DECOPRIM 1/97 : suite

Vivian Gussin Paley "Story and Play: The Original Learning Tools"

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As we speak of teachers becoming reflective practitioners it occurs to me that we model ourselves after the original reflective practitioner - the child at play.
What has just been described about our own analytical examinations of people and materials can be observed in the playful trial and error method of young children transcribing everything around them into play. Yet we give the process little credit.
Imagine if the faculty at a medical school discovered a marvellous new technique by which all the disciplines required to become a doctor could be integrated. Some tool, perhaps a computer program, in which all the mysteries of anatomy, psychology history or chemistry could be woven into a tapestry understood by all the students, forming a nurturing ground for every future subject. Then, having invented such a program, the dean of the medical school would say "We will not continue using it and go back to all the old ways of teaching medicine". This of course would never happen. Such a medical school would soon go out of business.
Is this not, in effect, what happens to our children when they enter school? For five years, an intuitive program called play has worked so well that the children learn the language, mannerisms, and meaning of all the people with whom they live. They know what every look means, every tone of voice, who their family is, where they come from, what makes them happy or sad, what place they occupy in the world. Then the children enter school and find, strangely enough, that this natural theater they have been performing, this playfully deep fantasy approach to life is no longer acceptable, is no longer valid. Suddenly they begin to hear
"Do that playing outside, after your work."
This is a serious problem, for when play is eliminated, the model for story making is eliminated as well. Since my talk tonight concerns story, I'll tell some stories. And, in the way that children reflect upon the story that is being acted out - played out - perhaps we can reflect upon how such stories become our learning tools, first the children's and then ours.
A colleague of yours told me a story of this sort as we hiked in the old fortress today a story that has the power to instruct us. It's about his two-year-old daughter with whom he is playing and who sees a little snail. She asks her daddy if she can have the snail. Holding it in her hand she then points to some other snails in the little pond and says. "Now give me the mother and the brother and the father snail."
This might seem just a cute little story about a small child. But think about what it tells us about the role of fantasy as a teaching tool. Wait, you say. This child comes from a family of teachers. She has heard many stories and books are read to her every day. True. But this particular snail story has never been read to her. At two she has already figured out how to use the story model to explain the connection between all these odd creatures. Perhaps they frighten her little creatures coming out of their shells. Who knows what seems so odd about the snails to the little girl? First she drops the snail, afraid to hold it. Then she creates a story about it and it becomes safe and interesting. Later, when she is in second or third grade, and something new about math or science or a foreign language seems strange and threatening, if she can create a story about it she'll hold on to the new material with greater comfort, as with the snails, at age two.
A year later, at age three, she'll take the next step. She will understand the use of other children. "You be the baby snail," she'll say to a little friend. "I'll be the mother snail and let's ask Johnny to be the brother snail. Here comes a huge creature who wants to eat us up. Let's go and hide." There would be no limit to the way the two-year-old, becoming three, would understand how to expand her analysis and thinking when play can be used. And there would be no limit to the seven and eight-year-olds expanding their thinking about science when play is used as the model.
And still later, the scientists will say, let's imagine, let's play around with this idea. Pretend this chemical does not exist and we need to find a more powerful chemical that can destroy these little creatures. What would happen? The storytelling model of the scientist is not far away from the one- invented by the young child. Primitive people, as we know, from the beginning, have understood the power of story to explain

what they do not understand about the world around them, to explain physical phenomena, community, fear, safety and love.

A few days ago I was in a small town outside of Frankfurt, speaking to a group of teachers. A young woman, studying anthropology told a story about the Bushmen tribe. It had a profound effect upon me and I'll tell you why in a moment.

Here is the story she told: When a member of the Bushmen tribe is separated from his community, he says that he has died. Why does he say he has died? Because, he explains, he has not heard the stories told during his absence. This is akin to death. Even when he returns, finally, part of him has died. That part that has missed the storytelling on the days he was gone.

When the young woman offered this, in a small group discussion that I was having with teachers from all over Europe, I was so astonished I asked her to please repeat the story because it explained something to me about myself in an entirety different way, which of course is what children do for each other. She told the story again and then she said "*What is there about this story that excites you so much?*" She was genuinely curious. It seemed to her I was overreacting. She hadn't intended to elicit such a response from me and perhaps she was a little bit embarrassed. I had a pile of my books in case I wanted to quote one thing or another. And I said, "*I'// tell you why. It's because of the way I begin* "The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter":

"Who are you, Lilly?" I bend low to ask the bonneted figure pulling a straw purse over my feet
"'Me and Eli losted our baby, " she says, disappearing into the cubby room.
Later, Lillv the story player becomes Lilly the storyteller, a fragile change of perspective that has enabled me, after manv years, to find my role as teacher.
Once upon a time mother and the daddy goed hunting for their little girl. That girl is in a trapdoor.
The end.

