Our Children, Their Stories: Storytelling in the Classroom

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OUR CHILDREN, THEIR STORIES:
STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM

Malik Torres

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of the requirements for the degree of
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My Master’s Thesis is about children and their stories. It seeks to understand story creation in the classroom and connect it to the cultivation of the broader classroom community. Here, storytelling is understood in its five forms: reading stories, oral storytelling, drawing stories, writing stories, and acting out stories. What threads these forms together is classroom community. In my thesis, I focus on a concept called “the narrative classroom.” A narrative classroom makes space for both play and storytelling; it incorporates the multi-modal process of literacy into a classroom environment centering children and their stories as official knowledge. Most importantly, my thesis is a testament to the narrative classroom put into action in a public-school setting, where literacy is often decontextualized from its natural, social core.
Acknowledgements

My acknowledgements go to my mother, father, and twin brother, with whom I would not have been exposed to the plethora of rich stories which have textured my life experience. I want to thank my Don at Sarah Lawrence College, Carolyn Ferrell, for under her care and guidance I came of age as a storyteller. I also want to acknowledge my colleagues at the Purple Circle Early Childhood Center, led by Elaine Karas and her staff of wonderful teachers, facilitating my first experiences with progressive education. I also wish to acknowledge my two phenomenal host teachers at the Ella Baker School, Taz Azad and Regina Gallagher, who were not only great mentors but serious thought-partners and great friends throughout my time in their classrooms, offering ample space for me to grow, make mistakes, and grow some more. Finally, I wish to acknowledge all my colleagues at the Art of Teaching Program, with whom the pandemic years have become all the more bearable. Truly, without these wonderful human beings, I would have been lost in the world.
Reflecting on it now, it comes to no surprise that a storyteller, who’s also a teacher, would wish to immerse himself with children and their stories. As a child, I grew up with many stories. My father would tell us stories all the time and my brother and I would sit there listen, whether during long car rides or simply at dinner. These were examples of oral storytelling. My parents didn’t read to us all that much when we were young, but we came to school already knowing how to read. Although we didn’t get many stories through our parents reading to us, we absorbed many stories from our parents telling them to us; these stories often were about their childhoods in New York City. Not only did I absorb stories from my parents, but naturally I generated my own through play with my brother, friends, and cousins. Storytelling was a way to create a collective world and to share it and to evolve it. As I would move away from pretend play, I would begin to write the stories, the imaginary worlds in my head down to paper. As a teacher, I would later become fascinated by how children’s stories emerge and are cherished in the classroom environment; most importantly, I would work on how best to facilitate environment in which children could have their stories merge into the collective imagination of the classroom.

An environment which best facilitates storytelling is one which accepts literacy as a multi-modal process—an organic, communal, spontaneous one—and ultimately guided by play, children’s natural outlet to generate and tell stories. In my thesis, I focus on the “narrative classroom,” a classroom which understands literacy as multi-modal process, centering children’s stories and highlighting the social piece classrooms play in the lives of children. The narrative classroom makes room for all
kinds of stories: read alouds, oral storytelling, drawing stories, writing stories, and finally storyacting.

To quote from the article a *Toward a Narrative Classroom: Storytelling, Media, and Literacy*: “As young children play, they construct narratives (both verbally and through gestures), often including characters and emotions, creating imaginary situations in which objects can be reimagined and remade [...] In the narrative classroom, there is room for both play and storytelling—both are framed as essential language and literacy practices. (Rainville and Gordh, p. 76)” The role of the classroom is to pull these narratives together into a shared imagination. As Vivian Paley wrote in *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, “The classroom that does not create its own legends has not traveled beneath the surface to where the living takes place. (Paley, p. 5)”

With my thesis, however, I wished to take theory and put it into praxis. But how does one cultivate narrative classroom, not only in the younger grades but in the older as well? I took experiences from both my times in Taz’s kindergarten classroom and Regina’s 4th/5th grade classroom at the Ella Baker School to inform my praxis. In Taz’s classroom, read alouds and the conversations taken place thereafter were essential to our classroom community. So were the stories children told us on the playground, during Worktime, or simply in line going to art class. Children drew their stories, often intertwining them with words they knew how to spell. To top all of this, I facilitated numerous plays for storyacting, giving children the chance to embody stories they cherished, such as folktales and fairytales like *The Three Billy Goats, The Little Red Hen, The Three Little Pigs, and Jack and the Beanstalk* in a space outside of worktime and the playground. Most pivotally, the social piece which is essential to storytelling was preserved in our classroom community. In the older grades, however, children’s relationships to stories evolve and often the social aspect of storytelling is undermined. The goal is to get children reading independently; it’s not to have children engage with a text and explore it deeply in a social setting such as a student-led book club or writing work time. But it’s the social piece which gives stories their power and meaning. My thesis details my time with older
children in Regina’s 4th/5th grade classroom, where children and their stories were nonetheless seen as essential to classroom community building. Bucking the trend, read alouds were a nearly everyday occurrence, journaling and journal shares were held as important, so was the classroom newspaper, and writing work time. During my time in Regina’s class, I would conduct read alouds, facilitate journal shares, classroom newspaper, and writing worktime; ultimately working to keep children’s stories essential to our classroom community. Not only would I learn to facilitate these moments for storytelling in our classroom, but I would also plan and facilitate my own ideas to add to our classroom community’s propensity for storytelling, such as organizing a classroom play and graphic novel curriculum.

