Using the Transformative Power of Play to Educate Hearts and Minds: From Vygotsky to Vivian Paley and Beyond

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This article argues that Vygotsky's analysis of children's play and of the ways it can serve as a powerful matrix for learning and development has two important implications that are not always fully appreciated. First, children's social pretend play can promote development both in the domains of cognition and language *and* in dimensions of social competence, such as self-regulation and cooperation. Second, tapping play's value in the education of young children is not purely a matter of alternating didactic/academic instruction with unstructured free-play periods. We also need to devise educational practices that systematically *integrate* the play element into the curriculum in carefully structured ways that simultaneously engage children's enthusiasm and provide scope for their own initiative and creativity. One concrete example of a play-based activity that can do this successfully is the story-telling/story-acting practice developed by Vivian Paley. Drawing on a recently completed 2-year study of this practice in several preschool classrooms serving low-income 3- to 5-year-olds from diverse ethnic backgrounds, we focus on an individual case study to illustrate how participation in this practice can generate mutually reinforcing benefits in language and social competence for the children involved. In the process, we consider the significance of both peer-group relations and socio-emotional relations with adults and their complementary roles in helping promote these competencies.

In recent years, the role of play in early childhood education in the United States has been markedly reduced. Part of the reason is that kindergarten, elementary school, and even preschool teachers feel increasing pressure to focus exclusively on teaching specific academic skills through direct instruction (e.g., Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). At the same time, the potential value of play for promoting children's learning and development is often underappreciated and poorly understood by researchers as well as practitioners. The result is an excessively one-sided enthusiasm for narrowly didactic/academic approaches to education, paralleled by a damaging erosion of more child-centered, constructivist, and, above all, play-oriented approaches.

It is essential to reevaluate play-based educational practices and to understand how they can be used most effectively in young children's education. This article seeks to contribute to that effort. We begin with a brief exposition of Vygotsky's seminal analysis of children's play and of

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the ways that young children's social pretend play can serve as a powerful matrix for learning and development. We argue that Vygotsky's analysis has two important implications that are not always fully appreciated. First, as research has confirmed, children's pretend play can promote both cognitive development *and* the development of dimensions of social competence, such as self-regulation, cooperation, and interpersonal perspective taking (for reviews, see Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). Second, tapping the potential value of play for learning and development is not simply a matter of alternating didactic/academic instruction with free-play periods. Rather, educational practices should systematically *integrate* the play element into the curriculum in carefully structured ways that simultaneously engage children's enthusiasm and provide scope for children's own initiative and creativity

One concrete example of a practice that can do this successfully is a storytelling/story-acting practice originally developed by teacher/researcher Vivian Paley (e.g., 1990). We recently completed a 2-year study of the operation and effects of this storytelling/story-acting practice in 14 preschool classrooms (7 experimental and 7 control) serving low-income children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. We present two types of evidence from this project: overall results drawn from a range of pre- and posttests and an illustrative case study. This evidence shows how participation in this practice can generate mutually reinforcing benefits in language and social competence skills for the children involved.

RECONCEPTUALIZING PLAY-BASED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Existing efforts to incorporate play into early childhood education in the United States are often weakened in one of two ways. The first is by treating play as simply a natural childhood activity that needs no support or guidance from teachers, except perhaps in a minimal way, such as allowing free time for children to do as they please and providing them with space and materials. Such free play is certainly enjoyable and beneficial for children, and it may well enhance some of their social-relational and language abilities. But by itself, this hands-off approach does not fully tap the potential of play-based activities to promote important skills that help prepare children for educational success—for example, by building up the foundations of emergent literacy, which is especially important for many children from low-income backgrounds.

The second is by incorporating play into classroom activities in ways that are excessively adult-structured and lacking in spontaneity. For example, teachers create play corners with specific themes that are structured for children to play in scripted ways. The goal is to teach children the vocabulary associated with these activities and also to expose them to specific practices that may be useful for them to know in real life. But in practice, these excessively scripted play corners usually capture children's imagination for limited amounts of time and rarely attract many enthusiastic participants. Because they do not provide enough scope for children's own initiative and creativity, they fail to engage their energy and enthusiasm, and their educational benefits are limited.

Neither of these approaches is a fully adequate way of integrating play into the education of young children. Both are based on partial or even misleading understandings of play and its potential to contribute to development and education. To gain better insight into how play can be used to create powerful contexts for learning and development, it is necessary to obtain a more complete and profound understanding of play itself. For that purpose, Vygotsky's theory of children's play and its role in development offers an essential starting point.

Vygotsky's Theory of Play

In characterizing play, Vygotsky stresses the presence of two essential and interrelated components: (a) an imaginary situation, and (b) the rules implicit in the imaginary situation. This is true for both social pretend play and games with rules. An *imaginary situation* is a defining characteristic not only of fantasy or pretend play but also of games with explicit rules—though, in the latter case, the imaginary situation may be present in concealed form. For instance, the game of chess is structured by an imaginary world peopled by specific actors—kings, queens, knights, and so on—who can move only in specified and rule-governed ways. The system of rules serves, in fact, to constitute the play situation itself; in turn, these rules and the actions based on them derive their meanings from the play situation. Equally, the presence of *rules* is a defining characteristic not only of "games with rules" in the specific sense, but also of fantasy play—though here the rules may be implicit. These implicit rules become apparent if, for example, we consider the restrictions placed on children's behavior by virtue of the roles they adopt. When a child pretends to be a mother or father, she or he cannot adopt just any behavior but must try to grasp and follow the rules of maternal or paternal behavior as understood and perceived by the child and others. An important cognitive effort is involved here: "What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behavior in play" (Vygotsky, 1933/1967, p. 9). In short, fantasy play and games with rules are two poles of a single continuum: from an explicit imaginary situation with implicit rules to an implicit imaginary situation with explicit rules.