Now, here's the connection to the Bushmen concept:

"A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. The children at least have their play, but I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose."3

When I read that to this discussion group there was silence.

I thought for a moment, "*Well, I get the connection. I get it very deeply.*"" But connections can't in one story be passed along, so quickly, so easily. And this is why children, these thoughtful, thoughtful practitioners, replay and replay and replay their stories.

It's the very thing scientists do: to attempt trial and error, trial and error. To understand the deepest meaning of a behavior. Play does this. Story does this. So complex are these connections that are intuitively part of early human development, and we take them so for granted that we seldom listen to what the words are and imagine what ail the meaning might be.

I want to tell another story from another recent trip. And I would be grateful if you would reflect upon all the levels of meaning from a very simple encounter that could happen in anyone of yours schools, certainly at any age level. This happened to be in a West London nursery school. I had stopped to visit before giving a talk in the afternoon at the Roehampton Institute, the Froebel College.

It was an ordinary little school, with children from many different cultures and slightly different accents, and in some cases, different colors. Still, an ordinary group of three, four and five-year-olds. This particular morning another kind of child came to visit. Apparently just a week earlier a new program had begun. A bus was to bring every Friday morning a group of severely brain damaged children. None of them could walk, none of them could sit alone. They were either carried or they were strapped and cushioned in wheelchairs. Four, five and six-year-oids.

I began to watch a little boy named Teddy. He was in a wheelchair and wore a thickly padded helmet. He was entirely strapped and cushioned. His face was so blank, I thought he might be blind, as indeed two of the other children were. This is only the second time Teddy has come but he remembers that after the storybook is read the children are allowed to play. The moment the book is closed Teddy turns to the young woman beside him, his head bobbing dangerously. The effort to speak begins in his torso, pushes through his heaving chest, arms, neck, chin, and mouth until at last a recognizable word emerges "Car?" he asks. The teacher smiles at him and leaves the room, returning soon pulling a small red car into which Teddy is strapped and cushioned again. Thanks to a complex home-made arrangement of pulleys, Teddy can now move along by himself.

He pedals to a group of children playing store and once again contorts his small body in order to speak. "Crispies," he whispers, extending a hand as if it contains money. The Indian child at the toy cash register pretends to take Teddy's money and gives him two empty little cereal boxes, saying in a clipped accent,

"Here you go, sir. Two for the price of one!" It is a simple transaction but the joy it brings to Teddy's face fills my eyes with tears. What could I ever do to cause him to gaze at me that way? The sudden conviction that I have watched something sacred is rather unnerving and I walk into the school kitchen for a cup of tea. By the time I reenter the classroom, Teddy is back in his wheelchair; again the passive outsider. However, he'll be allowed to watch one more activity, and the events of the morning will take on a new significance for me.

A few children have dictated stories for their classmates to dramatize. As he observes the first, a tale of two sisters who find a bunny and bring it home, Teddy's eyes come alive. He reaches an arm towards his teacher, pleading with his eyes. Does he wish to join the children in the center of the rug? They are about to act out Edmond's story of a baby bear, a crocodile, and a few other characters who are frightened by a monster. Teddy's eyes continue to implore, his mouth moving soundlessly. Edmond walks over to Teddy's teacher. "Your little boy needs his car," he says. "He wants to be in my story." The teacher is kind but also tired. " It's too late," she tells him. "I'm sorry. The van is packed for us to leave."

Teddy shrivels back into his cushions but by now several other children have come over. "He can't do this without his car, you know," they urge the teacher. "He wants to move by himself. We could bring him the car, please?"

There is an astonished look on Teddy's face. Can a boy in a padded helmet really have friends like these who need him in their stories and desire him in their play? The children move the wheelchair into the middle of the rug and a Chinese child says, "Then Teddy will be the baby. The baby hasn't learned to walk yet. And I will be the mother."

How do the children know that this child who looks and acts so differently from anyone they have ever seen must be able to join in play?