For my Master’s Thesis I knew I wanted to concentrate on storytelling in the classroom, its potential as a great bonding agent to pull the classroom community together. I was seeking to imbue rich theory with my own praxis, for in a world, in which a progressive educator can feel all too alone, I wanted discover alternatives to the trend—explicit phonics, silent reading, and silent writing—and apply them to my own praxis. My thesis is also about my journey to do just that.

**Master’s Thesis Outline**

**Introduction**

Thesis: Storytelling holds five distinct forms in the classroom through which children can discover entry points into literacy curriculum in ways that accentuate meaning-making, critical thinking, empathy, and imagination. These five distinct forms are reading stories, drawing stories, telling stories, acting out stories, and writing stories. They are the basis of a narrative classroom, a classroom which shares a collective imagination, through which all children can present themselves as they are.
A. What is a narrative classroom?
   I. If storytelling is, as Vivian Paley suggests, “play in narrative form,” then a narrative classroom cannot be anything but a space in which play acts as the foundation for all learning. Vygotsky—“learning is social” and stories are an essential aspect of social learning.

   “As young children play, they construct narratives (both verbally and through gestures), often including characters and emotions, creating imaginary situations in which objects can be reimagined and remade [...] In the narrative classroom, there is room for both play and storytelling—both are framed as essential language and literacy practices. (Rainville and Gordh, p. 76)”

II. Quotes from Vivian Paley’s *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter* (p. 5)
   “Once we push deeply into the collective imagination, it is easier to establish connections and build mythologies. The classroom that does not create its own legends has not traveled beneath the surface to where the living takes place. (Paley, p. 5)”

III. Cultivating narratives in the classroom
   Becoming literate is a dynamic process, multi-modal process not easily contained and defined by tests and written texts. A narrative classroom incorporates this multi-modal process into a classroom environment which centers children’s stories and highlights the social piece classrooms play in children’s lives, capturing this dynamic process and nurtures it.

IV. The kinds of stories we share:
   1) reading a story
Our Children, Their Stories: Storytelling in the Classroom

2) dictating a story
3) drawing a story
4) writing a story
5) acting out a story

B. Reading Stories (storyreading)
   I. Why do we read?
   II. “windows and mirrors” for classroom libraries isn’t enough

   It’s wonderful and rich to have books which reflect diverse experience of children’s lives. Educators do a disservice, however, when they simply end there and don’t engage in conversations after the fact. Stories should not be solely an individual, private experience but also a communal, social experience.

III. Read Alouds (classroom anecdotes)
   Read Alouds are special in that they reach all children, those who aren’t strong readers on their own and those who are. It makes a story a communal interest.

C. Telling a Story (storydictations)
   I. “Can you tell me a story?” The power of Oral Tradition

   The oral tradition is often the first avenue through which children engage with storytelling. However pivotal it is to children’s early engagement with literacy, it is nonetheless deemphasized in classroom’s which overemphasize and value print over stories told orally or through play. When we overemphasize print as a form of storytelling, we consequentially ignore traditions outside the Eurocentric-framework, thus rendering the stories of our children of color invisible. One form of literacy is privileged while the other is dismissed.
“Oral storytelling traditions are well known and very important in a variety of cultures—Native American/American Indian, West African, African American, and Japanese, for example. However, oral storytelling is not adequately valued in classrooms that overprivilege print. The practice of overprivileging print is exclusionary and communicates to many children and their families that their traditions, although rich, are not valuable in classrooms and schools because those stories are not recorded in a book. Such practices are seen from a subtractive perspective and their richness for developing phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic knowledge and understanding is ignored. (Souto-Manning, p. 61, ch. 4)”

II. In Taz’s classroom stories were cherished no matter how they arose. Often children were eager to tell stories, whether it was in morning meetings, during Work Time, on the playground. I took an effort the write some of these stories down during Work Time, often beginning with the questions, would you like to tell me a story?

Classroom Anecdotes:

III. Goldilocks and the Five Little Birds

“Once upon a time, there was a nest and a tree and there were five eggs inside the nest.

The mama bird came and one egg started to crack. And then, another egg started to crack, and then another. And then another egg started to crack. And then another egg. Then, two eggs rolled out, and they started to crack. The top of the
shelves began to come off. And then two little birds said, 'mommy, mommy, get us out of here, please!'

And then, the rest of the eggs began to crack, and then two ones on the treetop, they began to fly. But the others couldn’t.

And then, all of them began to fly.

And then, they found a house. And then, a kid popped out of the house. The kid had beautiful clothes on. The sleeves on the dress was so long. There were so many flowers on her dress and her hair was so long. And then, her mom looked out the window.

And then, the girl had a flower in her hand and balloon in the other hand. And then, the birds flew back into the nest.

The end”

IV. The Little Girl and the Little Boy

"Once upon a time, there was a little boy. His name was Finn. And then, he lives with his grandma and grandpa. And then, he went on a rollercoaster. And then, there was a sister. The sister’s name was Ama.

And they went on a trip to the beach. And then, Finn and Ama’s mom and dad came back. And then, the grandma and grandpa went home. And then they all went on a trip to grandma’s and grandpa’s and then to the beach.

