Commentary:

On the Road to Literacy: Before the Three R's Come the Three F's

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ABSTRACT

From the earliest age, children begin to practice their imaginary characters, their separate visions of strength and weakness, of love and loss. By the time they enter kindergarten they are ready to build complex social and literary worlds in which friendship, fantasy, and fairness—the Three F's—are inalienable rights, and every child tries to find a secure place in an intimate community. A preschool or kindergarten without a substantial playtime puts everyone at a disadvantage, for play is the primary reality for its members. Within the familiar process of inventing new characters and plots, children continue to develop the intuitive language that binds us together in a functioning social entity. This is the true early literacy.

In the interest of full disclosure, I admit that during my long tenure in the kindergarten and nursery school, my colleagues and I rarely spoke of literacy. Any mention of early literacy would have taken us by surprise. How awkward to label the events taking place among our crawling, climbing, running, shouting, and posturing little ones as "early literacy," though the meowing and woofing, the baby cries and spaceship explosions were definitely connected to dramas in which well-defined characters performed their roles with increasing flair and fluency.

We called it pretend play or make-believe, as in "make it I'm a kitty and you try to find me 'cause I'm lost and pretend you hear a noise." The language and lore of the young needed no justification; I marveled at the outpouring of unfettered imaginations and somehow understood that a social and literary society was being

developed. Furthermore, it usually took precedence over my own less inventive plans. More plainly stated, the children found their own scenarios more compelling than the teachers' curriculum; we took note and tried to find a common nurturing ground.

It was not the Three R's we in the kindergarten pursued; reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic were the unchallenged province and preference of the first-grade teachers. Our task could better be described as the Three F's: fantasy, friendship, and fairness. These were the first steps to school success and were not to be short-changed in order to hurry our youngest students into more sedentary and formalized occupations.

I regret now that we did not call the doll corner and block area our seats of early literacy, rounded out by Beatrix Potter and jars of paint, mounds of clay, and tinkly pianos to keep us singing and marching through our invented worlds. "This is early literacy we're doing!" should have been our cry. Then the lyrical structures built up during long sessions of imaginative play might have been protected from the tidal wave of formal lessons and technology threatening to level the creative landscape of early childhood.

How Beatrix Potter would have applauded the literary analysis in my doll corner one day:

> "Peter Rabbit is a robber, you know," says five-year-old William (all names are pseudonyms), as Theresa, age four, pours him a cup of tea. "I don't think I drink tea if I'm a robber."
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> Theresa pushes the cup closer to William. "Yes, you could have it because it's chamillia-willia tea. That means it's for you because you're a William."
>
> "But robbers don't drink tea."
>
> "Peter is not a robber, no, he's not a robber."
>
> "He steals the lettuce — "
>
> "But Mr. McGregor is mean. And I'm your mother. So you can't be a robber if I'm waiting for you."

This has been a doll-corner conversation of great merit. The logic is clear: robbers do not have mothers who wait for them and give them tea. As to whether it is acceptable to steal from a mean person, the issue will arise again now that the idea has been introduced, stimulating new conversations.

"William thinks Peter Rabbit is a robber," I say at snack time. "So he doesn't think Peter should drink tea."

"He's not a robber," Theresa insists. "Because I'm the mother."
"And you gave him some tea."
"Camillia-willia tea."

Educators who wish to place good talk at the top of their literacy list are more than matched by the children's own desires. A child's need to explain ideas within the context of a story exerts a powerful incentive, driving the exploration of language and logic to new heights.

"But wait a minute, Theresa," Cassie says. "Peter didn't mind his mother so he might be a robber. They always run away like that."
"There could be a mean mother like Cinderella has," William says. "But Peter's mother is not mean."
"Cinderella's real mother isn't mean," Ella says. "Peter was hungry and he saw the lettuce."
"Okay, here's a good idea," Theresa concludes, and there is general agreement. "Let Peter ask Mr. McGregor can I please eat a small lettuce? Then, if he says no, Peter can hide and take some because Mr. McGregor can't eat so much by hisself."

The children in this class have become Peter's friends. They can easily imagine how this mischievous little rabbit feels but they are also curious about Mr. McGregor and his intentions. The adult may say, "If I were Peter, these would be my choices." But a child says, "I am Peter and my mother wants to give me tea. Do I drink the tea and still retain the image I prefer of a naughty Peter? Later when I put on my cape and become a super-rabbit, can I still have tea with my mother? But anyway, I might decide to be Baby Peter so that's okay."

Now, multiply these dramatic ruminations by those of twenty other children in the classroom and we begin to understand how learning is approached on the children's own turf. I grow, the child seems to say, when I pretend to be someone else, in another place, at another time; I grow further when my classmates and I build scenes and explain our characters' motivations day by day. As we learn to listen to one another's ideas and follow them through in our fictionalized worlds, we construct the model of a literate and democratic school society and prepare to climb the educational ladder together.

We in the early childhood community may legitimately consider ourselves still in the process of developing a sensible curriculum. After all, the introduction of

formal lessons to young children has a very short history and the results are often uncertain and troubling. Like Mr. McGregor, we plant our produce in neat rows and do not want Peter to mess about and impose too many different perspectives in the uses of lettuce and cabbage. Yet, who owns the subject, Mr. McGregor or Peter? Or, perhaps I should ask: What is the subject?

During a recent visit to a preschool, I had the opportunity to view these seemingly conflicting approaches to learning and even to the nature of the subject matter itself. However, due to the flexibility of the children and their teachers, common ground was always in sight.

