for story in my life and how the significance of the past shaped the present. As a result of this present reflection on my storied life, I remembered this letter to my uncle, written many years after he died. It crystallized the experiential moments of significance in my teacher story, bringing my past and present together in meaningful ways.

Remembering Why: Stepping Back to Move Forward.

Dear Uncle Harry,

I remember the night clearly. I was getting ready to go out. The phone rang. You had a stroke. The clock ticked so slowly. Finally the inevitable news arrived. It is with these thoughts that I write to you over thirty years later. Though you have never left me, I have not talked to you for a very long time. Much has transpired over these years. In order to frame my place as an educational researcher, I am reflecting on how the arts have shaped my ideas and realities. At first, I was not sure how to start. Then I began to remember. I realized that I must step back to move forward. I thought of you.

You were always something of a mystery to me. I recall the stories mom told me of your time at the Sorbonne after the war and your connections to artists I later studied. It must have been difficult to return to Ottawa after living in Paris.

My first memory has always been the excitement I felt coming to visit you. The grandfather clock in the foyer of your building was a symbol of joy. I remember the long climb up to your apartment. The smells of oil paint and turpentine were always present. There were canvasses, sculptures, and works-in-progress everywhere, belonging to you and Auntie Olga. I remember you allowing me to look at everything and often touch. You gave me an art box for my Bat Mitzvah filled with "adult" supplies—brushes, palettes, and oil paints. I still cherish it. You told me I had talent and always encouraged me. You once even tried to do my portrait, but I couldn't sit still. I wanted to be an artist like you. Such was the idealistic dream of a young girl. Then you left.

Though I have not fulfilled the young girl's dream of being an artist, I have found a way to reconcile those abandoned hopes and continue with the pursuits of future journeys. By remembering and writing to you, I have found the connecting threads that have helped the past merge with present. I recognized the journey started long ago. I now teach in the inner city of Toronto. I have brought the arts to my teaching. The education of a young child must allow for the unlimited expansion of the imagination. Creativity becomes the channel for learning through

the opening of this faculty. Art must be a part of the everyday experience of the child, and for adults too.

I look back at the little girl I once was and the phases my life has gone through. When I think of the arts in my life, I think of you. Your artistic essence and free spirit has always been an inspiration. Thank you for letting me remember why. (Binder, letter, 2003)

Co-Creation of Potentials in Teaching and Learning

Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed. (Palmer, 1998, p. 57)

Through the sharing that occurred during the interview and reflections of past and present, and personal and professional identities, Andrea and I were able to redefine the spaces of our teaching. This personal, practical knowledge, which we co-created, enriched our awareness of learning in the classroom, deepening our teaching and learning processes. My work as a teacher-researcher became more grounded in an understanding of how story, in the form of inquiry, had a transforming effect on how we can conceptualize teacher development. It was through our stories of experience as learners and teachers, that we came to realize how interconnected our professional journeys were and how these threads were woven into what we believed constituted quality classroom practice.

By participating in Andrea's story, I explored how classroom culture was created from the teacher perspective and how relationships were built and evolved through time. Through this reflective inquiry process, we were able to recreate our professional identities and clarify how these connected to the children and their learning. Understanding how this process defined classroom practice was significant for insight into how the children saw themselves and what images and scenarios were shared.

The use of story in research allowed for this co-creation of potentials. Andrea did not have a classroom of her own, but found a way to enter into our classroom culture and be a valuable member through her participation. Her beliefs about children's learning were validated by allowing her old story to reconstruct the present into a new story. We discovered through story play a community of learners, where all participants had permission to explore and articulate their lived worlds. The classroom became the place where "teachers and learners [were] storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2).

Children's Stories

Lights! Camera! Action!

Once upon a time there was a girl. She got lost in the forest. She felt sad. It was dark and she got scared. Then she saw a fox. The fox helped her to get back home. Then she saw her room again. She was happy. (Grade 1 Student, transcribed story, *n.d.*)

Ahn and Filipenko (2007) stated that "children's narratives not only represent experience, as they know it to be but also represent experience, as they would like it to be" (p. 279). Children bring together fact and fiction to make meaning of their world. This convergence gives them

permission to explore issues of concern and solve problems, which Andrea and I witnessed during our story play sessions.