What is most illuminating about Vygotsky's characterization of play is his focus on the way it necessarily fuses elements often treated as contradictory: imagination and spontaneity on the one hand, and rule-governed action on the other. Play is enjoyable, intrinsically voluntary, and at the same time an *essentially* rule-governed activity. The system of rules is central to constituting the playworld itself, and in turn, these rules derive their force from the child's enjoyment of, and commitment to, the shared activity of the playworld. Indeed, as Vygotsky emphasizes, a crucial aspect of the theoretical significance of play is that it is one of the first activities in which children self-consciously impose rules on *themselves*, rather than merely receiving them from others. This happens because the child learns that achieving the satisfactions sought in the imaginary situation requires adhering to the rules implicit in that situation. The rules of play therefore become, "rules of self-constraint and self-determination" (Vygotsky, 1933/1967, p. 10). Furthermore, play is always a *learning* activity because it requires learning and grasping these rules, seeing that they form a system, elaborating on them, and mastering the possibilities of the form of practice they constitute. Moreover, inserting elements from the larger culture into the symbolic universe of the playworld forces the child to try to make sense of them, even as they are stylized and transformed. Thus, even simple pretend play—for example, a little girl pretending to be a mother—requires attending to and making more *explicit* the normally *implicit* rules embedded in the role of "mother." These tenets are held even more strongly for joint pretend activity.

In short, play is not simply frivolous. On the contrary, if properly understood, it can serve as a prototype of a form of activity constituted by shared and voluntarily accepted rules, within which people can experience an intrinsic—rather than merely instrumental—motivation to strive for mastery of the possibilities inherent in that practice. To approach this point from another angle, play exemplifies the way in which the self-expression and empowerment of the child, including his or her intellectual empowerment, are achieved through the appropriation and

mastery of cultural form. Simultaneously, this perspective brings out the central importance of fantasy and imagination for the *cognitive* significance of play. Vygotsky argued that it is through fantasy play that the child is first able to emancipate his or her thinking from the constraints of the immediate external environment and thus take the first steps toward organizing thought in a coherent and independent way. By fostering the development of symbolic imagination, play prepares the way for abstract, internalized thought. But the creation of this autonomous world of imagination also leads the child, paradoxically, back to reality.

Vygotsky (1933/1967) asserted that in the early years of the child's life, "Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (p. 16). It is a form of activity that pushes the child beyond the limits of development already achieved and provides an opportunity to expand the world of mental possibility.

> In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play, it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior. (p. 16)

It is important to emphasize that when Vygotsky characterized play as *creating* the zone of proximal development, he was *not* referring to assisted problem solving in expert–novice inter-action. Rather, the crucial feature of play from a developmental perspective is that, in play, children collaborate in constructing and maintaining a shared imaginary situation in an activity that is simultaneously voluntary, open to spontaneity, and structured by rules—but these are rules recognized and accepted as necessary by the children themselves, not simply handed down by adults.

Vygotsky's illuminating analysis of play makes it clear that we should not abandon efforts to mobilize elements of play and imagination in education. At the same time, it implies that we must not simply alternate didactic/academic instruction with free-play periods. Instead, we should devise educational practices that can systematically integrate the play element into the curriculum in ways that promote learning and development. Vygotsky's analysis suggests that these purposes can best be served by rule-structured frameworks that help create valued practices which allow and support learning and development. At the same time, these activities will be effective only if they are highly motivating and fun for children. Ideally, such practices should also be structured in ways that allow children to enter into the activity voluntarily and according to their own rhythm, inclination, and abilities—while motivating them to grasp, accept, and explore the rule-governed structure inherent in the practice itself. In the process, to borrow a formulation that has been used to sum up a study of Japanese preschools (Lewis, 1995), these kinds of play-based practices can help to educate both hearts and minds in mutually reinforcing ways.

PUTTING PLAY TO WORK: VIVIAN PALEY'S STORYTELLING AND STORY-ACTING ACTIVITY

We believe that an excellent example of an activity that integrates and exemplifies these key elements of play is the storytelling/story-acting practice pioneered by Vivian Paley (1990). Versions of this practice have been used in preschool and kindergarten classrooms in the United

States (and abroad), and in some cases it has also been adapted for use with early elementary classes. The account of this activity is based on our own observations of the storytelling/story-acting practice in a range of preschool classrooms, serving both middle-class and low-income 3- to 5-year-olds, in which one or more of the present authors have studied (and in some cases introduced) it since 1990. The preschools involved have been in three different states—California, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. At a certain period during each day (usually during "choice time" activities), any child who wishes can dictate a story to a designated teacher, who writes down the story as the child tells it. Later that day, each of these stories is read aloud to the entire class by the teacher during group time, while the child/author and other children, whom he or she chooses, act out the story.