Then, the mother said, ‘I have a baby coming!’ And the baby’s name is Nao.

The end”
V. “Winnie the Pooh was preparing for bed when he remembered a very frightful thought. Tiger had warned him about Wozuls, creatures that love to steal honey. So Pooh was determined not to let anyone or anything get at his precious honey. The night’s rain flooded Pooh’s house. And then, he remembered to save his precious honey.”

D. Drawing Stories (storydrawing)
   I. A mental image
      Just as how when children begin to read, they read images, whether on a street sign when walking down the street or glancing at the train letters on a subway, drawing marks the emergence of writing in children
   II. Storydrawing in Taz’s classroom
      o Images of children’s work
      o Importance of creating a mental image
      o Connecting storydrawing with playacting or storyacting

E. Writing a Story (storywriting)
   I. Early Writing as Fantasy Play
      “Vygotsky makes the further case that the gesture is developmentally a requisite to the development of written language. In A Prehistory of Written Language (1934,
trans. 1978), Vygotsky claims that the gesture is “the initial visual sign that contains the child’s future writing as an acorn contains a future oak.”

“Gestures are writing in air, and written signs frequently are simply gestures that have been fixed.

Early on, children shuttle between actual gestures and scribbles on paper that “supplement this gestural representation.” In fact, Vygotsky regards the child’s first marks on paper developmentally as recorded gestures rather than as drawing in the true sense of the word.”

II. Excerpts from Understanding Children’s Writing as Play (Boldt)

Jimmy Britton argued that “a child’s writing begins to develop as yet another way to play with objects in the environment and with symbolization and language.”

“Children especially need this time so they can use play to direct movements in the classroom sea of talk among the stories we teachers tell and read to them, the many narratives they bring into school with them, and the spoken, enacted and written texts they produce. The children are invited to play, but are also invited to dictate their stories, to turn them into text, and to act them out for the consideration of the entire class” (Boldt, p. 16)

III. [Anecdotes from Taz’s classroom]
F. Acting out a Story (storyacting)

I. Storyacting is storytelling. Storytelling is play.

II. “Stories that are not acted out are fleeting dreams: private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined. [...] children like to dramatize books and fairytales but are not dismayed if there is time only to read them. Acting them out is better, but listening usually enough. They feel quite differently about their own stories. Once they see them in action, they are never again satisfied with half-a-loaf. (Paley, p. 25)”

III. [Anecdotes from Taz’s classroom]

- The Three Billy Goats
- The Little Red Hen
- The Three Little Pigs
- Jack and the Beanstalk

IV. Jack and the Beanstalk Storyacting

This was the fourth story we acted out, and this time I decided to be more methodical and imbued some structure to our storyacting. For Jack and the Beanstalk, we had three read alouds, one group drawing activity, one individual drawing/writing activity, storyacting. In a way, all the steps involved in the storyacting process encapsulate many of the forms of storytelling integral to a classroom settings (read alouds, storydrawings, storywriting, storyacting).

- First Read Aloud
- Second Read Aloud
- Group Storydrawing Activity
- Individual Storydrawing Activity
Part II: Tracing these threads into the older years of childhood

How does the role of children in story creation change as they get older?

I. Meaning-making in the later years

As children age, so does their relationship with stories. They are expected to read independently and branch out to different genres, most notably from fiction to nonfiction. What’s often cast to the wayside is the quintessential social aspects of stories. The goal is to get children reading independently; it’s not to have children engage with a text and explore it deeply in a social setting such as a literary circle. But it’s the social piece which gives stories their power and meaning. The goal for older children, therefore, should not be solely independent reading, though it’s an essential piece; rather, a worthier goal would be one which properly employs the power of stories in their social setting in, say, a literary circle or student-led book club. Agency is key to meaning-making. A classroom which provides numerous avenues for agency in story creation thrusts meaning-making in the forefront of learning.

A. Read Alouds

To reiterate, as children get older what tends to get undercut in terms of literacy is components which include a social piece like read alouds, shared reading, modeled/shared writing, and interactive writing. The social piece of literacy, arguably the piece without which the act of becoming literate itself is nullified, becomes sacrificed in an attempt to bolster literacy which is decontextualized—explicit phonics to no end, silent reading, silent writing. During my student teaching at the Ella Baker School in Regina’s 4th/5th grade class, I was lucky to experience a classroom in which the social component to literacy was cherished and seen
as an essential component to the broader classroom community and to children’s own literacy development.

Writing as Storytelling in the Later Years

“ [...] in many quarters of American pedagogy, it is common to talk about writing processes, to create open-ended prompts that allow students to draw from personal experiences to craft a piece of writing in a particular genre, or even allow students choice over the topic and genre of thei writing. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on crafting high-quality writing and turning out young writers with the attitudes, if not the talents, of a published author [...] this focus remains on the child’s production of writing for a critical audience rather than where it should be—on the use of writing for exploring and experimenting with the nature of reality, for personal and social pleasure, for the development of creativity and an appreciation of social diversity, and to grow an active and engaged public. (Boldt, p. 11)”

B. Journal Shares
An essential piece to our classroom community in Regina’s classroom. Students would write journal entries either independently or in partnerships and would share their work with the class at the end journaling. Highlighting student work

I. The importance of highlighting student work

II. Storytelling as a social act

III. The spontaneity of an engaged public

C. Writing Work Time
I. Significance of Writing Worktime
Writing Work Time is a space for children to pursue their own interests as a community of writers.