At the beginning of our research project, children usually began their stories with “once upon a time” and concluded with “the end.” Understanding of story concepts was reflected in how the children constructed the story, no matter how long or short. While stories read and stories told comprised a portion of the day in the classroom, it was through story play that we were able to observe a strong sense of authorship, a fusion of real and imaginary worlds, community building, and culture in the classroom developing. While children also told stories of kings and queens and dinosaurs, a shift began to occur as the children became more engaged with the storytelling and story acting. We observed how the children began to see themselves and their place with others. The children moved out of recreating storybook accounts and created their own stories. The following stories reflect our observations.

“Lights! Camera! Action!” we all shouted as children and adults moved arms and hands together mimicking a clapper board from movie productions. And then Andrea read the story. I sat with the children who were the audience. The following two stories show the combination of the real and imaginary and community building.

Story 1: A Child’s Story

The Door Story

Once upon a time there was a door who had to clean all the rooms and oh and it was a boy. He was very, very sad because he had to clean his room so he sneaked out of his room and lost for weeks and his mother was very scared but one sunny day a policeman saw the boy and took him home and he never stopped cleaning his room. (Child, transcribed story, n.d.)

This child created a whimsical yet poignant story about real situation in his life that he wanted to avoid. Andrea and I found his use of humour and his mix of an imaginary character with real people to be significant. He demonstrated an imaginary story with very real feelings about a home experience. So often children will use a story to express feelings and work solutions to problems. This child also demonstrated a sense of story structure, character inclusion, and the solving of a problem. While humour is included, he also shows sensitivity to others—something also reflected in the classroom culture. This story was one of many stories that enabled children to make their thoughts public and, in doing so, they contributed to the development of a class ethos by interpreting experience through real and imaginary constructs.

Story 2 is a much longer story that has built into it who will play the characters and has been constructed like a script. This story emerged during class work on our local community and the different people who lived and worked there. Several of the children came to Andrea requesting a class story.

Story 2: A Class Story

Helping People in our Community

Construction worker Sarah played by B.: “I’m Sarah the construction worker and I’m going to build a store for the storekeeper. It’s going to be hard work.”

Storekeeper John played by W.: “Hi Sarah, I’m John. Thank you for building my store. The store is very bright, big, with lots of books. All the shelves are full of all kinds of books.”

Librarian, Miss Donald (Miss D.), played by L.: “Hello John what a beautiful store you have. I would like to buy some books for the library. OHHHHHHHH!!!!!!... What interesting books you have. I haven’t seen these before.”

John: “They are new books, they just came out. I have Olivia, the caterpillar, The Riddle Book, Dinosaurs, 50 Below Zero, and...”

Miss Donald: “Your books are terrific. I’ll take them all. But there are so many, I’ll need help to carry them.”

The teachers, Miss Marni and C. are played by M. C.: “You’re not going to buy the whole store!”

Miss D.: “I’m not buying the whole store, just all the books. I’ll need some help to carry them back to the library.”

Miss Marni: “We’ll help you Miss D.”

Miss D.: “That will be very kind of you. Thank you. Just for helping you can take out as many books as you want.”

Miss Marni: “My children will love these books.”

Police officer James played by B.: “Where are the two teachers?”

C.: “We’re here Officer James. Could you help us carry these books?”

Officer James: “Sure.”

Miss Marni: “You came today to talk to the students about safety didn’t you?”

Officer James: “Yes I did. Let’s go inside.”

Mailperson Larry played by A.: “Hello Marni, you have a letter from Tim, one of your student teachers.”

Miss Marni: “How exciting!”

HELP! HELP! HELP!

Firefighter Claude played by A.: “Looks like a job for me. Stand back. I’ll put out the fire.”

Dr. Mark played by W.: “Is anybody hurt? I hope not.”