What Vygotsky said of children's play also applies to their narrative activity: both represent the union of expressive imagination with rule-governed cultural form in the context of social life. In fact, in important respects, it is probably most useful to see both pretend play and storytelling as falling within the field of narrative activity, on a continuum ranging from the discursive exposition of narratives in storytelling to their enactment in pretend play. The analytical distinction between the two is important, but it is also true that play and storytelling are closely interwoven and often mutually supportive in children's experience and development, and developmental research needs to grasp the ongoing interplay between them. The Paley-inspired storytelling/ story-acting practice offers an excellent example. Our experience with this activity strongly suggests that it is the combination of the story*telling* and the story-*acting* components of the practice that is critical to its operation and effectiveness. When this practice is established as a regular part of classroom activities, all children in the class typically participate in three interrelated roles: (a) composing and dictating stories, (b) taking part in the group enactment of stories (their own and those of other children), and (c) listening to (and watching the performance of) the stories of other children in the class.

The children's storytelling is voluntary, self-initiated, and relatively spontaneous. Adults certainly play an important role in this practice, but their role is more facilitative than directive. In the classrooms we have studied, teachers who transcribe and read out the children's stories offer little feedback, guidance, or other direct input as they do so. Instead, their key contribution is to establish, maintain, and facilitate a child-driven and peer-oriented activity that develops its own autonomous dynamics, within which the children themselves can take an active role in their own socialization and development. In the process, the children draw themes, characters, images, plots, and other elements from each other's stories; they also incorporate elements into their narratives from a wide range of other sources, including fairy tales, children's books, TV, and their own experience. However, they do not simply imitate other children's stories, nor do they just passively absorb messages from adults and the larger culture. It is clear that, even at this early age, they are able to appropriate these elements selectively, and to use and rework them for their own purposes.

Children typically enjoy storytelling for its own sake, but the prospect of having their story acted out, together with other children whom they choose, offers them a powerful additional motivation to compose and dictate stories. Furthermore, one result of having the stories read to and dramatized for the entire class at circle time is that children tell their stories not only to adults but primarily to *each other*; they do so not in one-to-one interaction, but in a shared public setting. The public and peer-oriented dimension of this activity helps to create a community of storytellers in the classroom, enmeshed in the ongoing context of the classroom miniculture and

the children's everyday peer-group life. Thus, participating in this activity helps the children to form and sustain a shared culture of peer-group collaboration, experimentation, and mutual cross-fertilization that serves as a powerful matrix for learning and development. And it is above all the story-*acting* component of this practice that effectively integrates a significant *play* element into the activity—not only in terms of the symbolic and social-relational involvement in narrative enactment itself, but also in terms of other kinds of peer interactions that typically accompany children's social pretend play. In short, the playworld generated by this practice provides an institutionalized *opportunity space* (Ochs, Smith, & Taylor, 1989) that can powerfully promote children's learning and development.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Whereas Paley's rich and acute ethnographic accounts of her preschool classrooms over the years offer some evidence that the storytelling/story-acting practice promotes cognitive and narrative skills as well as some dimensions of social competence, these accounts are restricted to Paley's own predominantly—though not exclusively—middle-class classrooms, so one might question their generalizability. And her analysis of the development of these skills is usually not systematic enough to trace their dynamics with precision. Other research examining the benefits of the storytelling/story-acting practice has been limited to showing the development of emergent literacy, oral-language or narrative skills**.** The present analysis goes further. We review evidence from the overall study indicating that children's participation in the storytelling/story-acting activity promoted oral language skills, emergent literacy, and social competence. Then we use a more detailed idiographic analysis of one child's experience to highlight the dynamics of the interplay between narrative development and dimensions of social competence.

METHOD

Research Sites and Data: An Overview

The data presented here are drawn from a large-scale project that examined whether this storytelling/story-acting practice can serve as a powerful context for promoting three key, mutually reinforcing components of young children's school readiness: oral language (including narrative) skills, emergent literacy, and social competence (including capacities for cooperation and self-regulation).

Research sites and participants.   Over 2 years we introduced and studied this storytelling/story-acting activity in seven child care classrooms serving low-income children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in a medium-size city in the northeastern United States. We also worked with seven control classrooms in the same child care organization that continued their normal routine activities. A total of 192 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds participated in this project; of those, 147 (81 experimental and 66 control) remained in their classroom the entire year. The overall attrition rate was 24%; although high, this is not unusual for child care programs serving

low-income families. Because parents often received some child care benefits through their jobs, those who lost their jobs often could no longer afford the program and withdrew their children. Family instability, which many of these children experienced, was another source of classroom attrition.

Overall, our sample was 48% White, 22% Hispanic, and 19% African American. All the children came from low-income families, most of them (63%) from families poor enough that they qualified for Head Start government child care subsidies, whereas most of the rest received at least some state or other subsidies to attend this program. The child care centers in this organization provided full-time, full-year care for a minimum of 6.5 hr per day, 5 days per week, 52 weeks per year. In principle, the basic instructional program in the classrooms was the Teaching Strategies' Creative Curriculum, but normal classroom practices did not usually include substantial amounts of a structured educational curriculum.

Procedure.   Each classroom was visited twice per week by two students, who assisted in carrying out the storytelling/story-acting practice (in experimental classrooms) and/or other normal classroom activities (in the control classrooms). The students wrote detailed field notes each time they visited the classroom. Teachers and teacher's aides in both types of classrooms welcomed the help that the students provided, leading teachers to be enthusiastic about participating in the study.

In the experimental classrooms, the storytelling/story-acting practice was generally conducted one or two days per week for about six to seven months (starting in October/November and continuing to the end of April)—somewhat more frequently, on average, during the second year than during the first. Storytelling by the children was voluntary and child initiated. Teachers preferred to limit the number of stories that could be dictated each day (to keep story-enactment time within limits), usually allowing an average of only two to three per day but occasionally going to a maximum of five if the children insisted. To accommodate several children per day, we also limited children's dictation to one page per story. The stories that the children composed and dictated as part of the activity were made available to the researchers for analysis. Most of these stories were dictated to the second, third, and fourth authors of the current article.