“As our workshop developed, we noticed different patterns. Personal narrative, writing about the self and one’s own experiences, appeared less compelling to many 4th graders. Certainly, student’s sources for writing, as constructivist theory would suggest, reflected lived experience in some way. Yet, when students were given space and freedom to write, the shape of that lived experience often reflected media-generated, popular worlds—video games they played, children’s book series, movie plot lines, superheroes, and TV characters they liked. Our students, it turned out were less likely to dwell on “realistic” personal experiences and far more compelled to represent and actively filter various “mediascapes,” shaping their own voices and language in relation to the virtual worlds and multiple literacies around them. (Hamel, 2017)”

II. An original class play

III. Graphic Novel Study

Tracing students’ interest across the school year and generating a multi-step classroom project.

Storytelling and History

A. Process Drama

I. What is process drama?

II. [Excerpts from Imaginative Inquiry and Process drama articles]

III. Process drama when exploring history [Anecdotes from Regina’s 4/5 classroom]
IV. Process Drama and Social Justice

B. Storytelling and Transformative Justice
   I. Empathy as the keystone for the critical consciousness necessary for transformative justice. Storytelling generates meaning and empathy.

C. Conclusion
   I. Reflection and thank you
Bibliography


Reflecting on it now, it comes to no surprise that a storyteller, who’s also a teacher, would wish to immerse himself with children and their stories. As a child, I grew up with many stories. My father would tell us stories all the time and my brother and I would sit there listen, whether during long car rides or simply at dinner. These were examples of oral storytelling. My parents didn’t read to us all that much when we were young, but we came to school already knowing how to read. Although we didn’t get many stories through our parents reading to us, we absorbed many stories from our parents telling them to us; these stories often were about growing up in New York City. Not only did I absorb stories from my parents, but naturally I generated my own through play with my twin brother, friends, and cousins. Storytelling was a way to create a collective world and to share it and to evolve it. As I would move away from pretend play, I would begin to write the stories, the imaginary worlds in my head, down to paper. I would come to Sarah Lawrence College wanting to become a writer. Though as a teacher, my fascination with stories, and how children’s stories emerge and are cherished in the classroom environment, would only grow; most importantly, I would work on how best to facilitate environment in which children could have their stories merge into the collective imagination of the classroom.
As we begin, I would like you to recollect, if you can, one of the first moments you were enthralled by a story in school. I want you to think about who told you the story. Was it a teacher? A fellow student? Or another adult figure in the school? Then, I would like you to ponder why the story enthralled you. Was it the thrill of the story itself? Maybe it was the tone of the storyteller’s voice?

The first story that comes to mind is one I heard perhaps in kindergarten or the 1st grade. A storyteller came into visit us and he told us the legend of John Henry, a former enslaved man who worked on the railroad and was the best steel driver the railroad ever had. He was two meters tall and could drill through rock with his tall hammer like none other. But one day, the railroad company bought a machine to replace the workers. John Henry in retaliation would go on to challenge the machine to a contest. As the story goes, John Henry and the machine go to work, the machine starting out twice as fast, but John Henry's determination burned hot like fire and he worked harder and harder, drilling through rock after rock, until the machine broke down. Man had beat mission but at a cost. John Henry would collapse and die due to exhaustion.
I remember being told this story to this very day, because it was a story of a man overcoming great odds, though paying a hefty price in the end. Indeed, I recall how sad I was when John Henry died at the end, which is perhaps the reason I remember the story at all today.

As an adult, I am enamored by this story because it tells the tale of a working class black man rising against the odds of industrial capitalism against great labor anxieties.

I tell you all this because I want to talk about the importance of storytelling in the classrooms, not simply the stories which adults tell but those which children generate themselves, so naturally and spontaneously everyday; and I want speak on listening to those stories and incorporating them into the broad, vivacious classroom community.
Storytelling holds five distinct forms in the classroom through which children can discover entry points into literacy curriculum in ways that accentuate meaning-making, critical thinking, empathy, and imagination. These five distinct forms are reading stories, telling stories, drawing stories, writing stories, and acting out stories. They are the pieces to a narrative classroom, a classroom which shares a collective imagination, through which all children can present themselves as they are.
[Here's a quote from the article Toward a Narrative Classroom]

If storytelling is, as Vivian Paley suggests, “play in narrative form,” then a narrative classroom cannot be anything but a space in which play acts as the foundation for all learning and children’s knowledge, all that they bring in, is rightfully included into the official knowledge of the curriculum.
Children in their play generate numerous stories, often tiny reflections on their own observations of the world.

“Once we push deeply into the collective imagination, it is easier to establish connections and build mythologies. The classroom that does not create its own legends has not traveled beneath the surface to where the living takes place.” (Paley, The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter, p. 5)
Children can create stories about small things
Children can create stories about trains towing in animals into a train station
Children can make stories about the mundane experiences of sitting on bench waiting for a bus.
They can create stories about recycling
Or making a forest
And they can also make a story about calling Santa Clause
To leave presents under your tree.