I enter the room while a mathematics lesson is in progress: a group of 18 fours and fives are to figure out, using little blocks on individual trays, how many ways there are to make the number 5. Derek has lined up his blocks as if they are train cars, pushing them along with a barely audible "choo-choo-choo." The teacher kneels beside him and asks, "Can you do a five, Derek?" When there is no response, she says, "Look, watch me. Put one block over here, then put one, two, three, four blocks over here, and look! How many? One, two three, four—and one more? One more is five! Good."

Derek has been silent throughout the dismantling of his train. The teacher studies his face for a moment, then writes "5" on a card and puts it on the tray. "Is this the number 5 train, Derek?" she asks. "Is it time to leave the station?" The boy rewards his teacher with a smile. She has come on board and enabled him to drive the engine again.

After mathematics comes free play. It is not as long a period as I would prefer, but there is time enough to pretend something, to continue an ongoing story, to establish an identity and connect to other players. Derek sits across from me at a small table, takes a black crayon and begins to draw on a large piece of newsprint.

"Your black crayon is going everywhere," I comment.

He looks up in surprise, then launches into a complete explanation. "Yeah, this is the hugest explosion. It could explode the whole world. Not really, I mean. It's for those guys over there I'm playing with. Ruby wants me to play with her but I promised them."

He points to Ruby in the doll corner. "Should I help her?" I ask. "She seems to be having trouble getting into those shoes."

"Naw, she's only just pretending," Derek informs me. "See, it gotta be hard 'cause she's Cinderella and those shoes they don't know could she be the real one or not."

"The real what?" I ask.

Derek examines my face as if he is trying to recall exactly what we have been saying. "The real princess. See, Ruby wears the slippers 'cause it's her turn and before that time Shelly was wearin' them and she was probably wishin' to have them now but it's anyway not her turn. And Ruby was cryin' 'cause it weren't fair. So Miss Connie has to have a good talk to see what's fair to do."

"Who did Ruby want you to be?"

"I could be the dad or Superman 'cause I got a cape. Teacher says keep it in my cubby. She'll tell me when. This explosion's okay 'cause it's paper. That's allowed for explosions but not too loud. We're waiting for the enemy. Then we have the explosion. So I gotta hurry."

How incredible, I thought. This small child is already a student of topics that preoccupy us all our lives: friendship, fantasy, and fairness. He knows and cares about the roles he and his classmates prefer and he welcomes a fair distribution of personas. Furthermore, he knows that in order to see the whole picture, a story must be acted to hold the parts together. There are many parallel stories in flux, including the teachers', and he must listen carefully, talk about the script, its characters and plot, if he is to figure out what comes next.

Still, what about the mathematics lesson? Will Derek be judged by his lack of responsiveness during the number 5 practice, and later, in a phonics drill from which he appears equally disconnected? I feel certain the teacher will figure out better ways to handle the formal curriculum, just as she has enabled Derek and his friends to have their explosions and superheroes and has helped the doll-corner players experience their own versions of Cinderella from cradle to dance. Miss Connie needs only to adapt what she knows about play to other curricula: "Once upon a time, a little engine sat alone on a track. It was lonely and sad…"

Derek, by the way, does get around to numerical values. "There's supposed to be two more sisters, you know," he returns to tell me. "Those steptoe sisters? See, there's really three sisters but only one is nice. Two is mean. Even the mother is mean. Three mean people. But nobody wants to play them. Anyway, Ruby likes to be Baby Cinderella 'cause then she has the nice mother. Ruby told that story to Miss Connie, you know, when she writes down our stories? And I was the dad." He pauses to remember the event in greater detail. "I was the hunter who is a dad. Because there was a wolf."

From the earliest age, children begin to practice their imaginary characters, their separate visions of pleasure and pain, of strength and weakness, of love and loss. By the time they enter kindergarten they are ready to build complex worlds in which friendship and fairness are inalienable rights, and every child has a secure place in an intimate community.

This has never been an easy task, but a preschool or kindergarten without a substantial play time puts everyone at a disadvantage, for play is the primary reality for its members. Play contains the only set of circumstances the children understand from beginning to end. "I can do this well," the children seem to say. "I can be this effectively. I understand what is happening to me and to the other children."

Within the familiar process of inventing new characters and plots, children continue to develop the intuitive language that binds us together. Here is where we have an opportunity to study each child's individual style and story, and to introduce all manner of new experiences into a functioning social community.

"What are you pretending? Who can I be?" the children ask one another. Kieran Egan (1989), in his *Teaching as Storytelling*, would have all schoolteachers ask the same questions: "What is the story here? What roles can we take?" Young children, without instruction, begin to imagine the answers to these questions long before they enter school.

Let us respect the primacy of children's fantasy play and study its rich development through the early school years and beyond. The lively curiosity and enthusiasm engendered in the process of creating stories will support our own educational goals in a manner that is recognizable to every child. Climb aboard, we announce to Derek and his friends. The number 5 train is leaving the station!

References

Egan, K. (1989). *Teaching as story telling: An alternative approach to teaching and curriculum in the elementary school*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vivian Gussin Paley writes and teaches about the world of young children. She examines their stories and play, their logic and their thinking, searching for meaning in the social and moral landscapes of classroom life.

A kindergarten teacher for 37 years, Mrs. Paley brings her storytelling/story acting and discussion techniques to children, teachers, and parents throughout the world.

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