Pre- and posttests.   The 147 children who remained in the experimental (81) and control (66) classrooms the entire year were given pretests and posttests measuring expressive vocabulary, narrative skills (a narrative task devised by the researchers), emergent literacy abilities (some subscales of PALS-PreK), and various dimensions of social competence (three 3-min observations rated using peer interaction and self-regulation scales).

OVERALL RESULTS

In the experimental classrooms, children participated enthusiastically in the storytelling/story-acting activity and eagerly sought out the story-taker to make sure that they could tell their stories. Overall, children in the experimental classes composed (and acted out) 553 stories over the course of 2 years (190 in the first year, 363 in the second). A mixed repeated analysis of variance (Condition × Semester × Age × Year) on pre- and posttests indicated that children's participation in the activity (experimental group) promoted certain aspects of their narrative, emergent literacy, and social competence abilities relative to those in the control condition. The critical

TABLE 1
Means for Pre- and Posttests Measuring Narrative, Literacy, and Social Competence for Experimental
and Control Groups

		Experimental Group				Control Group	
Assessment Tasks		Pretest Means	Pretest Scores (Destiny)	Posttest Means	Posttest Scores (Destiny)	Pretest Means	Posttest Means
Oral Language: Narrative Comprehension[a]							
Range: 0–14	Oral Telling	6.64	0	7.40	14	6.83	7.53
	Picture Sequence	7.07	10	9.00	12	6.81	8.67
	Single Picture**	4.94	2	7.60	9	4.98	6.64
Range: 0–42	Total score*	18.65	12	24	35	18.62	22.84
Emergent Literacy: PALS-PreK[b]							
Range: 0–10	Print & Word Awareness*	4.95	6	7.38	9	5.30	6.27
	Begin. Sound Awareness	4.81	6	7.60	10	3.45	6.64
	Rhyme Awareness	3.88	6	5.60	9	4.67	6.24
Social Competence: Self-Regulation Scale[c]							
Range: 0–20	Inhibition*	7.91	1	10.35	9	6.12	5.50
Range: 0–10	Assertion**	3.38	6	3.18	4	4.38	2.42
Social Competence: Peer Interaction Scale[d]							
Range: 0–12	Disruption**	1.81	5	1.53	3	1.26	2.02
	Disconnection	1.20	1	.97	0	1.47	.64
	Prosocial	5.72	3	6.15	6	5.88	6.06

[a]$N = 130$. [b]$N = 75$; only 4- and 5-year-olds tested. [c]$N = 60$; administered only in Year 2. [d]$N = 119$.
Semester × Condition interaction significant at *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

test here is Condition × Semester interaction (see Table 1). With respect to narrative abilities, participation significantly improved children's overall story comprehension skills. With respect to emergent literacy skills, it significantly improved children's print and word awareness. And with respect to social competence, it significantly improved their self-regulation and decreased their play disruption.

AN IDIOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS WITH SOME GENERALIZABLE IMPLICATIONS

One intriguing, and unexpected, finding from our research was that, although all the children were eager to participate in this activity, several children who could be described as "difficult" and who manifested emotional or behavioral issues showed an especially intense and persistent interest in it and seem to have derived especially notable benefits. Not only did this activity help them improve their narrative and social competence skills, but it also helped them become more integrated into the classroom peer culture—which, in turn, appears to have facilitated and partly motivated their gains in those skills. These cases underline the interrelatedness of the different dimensions of children's learning and development.

As an illustrative example, we focus here on Destiny. Destiny told the greatest number of stories (30) of all the children in her classroom—compared to 19 stories by the next most prolific child and the overall mean of 12 stories per child. In addition to Destiny's stories, our account also draws on field notes that research assistants wrote after each visit to the classroom, as well as reports of peer interaction and self-regulation based on three focused observations in October, March, and May. During each of these observation periods, the research assistants conducted three 3-min observations of each child in the classroom, wrote down the incidents they observed, and then coded them according to a scale of behaviors provided. The field notes and these observations, along with information about children's preferences in the story-acting part of the practice, allowed us to complement and contextualize our analysis of the stories themselves. A close analysis of this individual case helps us delineate the complex dynamics of the interactions between the strategies Destiny pursued, the social context provided by the storytelling/story-acting practice, and the larger classroom peer culture over the course of the year.

Patterns of narrative development displayed by children participating in this activity appear to emerge, in large part, from the complex interaction of two related but analytically distinct kinds of motivating concerns (Nicolopoulou, 1996): (a) social-relational concerns, focusing on peer interaction, friendship, and participation in peer-group life and (b) intrinsically cognitive, symbolic, and formal concerns, including the mastery of narrative form for its own sake. This kind of dynamic appears to underlie the complex rhythms in the development of Destiny's storytelling.

Case Study: Enter Destiny

In one of the experimental classrooms, Destiny, an African American, 4½-year-old, Head Start–eligible child, stood out from the beginning of the school year. Destiny used to break down and cry repeatedly about minor things in a persistent and inconsolable manner. The office staff often had to intervene by taking her into the director's office for the classroom to function, and some days she was there more than once. One of Destiny's key problems seemed to be difficulty in and anxiety about managing transitions, and many facets of her life were punctuated by transitions and uncertainties. She lived with her mother in her grandmother's house, but her grandmother was the primary caregiver. Her mother seemed to be preoccupied with new developments in her life precipitated by a recent separation from Destiny's incarcerated father. About a month into the school year, Destiny's classroom teacher quit abruptly and was replaced by a teacher with a markedly different and much less structured style of running the classroom. In addition, we began our project—itself a transition.