There could be no curriculum any of us could develop that would teach this essential human emotion, empathy, essential to all of our civilized societies, the emotion, without which nothing we ever attempt to do toward a more peaceful world would ever work. And there it is, demonstrated, giving us the optimistic understanding: Yes it's there. It's worth pursuing. It's worth working for, because we see in this little incident involving play and story, that it is there. Furthermore, the children see that it is there. The children understand how good it feels to involve someone who is an outsider, who needs help. They did not need to be instructed in doing this. Something about this model of story and play explained it all to them, as of course it explained it to us, all of us, when we were little. As we watch, really watch and listen to the play of children, which very few of us do, and even when we see good play, we say, "*That's great play. That's wonderful play*." But unless we write it down, analyze it, think about it, discuss it with each other, stretch it out as if it is a piece of academic wisdom that we are trying to interpret, we then will continue to think of it as childish and something that can be easily put aside, when the real business of schoolwork appears.

Of course, there has been some good research, even scholarly research done on play, but we are rarely convinced. Jerome Bruner, in the sixties, did a study in which a lesson was presented in three ways: one had the teacher lecturing; the second had the teacher demonstrating the concept with materials; the third allowed the children to play with the material, in every way they wished. The students involved were four year-olds, seven year-olds and nine-year-olds. In every case those who were given the opportunity to play with the materials figured out the solution to the problem presented to them far more quickly and in more original ways. Pretty convincing? But apparently not convincing enough. Play is considered appropriated only for little children in the sandbox. Furthermore, in many many places in the world now, including my country, even three year olds are spending less time in the sandbox than sitting at tables in pre-school classrooms, coloring in circles, attempting with very shaky fingers to cut them out, to make the letter "A" and so forth. Even as we learn more and more about play, more and more schools are taking play away. I think part of the reason is that those of us who truly do believe that play and its structure - story - are the wheels that go around, the connective tissue, don't spend enough time explaining it to each other in story form. Listening to what the actual play sounds like, writing it down, describing it to each other and proving to ourselves, much as the children prove to themselves how to build a tower out of blocks, so it doesn't fall by continually putting a heavier block on a lighter block - bang! - a heavier block on a lighter block - bang! And after a year of trying, suddenly - oh! - it needs to be balanced on both sides. Now it won't fall. For us to understand play, which is far more complex in its terminology, we have to study play and the story form of play 'till we ourselves become players and storytellers, far longer than the little children study how to get blocks to rise up into towers without immediately falling.

Listen, for example, to a brief episode of play, that emerges out of a group of three and four-year-olds attempt to make sense of a new word that one of them had brought into school, "*waterbed*". Clearly it was

confusing, seemed to have dire consequences and yet a child had said, guess what! "*My mummy and daddy have just bought a waterbed*." ' Within the hour here's what the play sounded like. If I had not taken it down, if I had not had a tape recorder, it would have been lost. I wouldn't have even remembered it. I wouldn't have remembered the exact words so that I could think about it.
"*Where do I sleep?*" Simon asks suddenly. They are in a spaceship that they have built. Now, we begin the scientific investigation of "*waterbed*.".

"In the waterbed, because you're the dad."

"The water turned into a bed?"

"Turn the bed so it won't squeak."

"And leak. Squeak and leak. And peek."

"Only dads and moms can peek there."

"Meow! The water's coming down."
"Help! Help! We can't swim. A monster!"
"In the water he is."
"The bed's in the waterbed!
"Here's the floaters. Jump in the floaters." 4

If I hadn't had my tape recorder, I would have missed it. I would not have been able to transcribe it. There was no other teacher around at that time, that I could talk to. When I transcribed this, I then realized: One word has created an entire dramatic scenario - one word! These are just three and four-year-olds. They are trying to figure out *waterbed*.
One of the children some days later dictates this story:
Once there was a little squirrel. And his mother said,"'Go sleep in a waterbed."' So he did. And he drownded inside. An then he got not-drownded because it leaked out and he leaked out. The mother told him to swim home.5
This is thinking. We are in the privileged position of hearing what thinking is like in a child's head. Once I got the hang of keeping track of all of this thinking I was eager for more. I gave the children additional playtime so I could have more listening time. It seemed to me that all the secrets of the universe were being revealed to me, in the manner of the philosophers, linguists, and dramatists. Here is one last example from the book about Jason, the helicopter boy, who frequently spoils the games his classmates play. Two of them have remained in the classroom alone during recess period, with me nearly to hear their story of destruction and resurrection.