Children generate many stories through play and a narrative classroom facilitates this; it encourages story creation.
Becoming literate is a multi-modal process; it’s organic, communal, and spontaneous. A narrative classroom incorporates this multi-modal process into a classroom environment which centers children’s stories and highlights the social piece classrooms play in children’s lives, capturing this dynamic process and nurtures it.
Reading Stories
During a professional development meeting at Ella Baker, the principal talked about the importance of going beyond windows and mirrors citing Zaretta Hammond’s talk at the Teacher’s College. It’s wonderful and rich to have books which reflect diverse experience of children’s lives. Educators do a disservice, however, when they simply end there and don’t engage in conversations after the fact. Stories should not be solely an individual, private experience but also a communal, social experience. So how does a classroom make a story a communal interest?
Read Alouds are special in that they reach all children, those who aren’t strong readers on their own and those who are and those who are not readers at all. It makes a story a communal interest.

My first experience facilitating a read aloud was at the Purple Circle Early Childhood Center, a progressive early childhood center on the Upper Westside in Manhattan. A school also privileged with a vast library of books, but one which also highlighted the importance of also having conversations about those books.
This is a picture of the many read alouds that would happen at the Purple Circle. I learned so much from this woman here in the picture. She is a phenomenal storyteller and children are always absorbed into the stories she reads to them and the folktales she can tell orally.
One of my greatest duties at the Purple Circle was reading to children, whether during a read aloud or right before naptime.
Last Fall, I had the pleasure to be in Taz's kindergarten as a student teacher. There we read many upon many books, ranging from folktales and fairytales to books on feelings, identity, and funny stories. We read a many great range of books, but we also had great conversations about these stories, whether they be on identity or thoughts about characters and plot.

Read alouds centered the class interest on one story, and often that interest would evolve into something elaborate, which we will explore later.
Dictating Stories

Another way we tell stories in the classroom is through oral storytelling and dictations.
The oral tradition is often the first avenue through which children engage with storytelling. However pivotal it is to children's early engagement with literacy, it is nonetheless deemphasized in classroom's which overemphasize and value print over stories told orally or through play. When we overemphasize print as a form of storytelling, we consequentially ignore traditions outside the Eurocentric-framework, thus rendering the stories of our children who do not historically belong in this framework invisible. One form of literacy is privileged while the other is dismissed.
In Taz’s classroom stories were cherished no matter how they arose. Often children were eager to tell stories, whether it was in morning meetings, during Work Time, or on the playground. I took an effort the write some of these stories down during Work Time, often beginning with the question, would you like to tell me a story?

I felt it pivotal to listen to children's stories, to write them down. I want to share some of those stories with you today.
Classroom Anecdotes

Goldilocks and the Five Little Birds

"Once upon a time, there was a nest and a tree and there were five eggs inside the nest.

The mama bird came and one egg started to crack. And then, another egg started to crack, and then another. And then, another egg started to crack. And then another egg. Then, two eggs rolled out, and they started to crack. The top of the shells began to come off. And then two little birds said, "Mommy, mommy, get us out of here, please!"

And then, the rest of the eggs began to crack, and then two ones on the treetop, they began to fly. But the others couldn't.

And then, all of them began to fly.

And then, they found a house. And then, a kid popped out of the house. The kid had beautiful clothes on. The sleeves on the dress was so long. There were so many flowers on her dress and her hair was so long. And then, her mom looked out the window.

And then, the girl had a flower in her hand and balloon in the other hand. And then, the birds flew back into the nest.

The end"

[after story]

One girl told me this story during Work Time. It’s lovely how children can take a folktale they are familiar with and make it their own.
Here's another story. By the same girl, but this time, she includes everyone else at the table sitting next to her.
“Winnie the Pooh was preparing for bed when he remembered a very frightful thought. Tiger had warned him about Wozuls, creatures that love to steal honey. So Pooh was determined not to let anyone or anything get at his precious honey.

The night’s rain flooded Pooh’s house. And then, he remembered to save his precious honey.”

This is the final story, I'll share with you.

As you can tell, this child is a big fan of Winnie the Pooh. I love the language in this story, so rich and detailed. The girl was very particular in her use of language, wanting to get the story exactly as she imagined it.
Drawing Stories
Just as how when children begin to read, they read images, whether on a street sign when walking down the street or glancing at the train letters on a subway; tangentially, drawing marks the emergence of writing in children
1st picture--after story drawing exercise I learned from Cassandra. The child waited until I finished the story to draw every detail from memory. “This is the little town and here is the kid going up the mountain. Here are the animals and here’s the Ice Wizard on top.”

2nd picture—This drawing included numerous stories, often happening in the same scene. Lots of motion and detail with facial expressions

3rd picture--group drawing by two girls after our Jack and The Beanstalk Read Aloud.
Writing Stories
Vygotsky claims that the gesture is "the initial visual sign that contains the child’s future writing as an acorn contains a future oak.”
“[A] child’s writing begins to develop as yet another way to play with objects in the environment and with symbolization and language.”
Here are few pieces of children’s work written during Writing Work Time.