Destiny had problems with regulation and control that permeated her interactions with her peers. She had a difficult time managing and expressing her desires and postponing gratification. She was a cognitively capable child but did not seem to have strong social skills, especially related to taking others' perspectives and negotiating effectively with them. Like most children, she very much wanted to play with other children and have friends, but because of her continuous crying and temper tantrums, her attempts to play with others were often inappropriate, inept, and unsuccessful. She wanted things done her way, and broke down crying if someone went against her wishes, whether a child or an adult. The end result was that, although she wished to play with other children, she was often excluded, especially by one group of girls in whom she seemed most interested—which made her angry and unhappy. In her fits of crying, Destiny complained that she had no friends.

Destiny's narrative transformation.   We introduced the storytelling/story-acting activity in Destiny's classroom around the middle of October. The children were immediately drawn to the activity, and their enthusiasm continued for the rest of the seven months we were in the classroom. It was clear that being able to pick their friends to act as characters in the stories made the activity even more appealing to the children, and in this respect Destiny was an especially striking example. She was among the first children who volunteered to tell a story, though at that point her enthusiasm outpaced her narrative skills. She told a rather short story based on one of the story models we had used that day to introduce the activity. (Characters in the stories are in boldface.)

> Once upon a time is **a sister** and **brother** and **a mom** and **a dad** and **a baby**. They went to work and they feed the baby. The end. (10/17/06)

It is worth noting one aspect of this story that highlighted the social-relational concerns Destiny brought to the storytelling/story-acting practice. Even though the story was brief, Destiny used more characters than the three other storytellers before her—five characters, compared with two or three per story for the other children. As we discuss next, she showed a persistent strategic interest in offering other children roles in enacting her stories. Destiny was also eager to participate in the enactment of other children's stories. During the first few weeks, she was picked to act about once per storytelling day, but this was not as often as she would have liked, and it led to more crying and temper tantrums. As time went on, however, more children began to include her in their stories, in part because Destiny proved to be a good actor in portraying both animate and inanimate roles that appealed to her classmates. For example, one time she was included as "the pond." Instead of standing there doing nothing, as most children did when portraying inanimate objects, she plopped down on the floor and invited children to pretend jumping on her. Eventually she became one of the children who acted most frequently in other children's stories.

In addition, Destiny began telling more stories herself—with increasing numbers of characters. Here is Destiny's second story, dictated about two weeks after her first. It was very loosely based on an episode of *The Powerpuff Girls*, a popular TV cartoon show:

> I'm gonna be **Bubbles**. Elena gonna be **Buttercup** and Daisy's gonna be **Blossom**. Darius is **Mojo Jojo** and **the Mayor** is gonna be Jed. And **Mojo Jojo's friends** is gonna be Ms. Kathy and the **other ones** gonna be Taylor, Alexia, and Sapphire and Antonia. We're gonna fly anywhere (Bubbles, Blossom, Buttercup). Mojo Jojo, he's gonna kill us. The mayor's gonna have a big telescope and look for big giant things. Ms Tina can be **the monster**. When the story is over you can do a superhero bow. Someone's gonna be **a slimy thing**. Some **broccoli monsters** too. (11/1/06)

This story had a much larger cast of characters (10) than any other story told so far (the other children averaged about 3 characters per story). (In counting characters, singular and undifferentiated characters counted as one.) This meant Destiny had given roles to almost all the children in her class, as in this period her class fluctuated from 6 to 12 children per day. Over the course of the year, accumulating evidence made it increasingly clear that Destiny used this multiplication of roles in her stories as part of a strategy for integrating herself into the classroom community. One sign of Destiny's desire to use this particular story for these social-relational purposes is that it was mainly told from a director's point of view rather than an author's point of view. That is, Destiny did not follow the typical pattern of story dictation, first narrating the story and then choosing who was going to play what role; instead, she began by indicating

which children (or adults) in her class were acting as which characters, and only then started to provide a few actions. However, she did not make much effort to connect these actions and characters in a coherent overall plot, and for good measure she tossed in a few more characters toward the end. The result was an incomplete and inchoate storyline. In fact, it would be fair to say that Destiny put most of her effort into casting her story and did not really get around to telling the story itself.

However, as soon as her story was enacted, Destiny learned that this strategy had its drawbacks. She got very upset because there was not much action in the dramatization. After the teacher had read the story and most of the characters stood still because they had not been given any actions to perform, Destiny complained when the teacher told the children to sit down. "We didn't do it!" Destiny insisted, following up with one of her temper tantrums. She clearly had more in mind about what the characters needed to do than she had managed to express explicitly, a common tendency with preschoolers beginning to narrate their own stories. The teacher explained to her that if she wanted the children to do more during the dramatization, then she needed to put more action in her story during the telling.

Destiny's next several stories attempted to describe more actions explicitly and even to introduce rudimentary plotlines. It may be significant that two of her next three stories again centered on the Powerpuff Girls theme. It is not uncommon for children participating in this storytelling/story-acting practice to tell a sequence of stories reworking the same story framework, with variations, in an effort to get it right and to master its narrative possibilities (Nicolopoulou, 1996). This series of Powerpuff Girls stories by Destiny seemed to fit that pattern. In the process, the narrative sophistication of her stories increased in several respects, and she began to tell her stories from a storyteller's point of view. On the other hand, as the following story indicates, at this stage her stories remained sprawling and disconnected; she also still told her stories mainly in the present tense, and only later began to put them in the past tense, which is the typical narrative convention.