Firefighter Claude: “No, everyone is okay and safe.”

Officer James: “Let’s check to see if everyone is okay inside.”

Miss D.: “I heard there was a fire. I hope none of my books were in the fire.”

Miss Marni: “I still have all your books. They are safe.”

Miss D.: “Oh goodness! I was worried about them.”

Officer James: “Everything is fine because we were cooperating and working together.”

EVERYONE: “WE ARE A GREAT COMMUNITY.” (Students, collaboratively written story, n.d.)

This story reflects themes of fairness, safety, and cooperation. It offers a look into class culture through the lens of the children as they re-enacted people and issues of importance in discussing what community looks like to them. They appeared to be solving their own problems by drawing on observations of their world and through their interactions with adults. These two stories demonstrate what Paley (2007) discusses in her learning where “young children disclose more of themselves as characters in a story than as participants in a discussion” (p. 159). Even though stories may be fictionalized, it is still important to recognize the intimacy and vulnerability involved in revealing oneself through the narrative. Further, when children tell a story, they are reflecting on who they are and how they situate themselves in the world. As well, Cooper (2009) says, “Young children use stories to interrogate what they know about the world—and what they might know” (p. 66).

Two powerful events developed towards the end of the research. Andrea was recording the story of one child, when another quietly approached. This child was an English language learner who exhibited language processing difficulties. He usually sat back and watched the other children, not feeling confident in expressing himself orally or in writing. Consequently, he was initially reluctant to participate in our story play activities. Andrea asked the child, whose story she was recording, if the other little boy could stay and help with the story. Together, the three of them continued to write down the new story. Later, we observed a change in this child’s willingness and eagerness to participate in story play at all levels. Paley’s story play work was beginning to unfold naturally in our setting.

The other occurrence was a spill-off occurring from the story plays (See Figures [1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)). The children were working together to draw and write their own plays because they felt once a week through our research was not enough. The structure of their written stories changed. Prior to this, many told and wrote stories that did not define a beginning, middle and end, as well as lacking in descriptive narratives. Now the stories took on more depth and detail and made connections to other classmates by assigning the roles at the end of drawn and written stories. Oral stories were showing similar changes in structure. A sense of “pedagogical purpose” (Cooper, 2005, p. 229) was emerging within the context of the story play.

The stories told and acted out reflected the everyday worlds of the children: the real and the imaginary. The everyday is the story about princesses, monsters, playing in the park, being with your friends, or solving a problem. These are some of the common themes we found, which other researchers have also reported (Booth & Barton, 2000; Cooper, 2005; Paley 1991). The everyday allows the space for children to share their daily experiences. These are the resources the children draw upon for expression. Experiencing this everydayness allows teachers entry into their worlds of meaning, deepening the understanding of the lived curriculum and classroom. By being part of these lived spaces, Andrea and I were given opportunity to, not only be part of the classroom culture, but to also engage and interact with the children and with other through understanding our situated personal and professional places.

Conclusion

The key is curiosity, and it is curiosity, not answers that we model. As we seek to learn more about the child, we demonstrate the acts of observing, listening, questioning and wondering.
(Paley, 1986, p. 127)

The storytelling curriculum offers ways to (re)create the living classroom through curiosity and wonder. The stories children tell, act out, and draw provide a lens into their complex understanding of their world and how they define the space within which they live and play. In the story plays, Andrea and I observed good and evil, moral development, issues of acceptance, risk, the personal, fears, and how the children deal with them through their sociocultural lenses. Images overlapped and repeated themselves. There were questions of inclusion, exclusion, and friendship which demonstrated the importance of these issues in the eyes of the children; such are the complexities of classroom culture where children continually enter in and out of each others learning spaces and also ours as the teachers. Identities are defined and redefined as stories unfold and are told and retold. Similar concerns are found when using story in research. The researcher and participant deal with issues of the personal, risk, and acceptance. Through their stories fears arise and through restorying they are often dealt with. An inclusionary process solidifies the relationship between researcher(s) and participant(s).