First picture: “Construction”
Second top right: House, family, dog, although its clearly a cat
Third bottom right: example of inventive spelling-- WaDr Porc My Favurhlt” or “Water Park my favorite”
This is a reflection on play in Dramatic Play. During the time this was written, the “Water Park” was a major theme in Dramatic Play. Children would use the hollow blocks to build slides and other tall structures.
“Children especially need this time so they can use play to direct movements in the classroom sea of talk among the stories we teachers tell and read to them, the many narratives they bring into school with them, and the spoken, enacted and written texts they produce. The children are invited to play, but are also invited to dictate their stories, to turn them into text, and to act them out for the consideration of the entire class” (Boldt, p. 16)
Storyacting is embodying stories.
Storyacting is storytelling. Storytelling is play.
“Stories that are not acted out are fleeting dreams: private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined. [...] children like to dramatize books and fairytales but are not dismayed if there is time only to read them. Acting them out is better, but listening usually enough. They feel quite differently about their own stories. Once they see them in action, they are never again satisfied with half-a-loaf.” (Paley, p. 25)
In Taz’s classroom storyacting was a community thread, which bounded children together in common act. Many of the stories we read together during Read Aloud we acted out as a class communal event. Four stories in particular were The Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Little Red Hen, The Three Little Pigs, and Jack and the Beanstalk, all either folktales or fairytales.
I want to share with you our final storyacting session we did in Taz’s class. We acted out the fairytale Jack and the Beanstalk.
This was the fourth story we acted out, and this time I decided to be more methodical and imbued some structure to our storyacting. For Jack and the Beanstalk, we had three read alouds, one group drawing activity, one individual drawing/writing activity, storyacting. In a way, all the steps involved in the storyacting process encapsulate many of the forms of storytelling integral to a classroom settings (read alouds, storydrawings, storywriting, storyacting).

**First Read Aloud**
When our class focuses on a specific story, I begin the first read aloud and its usually introduced as any story we may read. I read *Jack and The Beanstalk* and gave children the time to comment on the pages during our read aloud. After the read aloud is finished, I ask the children a broad question: “what do you remember?” or “what part stuck out to you?”

Some children responded, “the castle in the sky,” the “Giants,” or the “magic beans.” These are small disparate details. This is fine. As we read the story a few more time and reflect on it through drawing first collectively, then individually, before finally acting it, the children will begin to recall a plethora of fine details and concepts from the story.
Second Read Aloud
For our second read aloud, I asked the children what they remembered in the story and wrote down their thoughts and repeated it back to them. As expected, children started to recall pivotal plot points of the story and connect them to one another. Here are the points we discussed:

Jack’s mother being angry about him selling their only cow for magic beans. They remembered the magic beans growing into a giant beanstalk which reached up into the clouds. Some children recalled how angry the giants were and they always yelled, “Fie, Fi, fo, fum!” They remembered Jack had to hide from Giants in the giant washbin. And they remembered the beanstalk was cut at the end.

Storydrawing Group Activity

After this, I had the children work in groups on drawing their favorite scene from the story. The idea is to have students to think about and draw the story collectively. This way, their ideas can mesh, and they can learn from one another some details that they might not have remembered. During this time, the other teachers and I went around asking children about what they were drawing and labeling it. Some children decided to draw the characters they enjoyed. In case of the picture in the middle, we see the Giantess, Jack’s mom and Jack. In the picture on the bottom left corner, the children included numerous objects and scenes from the book. Notably, they included the scene when Jack’s mom became angry with Jack when he returned home from selling the cow with no money and only beans. She angrily threw them out the window. The students also drew the beanstalk and the Giantess at the top.

Like the previous drawing, the drawing on the bottom right includes a mesh of ideas. Children were drawing things that stuck out to them. This included the beanstalk or animals like the cow. In this group, we even see one child include the harp, a small but important detail in the story, in the drawing. A constant theme still is the beanstalk.

Third Read Aloud

For the third read aloud, I tried to focus on the small details in Jack and the Beanstalk, particularly on the three items Jack stole from the Giants, first a bag of gold coins, then a goose that lays golden eggs, and finally a golden harp. After the read aloud, I wanted to individually assess how everyone absorbed the details and plot of the story, so I asked each child to draw a favorite scene of theirs or simply something they
remember from the story but this time individually.

**Individual Drawing Activity**

On the top right, the student not only drew Jack’s house and the Giant and the castle in the sky, but she also provided labels for them as well. The beanstalk is the ever-expanding swirl next to the house.
Always, before our class begins to reenact a story, I ask them “what do we need in our play?” This allows them to think about the story we have been reading and allows them to imagine in it in physical space. For *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the children recalled a host of things we might need: a beanstalk, the goose, the house and castle, a cow, the mom, the bean seller, Jack of course, and two giants. Some of these were characters while other things were to do with the various settings in the story.

I wrote down the “stage ideas” on a white board.