Arlene: In five minutes this tissue turns to magic. I wetted it Is five minutes overyet?
Alex: The kind me and Simon made? First we buried something in the sand and then it's all buried and that magic is helping us make it magical.
Arlene: To blast people?
Alex: To blast Jason. To the sky. Because he keeps fighting us, even just me in the story room.
Arlene: Tissue in the sand. He'll be blasted?
Alex: To a million pieces.
Arlene: The whole world forever.
Alex: Let's lift up the whole sandbox Help me. Superman can carry the whole school up and we'll all fall in the river.
Arlene: But not us, right? But everyone else. But not our mom and dad. Only Jason?
Alex: And Joseph. And Petey. Not Simon. Blast them to pieces in the helicopter. Put them here. This is the helicopter
Arlene: They'll blast to French fries and we'll eat them up. Not Samantha and Katie.
Alex: I can't wait to do this. First we explodeJason.
Arlene: The we fix him up, right? Then he's our baby.Our new baby.
Alex: Yeah, and I'm the superdad and you're the supermom."6

Later when I transcribed the scene I was astonished to realize its similarities to the finale of George Bernard Shaw's dream scene from "Man and Superman". Where Donna Ana cries out, "I believe in the Life to come. A father! A father for the Superman!"

I want to finish my remarks with a scene I was privileged to watch in the kindergarten this morning. I watched several children. One was a little Japanese girl who was very very quiet. She was kind enough to come up and say a few words to me because one of the four languages that she spoke was English. She seemed to understand that this was an important connection to me. And indeed it was. Because there were not many children there who spoke English. And I may have reflected my pleasure. But I watched her and she spoke to no one else. I watched her carefully. She watched people. She was busy herself, but she would not speak to anyone else. I busied myself with some other more vocal children, who understood they must use sign language to communicate with me. And suddenly I saw the little girl's face light up.

And I wondered, *What is causing this?* I thought for a moment, maybe a parent had appeared. Because I had not seen during the entire morning this huge smile on this bright little girl. She had seen that the teacher had the story notebooks, ready to act out stories, half a dozen or so, that had been dictated at an earlier time, in some cases to the parents and in some cases to the teacher. Now this girl whose story was first, and she must have seen that her notebook was on top, became a different child. She certainly had no physical problem, problems of the kind I described with Teddy. A beautiful, well built, healthy child. But extremely shy, not ready to jump into play in the usual form of play, but her story was about to be read. I'm sorry to say that I had not my tape recorder with me so that I'm not able to say what the story was all about, but it was a simple story. I believe the little girl went to a pet store to buy a dog. I think, that was this child's story, and as I said, suddenly she was a different child. She was giving out roles to people, "*This one will be the dog, this one will be the mother who gives permission, this one will be the storekeeper*." She had found a way into play. The play was in one of her four languages, Luxembourgish, that didn't matter, maybe it was even not her best language, I don't know, but she now had everything she needed to proceed with the subject of school. This was a six year old, mind you. Her pictures that she had drawn in her notebook were the kind of pictures a seven or eight year old might draw. Clearly there were many connections she already had made. This was no one you need feel sorry for, except, she wasn't smiling, she wasn't interacting until she found the way in with her story.

Another child was also described as a shy child, so shy in fact she seemed unable to communicate in Luxembourgish. Her first language was Portuguese. She dictated a story at home to her mother who wrote it down in Portuguese. Now, as it happens, all the visitors had been watching the child because she was doing an odd thing: speaking entirely through a friend. When the Portuguese child was asked a question she would whisper to her friend who in turn repeated the answer to the visitors. The friend was the intermediary. It was the Portuguese girl's turn to tell her story and have it acted out. The teacher read the story line by line in Portuguese and the girl, sitting proudly at the table, translates each line perfectly into Luxembourgish in a loud voice while the children act out the story. The story has become the intermediary, the conduit, the friend.

What is this miraculous event going on? The children are not surprised. Nothing surprises or confuses them that takes place during play or story time. *They expect to understand. Play is their language and story is their second language*. Or is it the other way around? It matters not. Somehow they intertwine and connect and explain what we are doing together in this classroom. Play and story takes us where we want to go. Hop abroad. It's the pleasantest trip anyone can invent and will instruct us well for the rest of our lives.

1 Paley, V. G. (1990). The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom, p. 18, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England

2 Paley, V. G. (1993). In an interview with Brooks Gollobin, published in American Alliance for Theatre & Education, The Drama Theatre Teacher, Vol .5, No. 2, Winter, University of Washington

3 Paley, V.G. (1990). The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom, p. 3

4 idem, p. 20

5 idem, p. 21

6 idem, p. 52