> Once upon a time **a monster circle** with all the eyes. Some **people** run away from the monster. The **Powerpuff Girls** beat the monster up, and the Powerpuff Girls just got the monster. They punch the monster, catch the monster, and he's too big. And the man is lock in jail. He is **a fish**. The man is taking pictures of a monster. He saw **the dog,** and the dog woke up, then he went back to sleep. **Germs** come down on the floor and the **fishes** flapping around. **A bird** come, **seahorses**, **sheep**, and **horses** and **cows**. We saw the flag and it's pretty. (11/14/06)

Furthermore, Destiny's social-relational concern to incorporate as many characters in each story as possible continued to escalate, and this tendency often overwhelmed her attempts at achieving narrative coherence. The story just quoted included 12 characters, half of them added toward the end of the story—at which point any semblance of a plotline dissolves. During the rest of the fall and winter Destiny continued to introduce large numbers of characters per story (from 6 to as many as 16). In addition to including as many children as possible, she sometimes offered roles to adults in the classroom as well. She seemed to be using roles in story enactments as tokens of friendship and as a negotiating tool for making and keeping friends. She made sure to include children who had included her in their stories or who were playing with her. Destiny was often quite explicit about this kind of quid pro quo. We would hear her say to another child, "Can I play with you? You're [role] in my story." Or she would threaten another child who refused to play with her or did not want to play according to her wishes that she was going to take away the role she had already given him or her in the story: "You can't be [role] in my story."

However, one can also see other factors operating in Destiny's storytelling that helped to counter these disruptive and centrifugal tendencies. Analysis of Destiny's stories over time makes it clear that she was struggling to make them more coherent and interesting as stories, and her relations with other children in the classroom peer culture assisted and motivated this process as well as complicated it. Among other things, Destiny wanted her stories to be interesting and entertaining so that other children would want to act in them, and the children indicated in various ways that they wanted roles that gave them something to do. Destiny also began listening attentively to other children's stories and getting attuned to them, so that she increasingly borrowed characters, themes, and narrative devices from their stories to use in her own stories. In fact, when she composed stories after hearing other children dictate theirs, her stories would often draw on, follow up, and elaborate elements from their stories—while also, it should be noted, adding narrative themes of her own that contributed to the classroom peer culture. Although all of the children's stories showed this kind of narrative cross-fertilization to some degree, Destiny was among the most likely to incorporate new themes and characters each time she told another story. In some respects, this tendency made it more challenging for her to master and organize the material she was using, but on balance, she used the resources provided by this narrative cross-fertilization to strengthen her narrative skills and improve the quality of her stories.

Destiny gradually discovered, employed, and refined narrative strategies for coordinating her characters more effectively and giving her stories some coherence and continuity. One of these strategies was to introduce an interconnected cluster of characters who persisted through the story and encountered various other characters or situations. This device could be used to provide an element of narrative continuity, even if this element was fairly minimal in some cases. We have encountered this strategy, used mainly by the girls, in other classrooms we have studied. Two kinds of character clusters that children typically employ for this purpose are pairs or teams of characters from cartoons and depictions of a family group.

Here is an example of a story using this strategy, in which Destiny begins by constructing a family group:

> Once upon a time the **baby** was crying with her **sister** and her **brother**. And the brother and the sister were putting the bottle in her mouth. And the brother and the sister were at the playground with their **mommy**. And their mommy and their **daddy** drove them to the playground. And then the baby was sitting there with the mommy and the daddy. And then they went to Dorney Park, and then Disney World. And they went to Sesame Place, and then they went to see **Snoopy**, and then they saw **Charlie Brown**, and then they went to the parade to see Charlie Brown and Snoopy, and then they saw **the clown**, and they saw **Tigger** and **Pooh Bear**. And then they went to Sesame Place and got some tattoos. The sister got a rabbit tattoo and another tattoo called Tweety Bird, and the brother got the dragon tattoo. The end. (1/4/07)

This story included a sprawling cast of 10 characters, but a core cluster of characters—beginning with the brother and sister and then expanding to a family group of sister, brother, mommy, daddy, and baby, who are referred to as "they" in the second half of the story—persisted throughout the story, giving it a semblance of coherence. Toward the beginning of the story the timeline was a bit disconnected, but then Destiny settled into narrating a string of places and actions for the core cluster of characters in loose temporal sequence.

In short, in her storytelling Destiny placed various partly conflicting demands on herself— both social-relational and intrinsically narrative—that she worked to meet and reconcile. Over

time, through using and experimenting with the strategy just outlined and others, Destiny managed to compose stories that were more coherent, structured, and narratively satisfying. They included more frequent and fleshed-out descriptions of action, they began to acquire plotlines with more coherence and spatio-temporal continuity, and they were more frequently marked by standard narrative devices such as formal beginnings and endings. Destiny also began to recognize the value of limiting the number of characters in each story to levels that she could comfortably manage; toward the end of the school year, her average number of characters per story was three to five. Here is Destiny's last story of the year, loosely based on Little Red Riding Hood, though Destiny managed to give it her own stamp. It includes just three characters who are interconnected through a clear and coherent plotline, and the characters' roles are fleshed out with descriptions of action as well as dialogue.