Due to the numerous components of the story, I knew that our play would require extensive planning with the children. During our Work Time, a group of children and I set to work with building our stage. Some children helped build the house and castle, while others helped me craft the beanstalk. For the house and the castle, the children used our classroom hollow blocks, great building materials for Dramatic Play, and used them to create two complex structures. For the beanstalk, I gathered some fallen leaves and long strips of green paper beforehand, and the children helped attach the leaves to the green paper. We attached the decorated paper to some long hollow blocks.
These are the structures after they were built. On the right is the Giant’s castle, and on the left is Jack’s house. In the middle lies the beanstalk.
These are pictures of some performances. Before we preform, we go over audience rules: 1. Stay Quiet 2. Keep a Still Body 3. Applause at the End. Then, children move back and sit at the edge of the rug

Reflection

What part did you like from the story or story acting?
The reflection piece is an idea that I began to add to our story lessons after a few tries with the *Billy Goats Gruff* and *The Little Red Hen*. With those stories, I understood at the end the stories did stick with the children and they certainly demonstrated in more than one way, with either storydrawing or the process of building the stage in storyacting, that they understood the intricacies of the story. I also knew they enjoyed it, because the stories would become a constant reference in our classroom during pretend play. But for this story, I thought giving a structured time for reflection would give children the space to share their thoughts on a story they worked so long and hard on.

Children were immensely eager to share their favorite parts and why they choose
those parts specifically. They naturally enjoyed the parts they participated in the most. So if a child was Jack in the play, he or she would say, their favorite part was being Jack. If they were the Giant, this would be their favorite part. But most notably, many children converged on the idea that the ending, when the Giant fell down the vine to his death, was their favorite part.
Tracing these Threads into Late Childhood
How does the role of children in story creation change as they get older? This was a question on my mind as I moved to the upper grades at the Ella Baker School into Regina’s 4th/5th grade classroom.

As children age, so does their relationship with stories. They are expected to read independently and branch out to different genres, most notably from fiction to nonfiction. What’s often cast to the wayside is the quintessential social aspects of stories. The goal is to get children reading independently; it’s not to have children engage with a text and explore it deeply in a social setting such as a literary circle or a class read aloud. But it’s the social piece which gives stories their power and meaning. The goal for older children, therefore, should not be solely an reinforcement of independent reading, though it’s an essential piece; rather, a worthier goal would be one which properly employs the power of stories in their social setting in, say, a literary circle or student-led book club. Agency is key to meaning-making. A classroom which provides numerous avenues for agency in story creation thrusts meaning-making in the forefront of learning.
To reiterate, as children get older what tends to get undercut in terms of literacy is components which include a social piece like read alouds, shared reading, modeled/shared writing, and interactive writing. The social piece of literacy, arguably the piece without which the act of becoming literate itself is nullified, becomes sacrificed in an attempt to bolster literacy which is decontextualized—explicit phonics to no end, silent reading, silent writing. During my student teaching at the Ella Baker School in Regina’s 4th/5th grade class, I was lucky to experience a classroom in which the social component to literacy was cherished and seen as an essential component to the broader classroom community and to children’s own literacy development.
When I first entered Regina’s classroom in late November on a little tour given to me by the principle, I had the pleasure sit in on a read aloud. Regina was reading The Losers Club by Andrew Clements. I remember being struck by how thoughtful students were in the commentary after the read aloud was done. Not only were they eager to give their own opinions on what was read, but they could also offer agreements or disagreements on the comments of their peers. As I would join the classroom in January, I would begin to surmise that I was among a community of readers, and by no means a perfect one, but one instead rich in a diversity of young readers, some avid, others casual, some “struggling,” others precocious; a pleasant surprise was that every child engaged in reading something they enjoyed. A few things work to cultivate a community of readers in our classroom: read alouds, a vast and diverse classroom library, independent reading time, and most recently student-led book clubs.

Read alouds are the first thing. As stated previously, read alouds make one story a communal interest. They offer classrooms an opportunity to reach beyond windows and mirrors and open doors to conversations on race, class, and gender issues. Here are some of books we read together as a class and which are part of the classroom
library, available for kids to read on their own at home and at school.

Next I want to show you pictures of the student-led book club. They are in the process of choosing books they would like to read in a small group. They rank five choices and Regina and I do our best to put them into groups.
This is beginning to turning independent reading into a student-led group reading or book club
I am pleased to say in Regina’s classroom children’s stories were not only held as serious work, but also as essential threads to our classroom community.
One of the ways stories were integral to the classroom community were through Journal shares. Journal shares played another important role in our classroom community, allowing children to present stories they have either written privately or in a partnerships with their classmates. Sometimes these journal shares were reflections on everyday life, but most times, journal shares included what Fred Hamel in his book *Choice and Agency in the Writing Workshop* called various “mediascapes,” pulling from TV shows, video games, and shared imaginations. Through journal shares children would even adapt stories of other children, thus creating their own “fan fiction.” These are some of the ways children were able to display their own stories and cherish the stories of others.
Class Newspaper
Newspaper was another community project in our classroom. Each issue would be managed by four student editors, who we tasked with keeping track of the work of other students. This work would include news articles covering a range of issues from the Pandemic to playground-related issues such as Kickball. Additionally, children would make comics strips and crossword puzzles and write articles on food. In this picture, you see four issues, and we are currently working on our fifth and final issue.
These are three stories from those issues. Some of these are fan fiction pieces. I find it lovely when children use fan fiction as a way to comment on each other’s stories.
Writing Work Time

[insert quote from Hamel's Choice and Agency in Writing Workshop]
“As our workshop developed, we noticed different patterns. Personal narrative, writing about the self and one’s own experiences, appeared less compelling to many 4th graders. Certainly, student’s sources for writing, as constructivist theory would suggest, reflected lived experience in some way. Yet, when students were given space and freedom to write, the shape of that lived experience often reflected media-generated, popular worlds—video games they played, children’s book series, movie plot lines, superheroes, and TV characters they liked. Our students, it turned out were less likely to dwell on “realistic” personal experiences and far more compelled to represent and actively filter various “mediascapes,” shaping their own voices and language in relation to the virtual worlds and multiple literacies around them. (Hamel, 2017)”