Story in educational research can provide a place where teacher becomes researcher, reshaping professional identity (Clandinin et al., 2006). Though tensions, such as building relationships, exposing pedagogical beliefs, and sharing personal stories, must be recognized in this type of research, the benefits are rewarding, not just for the researcher but also for the participant. A story is created that situates narrative in understanding teaching and learning, bringing together the practice of teaching and the practice of studying teaching (Clandinin et al., 2006). Can it just be a story? No. It must be a story with direction and a sense of purpose: a story of lived experience.

As I reflect on this narrative of practice, I am reminded how stories educate and include young children and provide another path that offers the possibilities of co-creating new lived experiences in educational research. I bring to my current role as a teacher of adults the importance of story and how it shapes and can be shaped into a tangible method of inquiry, reflecting a dimension of experience that can crystallize past and present understandings, as well as offer possibilities for the future. I encourage them to explore their personal and professional identities, their connections to teaching and learning, and their relationships. Through story, I help them understand what has brought them to the place they are now in their lives. Throughout this process, I too, find myself forever remembering why...

I Remember

*I remember a little girl drawing profiles,
Noseless, blond hair, and blue eyes.
Always drawing.
I remember smells from the studio,
Oil paints and turpentine.
Visions of canvasses.
I remember the long climb
Up winding stairs,
The grandfather clock ticking.*

*I remember little pink shoes,
Costumes and recitals,
Madame LeGras.
I remember concerts, plays,
Nureyev dancing.
Being present.
I remember studying the world
Of literature and art history.
My passions.
I remember Picasso's "Guernica"
Taking my breath away,
Invading my senses.
I remember a young woman
Filled with dreams,
Unable to be fulfilled.
I behold a sea of young faces
Bursting with desire,
Imaginations aglow.
I discover children creating,
Their senses awakened.
The space to be.
Through their inquiring eyes
I see a future of hope.
And I remember why.
(Binder, 2003, pp. 8-9)*

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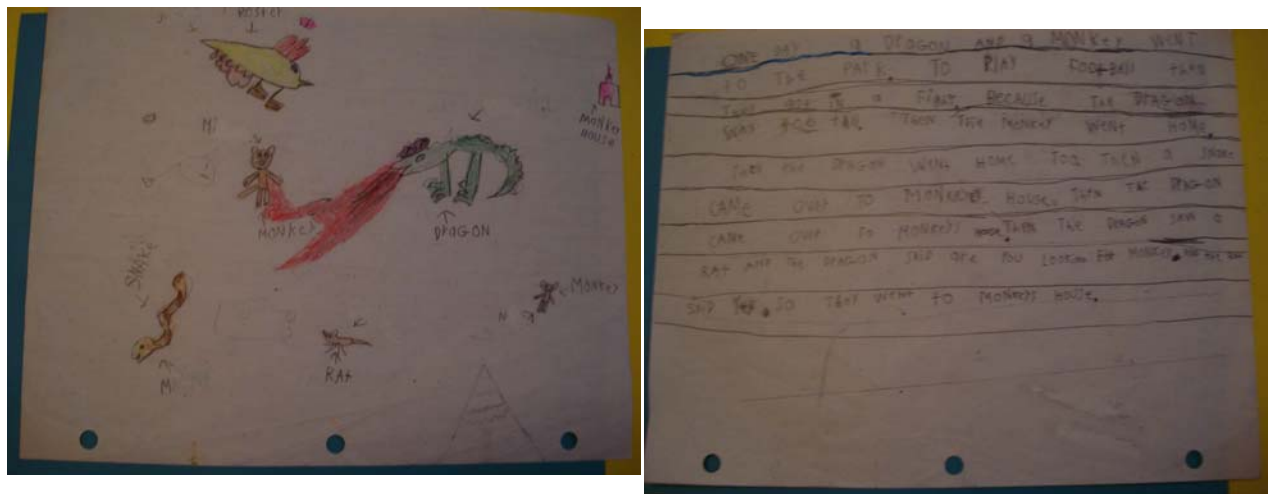


Figure 3.