> Once upon a time, it was **a little girl**. The little girl was going to **her grandma's**, but her grandma was so sick. But the little girl, she walked in the woods and picked out flowers. And then **the wolf** jumped out the bushes and he said: "What are you doing in the woods by yourself?" And then he said: "Mmmm, those are some yummy treats I smell." Then the little girl said: "Oh no, I'm far away in the woods." Then the wolf said: "That's ok. I will help you." And he took her back to home. And then the wolf ate the grandma. And then he had a big fat belly. The end. (5/10/07)

The narrative improvement outlined in this analysis is corroborated by the gains Destiny showed in our narrative comprehension tasks: her overall score went from 12 points at pretest to 35 at posttest (see Table 1).

Destiny's socio-emotional transformation.   As the preceding account has already suggested, this process of improvement in the quality and sophistication of Destiny's narratives was paralleled by a gradual transformation in her socio-emotional pattern of relations and interactions with other children and adults in the classroom. She became notably less anxious and unhappy, had better interactions with teachers and other adults, was integrated more comfortably into the classroom peer culture, and improved her capacities for self-regulation and cooperative interactions with other children. We argue that these developments were facilitated and fostered by her participation in the storytelling/story-acting practice.

In addition to the ways that Destiny used this activity to facilitate her integration into the classroom peer culture, another factor was at work. The incorporation of the storytelling/story-acting activity in the classroom, although perhaps initially disruptive—especially because it coincided with the transition to a new teacher—in the end was a major source of consistency and predictability for this classroom. This was especially true for Destiny, whose life experiences have made her more prone to having difficulty with transitions, and who seemed to benefit from regular routines structured by receptive and trusted adults. They helped her gain some control and predictability in her often unpredictable social environment.

The activity took place twice per week for the entire seven months we worked in this classroom. It was almost always initiated by the same graduate student, who came in the classroom with another (undergraduate) student. She would find the classroom storybook and sit down to take stories. As soon as the students arrived in the classroom, they were enthusiastically greeted by all the children, who looked forward to having the storytelling/story-acting activity take place that day. Initially, we intended that the teacher or teacher's aide take the stories down, while we observed or helped in other ways. But we soon realized that it would be done more regularly and consistently if the research team did the story-taking themselves on the days when they were

scheduled to be in the classroom, consulting first with the teacher on how many stories she could handle that day during group time. The story-acting was almost always conducted by the lead classroom teacher, who enjoyed the story-acting and sometimes even playfully took part in it if a child gave her a role.

As previously noted, Destiny was eager to tell stories every time a story-taker was in the classroom. In fact, Destiny always greeted our research team with smiles and hugs. Because other children also wanted to tell stories and not all of them could be accommodated every time, we began to negotiate with Destiny to ask her to wait for her turn. As part of standard procedure, we used a written waiting list with the names of children who wanted a turn. In fact, all the children, and especially Destiny, quickly came to recognize the significance of the waiting list, so that as soon as they finished their story, they asked for their name to be put back on the waiting list.

When Destiny asked for a turn, we consulted the waiting list and showed it to her, indicating where her name was on it and when her next turn would come. Although in many of Destiny's other classroom activities negotiation was difficult, to put it mildly, in this context, she began to accept that other children needed to have their turn as well. Soon Destiny began to ask, "Can I see the list?" Once she saw her name on the list and counted how many children were before her, she would calm down and even go to remind the next child on the list, probably hoping that her turn would come faster. "Is it my turn yet?" she would ask. Being explicit and negotiating with Destiny using a concrete, visible tool provided another opportunity for Destiny to experience consistency and predictability. She learned that she could count on the story-taker to remain true to her word, and in the process came to trust that she would get a turn again. This enabled her to have more trust in other adults and peers and in her environment, which in turn led to decreased anxiety and fewer emotional outbreaks. (These connections were pointed out to us by Alison Wishard Guerra, personal communication, November 2008.)

Although Destiny did sometimes plead for an extra turn and was always eager to tell a story when there was extra time, this was one of the first areas in which we saw her develop abilities for self-regulation, postponement of gratification in accordance with shared rules, and successful negotiation. Destiny slowly began to wait for her turn as a matter of course, without constant wailing and temper tantrums. In fact, during the last month we were in the classroom, Destiny gave up her turn to another child because she was playing nicely in the block area with a group of children (JD's field notes, 4/16/07). It is also worth noting that Destiny's gains in our self-regulation observations were substantial, changing from a score of 1 at pretest to 9 points at posttest (see Table 1).

While Destiny was building up positive trust relations with members of our research team, her relations with her teacher and the teacher's aide were also improving. As field notes (GF, 11/8/07) and classroom observations indicated, toward the beginning of the school year, she had tense and often confrontational relations with her teacher and teacher's aide, frequently disobeying and otherwise testing them. She first began to warm up to the teacher's aide, who was the adult with the greatest continuity in the classroom. We noticed that she gave the teacher's aide a role in the enactment of her second story. Toward the end of the fall semester, Destiny also began to have better relations with her new lead teacher, and again we saw that she began to give this teacher roles in enacting her stories. By the end of the year, she included both teachers equally in the dramatization of her stories. Including adults in children's stories was a practice initiated spontaneously by the children, and several of them did this. In the fall, Destiny did not include her teachers in story enactments as often as some other children did, but in the spring she did so

with higher frequency (eight times) than did other children (who generally did this a maximum of three to four times).