[For context, this quote is from the book Choice and Agency in the Writing Workshop. The author Fred L. Hamel is observing a 4th grade classroom as it sifts through Writing Workshop]

Writing Work Time in Regina’s class is a time for children to explore various “mediascapes” through numerous projects, some done cooperatively, others individually. Projects have a wide range, including comic book making, Choose Your Own Adventure stories, individual stories, Harry Potter Fan Fiction club, and a Fairytale play
During writing work time, I wanted to take a small group and facilitate a class play based on a fairytale. We began with overviewing what we know about fairytales and the basics of plot structure, and then students would tell me their ideas. I would just listen and write down what they said, while also making sure every child got time to speak and adequately commented on the ideas of their peers. I would ask probing questions about the plot, write these down, repeat it back to them for clarification.
Once the plot fleshed out, the children mapped it out themselves and divvied up work to manage the larger project. An important goal for me was to have this group be self-regulated, managing their own work and time between themselves. They managed to do this really quickly.
Writing Work Time was very busy for us. Students immediately got to work, some writing the script and plot outline, while others were making the various props. The production is almost finished, and we hope to be done by the middle if not the end of May.
Tracing students’ interest across the school year and generating a multi-step classroom project:

Throughout my time with Regina’s 4th/5th class, I noticed how children loved to make comics. Comics were in the newspaper and they were being made during Writing Work Time. I wanted to dedicate time to this as a larger classroom project. In conferred my professor Rue about it and she was kind enough to lend me a graphic novel curriculum she used for 2nd and 3rd graders. Next, I conferred Regina about how much time we could dedicate to the project and about ways I could best implement my own ideas.
The first thing we did was a Gallery Walk, the framing questions: Why do we read graphic novels? What sticks out to us when we read graphic novels?

We had a conversation about these questions before hand and many children brought up “the visuals,” that graphic novels allow them to “visualize a story” they otherwise had trouble doing with a traditional book.

So for the gallery walk, I had children go around and look at graphic novels we placed at their tables and write on little sticky notes, what stuck out to them.
The next thing was Storydrawing. I read to them a story from a collection of Native American Folktales adapted into a graphic novel form. The story was called How the Alligator Got his Brown Skin. I read it to them without showing the pictures, emphasizing the importance of possessing a mental image of a story. I played sound effects of thunder and rain and fire crackling from my computer to generate sensory images. After the read aloud, I asked them to draw what they imagined, particularly the conflict, rising action, climax, and resolution. I was pleased by how well children responded to the story, visualizing it with remarkable accuracy while simultaneously adapting it as their own, some of course adding their own little twists. For example, the child on the far left, whose whole world is Bayblades and Minecraft, imagined the story as Beyblade battle, distinctively meshing his own imagination with the plot he heard.
Graphic Organizing as the first stage. Organizing thoughts on characters, setting, plot (conflict, rising action, climax, resolution). These are pictures of children drawing the characters in their stories.
Storyboarding stage as a first draft (drawing out each scene). We had a conversation in the beginning about storyboarding (what is it?). I modeled an example of it and children got to work. For the storyboarding process, children referenced their graphic organizers and other materials like their journals or drawing books. The child on the upper right hand corner didn’t reference his graphic organizer at all, because he wanted to switch up his story after he had already completed his graphic organizer. He made it from scratch and it looks like beginnings to an exquisite animation. The girl on the bottom right referenced a book to draw certain animals. Children utilized a variety of references.
Official paneling stage, cover design
More photos of children in the final process of their graphic novel making
After children are finished with paneling, they place it into a folder and design an official cover. This folder goes up on the wall as an initial showcasing of student work. Once everyone is finished, we will do a comic book convention to finish up, making space for the social piece of our work and giving children the chance to read one another’s work and share in the joy they all worked so hard to create.
Storytelling and History
Finally, process drama is essential to how we tell stories and embody them in our social studies curriculum. The point here is to not to “act” as people would back then, for this is impossible and often insensitive, but it’s more important to understand how people thought back then and use what we know about a group of people to think through how they might engage with a particular scenario. Since we were studying the Haudensaunee people of New York, we got together as if we were in a long house and addressed issues, particular scenarios, like a community, as the Lenape would. I want to share with you one scenario in which the Dutch arrive and our classroom had to decide whether or not to trade with them and give their reasons as to why or why not.
Children use what they learn about the Lenape in reading books, writing essays, and engaging in other activities, and they use this information to inform their thoughts on a particular issue. Process Drama is essential for creating empathy in children for cultures that are not their own. This is all done through storytelling.
Empathy is the keystone for the critical consciousness necessary for transformative justice. Storytelling generates meaning and empathy and community in a classroom, intertwining with ideals of transformative justice.
How can we center children’s stories in our classrooms?

By preserving Read Alouds
Facilitating Book Clubs and Journal Shares
Structuring a Writing Work Time
And Incorporating storytelling mechanism like process drama into social studies
Thank you!