At the same time, Destiny also began to play more successfully with other children, and her abilities to do so gradually increased over time. Several mutually reinforcing factors appeared to be involved here. As part of her participation in the storytelling/story-acting activity, Destiny listened attentively to stories told by other children. She was also interested in getting her classmates to act in her stories and to give her roles in their stories. Thus she became more attentive to other children's desires and needs and slowly learned to pay attention to their perspectives. Again, field notes and classroom observations indicate that all these tendencies were first noted in connection with the storytelling/story-acting practice, and they gradually carried over into Destiny's other activities. The result was that in the spring, Destiny could successfully invite other children to play with her, shared toys brought from home without having to be reminded of the classroom sharing rule, and coordinate playing with others. Research assistants' field notes toward the end of the school year (JD, 4/9/07, 4/16/07) include numerous play episodes where Destiny is playing nicely with several children, whereas many field notes and classroom observations earlier in the year reported conflicts between Destiny and various other children. Our classroom observations during posttest administration in May indicated that Destiny continued to have successful play interactions and even appeared to have formed some stable playmate relationships.

In addition, observation-based measures indicated that Destiny increased in her prosocial behaviors and showed increasing concern for the feelings of other children. She was often the one comforting other children and appeasing them when they were upset. This should not be taken to mean that Destiny's ceased to have behavior problems or that her conflicts and tensions with other children and adults vanished completely. However, Destiny was clearly overcoming some of the socio-emotional limitations that had been pronounced in the fall.

These changes did not result simply from adults imposing rules of action in the classroom. Instead Destiny, along with the other children, was given the opportunity to participate in and be a member of a valued activity that was fun, imaginative, and rule-governed. This experience helped her to see the logic of the rules. She began to make sense of them, learned to uphold them voluntarily in order to help make this activity happen and work well, and carried over these capacities for self-regulation, cooperation, and negotiation to her overall relations with others in the classroom—becoming, over time, more actively and comfortably integrated into the classroom peer-group culture. Adults in the classroom also played an important role by structuring, maintaining, and facilitating this activity in a stable, consistent, and predictable way. They were available and responsive to Destiny, and over time, she developed trusting and cooperative relations with them as well.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study just discussed demonstrates that a regular storytelling/story-acting practice like the one examined here, which integrates play and narrative as well as individual spontaneity and group participation, creates a powerful context for enhancing both children's narrative skills and their social competence. A close analysis of one child's experience has helped to bring out more fully how these two dimensions of children's activity and development are interlinked, as

Vygotsky's theory of play implies. When integrated into the regular preschool curriculum, this practice draws on preschoolers' existing ability and inclination to tell and enact narratives, and helps these develop by providing children with continuous opportunities for narrative performance, experimentation, and cross-fertilization in composing their own stories, acting in each others' stories, or simply listening to or watching the stories of others. Furthermore, because children are given control over what stories to tell, when to tell them, and who should act in their stories, it provides children with the opportunities to use and elaborate their stories for their own purposes, which are both intrinsically narrative, aesthetic, cognitive, and social-relational in complex combinations. In ways that this brief report could only partly address, this activity also helps create and sustain a common culture in the classroom woven together by an ongoing framework of shared narrative practice in which children participate according to their pace, rhythm, and inclination. As a consequence, children become enthusiastically involved in this practice and bring considerable energy and creativity to their narrative activity.

At the same time, in order to participate in and sustain this valued activity, children need to develop various forms of socio-emotional competence: to regulate themselves and postpone gratification, to take the perspectives of others, and to cooperate effectively with others. This activity simultaneously requires and promotes these forms of social competence in a mutually reinforcing process. One could also argue that the positive emotional relationship that the child establishes with the adult (or adults) engaged in structuring, supporting, and maintaining this activity helps to motivate and promote the children's socio-emotional and narrative development. All of these dynamics depend on establishing an activity system that is simultaneously rule-governed, consistent, and attractive. The consequences successfully link the development of cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional and interactional competence.

The conclusions just outlined are further supported by research indicating that learning behaviors during the early elementary years are dependent on the development and maintenance of socio-emotional competence and successful peer-group interaction (e.g., Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000). There is also research indicating that children who have warm, responsive, and individualized interactions with teachers are more likely to use the learning opportunities available in classrooms and to construct more positive peer relationships in the classroom and as older children (e.g., Howes & Smith, 1995; Wishard, Shivers, Howes, & Ritchie, 2003).

Vygotskian-inspired research has often tended to conceive the social context of development too narrowly in terms of assisted problem solving in expert-novice interaction, whereas neglecting the complementary role of the peer group and peer collaboration in creating and maintaining fields of shared activity that provide resources and motivations for learning and development. It has also tended to neglect the *emotional* dimension of children's relations with peers and adults. This neglect is ironic, because Vygotsky (1933/1999) emphasized the intimate relationship between emotion and cognition, but the leads he offered in this respect still need to be followed up more effectively. The case study we have presented brings out, among other things, the significance of secure, trusting, and emotionally positive relationships with both peers and adults—which are promoted by Paley's storytelling/story-acting practice—in activating children's zones of proximal development. Informed and systematic analysis of the socio-emotional dimension of children's relationships must be a key focus of play research.

The storytelling/story-acting practice examined here is an example of an educational practice that successfully integrates a play element into the preschool curriculum in a carefully structured

way that simultaneously engages children's enthusiasm and provides scope for children's own initiative and creativity. It does so, in part, by building on the capacity of children's social pretend play to link their cognitive and social-relational concerns, their symbolic imagination, and their powerfully motivating interest in peer-group life. The fruitfulness of these links seems to be facilitated by the development of consistent, trusting, and emotionally positive relationships with adults who help to structure and maintain this activity. Improving our understanding of play and its role in children's experience and development is a key precondition for helping children construct and maintain playworlds that can provide resources and motivations to enhance their cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development.

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