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## **Chapter 2**

# **Paley's approach to storytelling and story-acting: research and practice**

**Rosie Flewitt, Teresa Cremin and ben Mardell**

### **Introduction**

This chapter serves as an anchor for the book by presenting a focused examination of one of Vivian Gussin Paley's advocated practices in the early childhood classroom: teachers scribing children's stories (storytelling) and children enacting these later on the same day (story acting). We begin by tracing the approach back to its origins in the 1970s, where as an early childhood teacher in Chicago, Paley was seeking to offer routes into early education that appealed to children from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, and with different learning needs. We discuss the affinity of her story-based practice with sociocultural theory, and consider key themes that have emerged from research evidence regarding the contribution of storytelling and story acting to young children's narrative competence, cognitive and oral language development, and their preparedness for school. We also summarise research findings regarding how children share story elements reworked from popular culture and story books, how the approach can promote a cohesive and shared classroom culture, and how meanings are jointly constructed during storytelling and story acting through embodied actions as well as through spoken and written language. We then present an overview of the different routes that have brought teachers in the USA and England to Paley's storytelling and story-acting curriculum, and the types of training and professional development they have been offered. Lastly, we provide background information on the diverse studies that are referred to across the chapters in this book, including their methodological and ethical stance towards the respectful conduct of research with young children.

### **Paley's storytelling and story acting**

The genesis of Paley's storytelling and story-acting approach can be traced back to her 1970s, ethnically and socially diverse early childhood classroom. As described in her book *Wally's stories* (and by McNamee in Chapter 7 and Cooper in Chapter 8 of this volume), Paley felt badly for Wally, a young boy who was often in trouble in school. One day, out of a sense of kindness, she scripted his story and then asked the other children in her class to help act it out (Paley, 1981). Eventually, Paley chose to make this become a regular classroom practice. Each day Paley would take down the stories of any child who wanted to tell her one. Later the same day, all the children in the classroom would sit around an improvised stage that was delineated by masking tape on the classroom floor. Reading out the story, Paley would support children in acting it out without props. Over time this practice evolved. Initially, the storyteller chose which classmates would play each character. Later, in consideration of fairness, Paley began inviting children to come to act in turn, with the storyteller only choosing

which character he or she would play. This feature of Paley's practice though has been differently developed over time, with some teachers offering the storytellers the option to choose who acts out each role in their story, whilst others invite each child in turn to enact the next character or object. What is key in this approach is that the two practices of story scribing and story dramatisation are offered, indeed Paley (2004, p. 5) asserts:

... the dictated story is but a half-told tale. To fulfil its destiny it is dramatised on a pretend stage with the help of the classmates as actors and audience and the teacher as narrator and director.

A teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, (a historically progressive and private setting founded by John Dewey, offering education from kindergarten through to Grade 12), Paley sought to develop an inclusive classroom culture that could be 'an island of safety and sensibility for everyone' (Paley, 1990, pxi). Paley's storytelling and story-acting curriculum formed part of her overall approach to teaching such that it focused on fairness and meaning (Cooper, 2009). Paley's text on this approach (e.g. Paley, 1990) and many of her other books, (e.g. Paley, 1981, 1986, 2004) are underpinned by a child-centred, play-based philosophy, reflecting her view of children as active meaning-makers and creative thinkers. She foregrounds the power of fantasy play and the potency of storytelling, dictation and dramatisation in the curriculum and argues that, in early childhood, 'fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills' (Paley, 2004: 8). She has not however sought to document this claim though conventional research and as Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010: 63) observe:

Because these accounts focused on one teacher and her classroom, various questions arise concerning the generalizability and effectiveness of this programme. Moreover, Paley did not fully articulate the theoretical underpinnings of this activity or specify the conditions for its implementation in other classrooms.

Nonetheless her work, whilst unconventional, has arguably made a rich contribution to the field, both theoretically and practically, with many scholars recognising and endorsing her views and sensitive accounts of young children's playful, story-based learning. As Cooper (2009:5) observes, Paley's work 'has touched a chord with a legion of educational philosophers, psychologists, cultural theorists and teacher educators'. However, perhaps due to the unusual nature of her books, written as they are in the first person from the perspective of a practitioner, without reference to the available literature, it could be argued that her insights have not been afforded their full value. Cooper (2009) explains why she perceives teachers in the USA have failed to make systematic use of Paley's ideas. Firstly, she notes that Paley herself does not engage in the kind of theoretical and methodological discussions that normally lend credence to new approaches to teaching and learning. Secondly, she posits that her books and articles usually focus on a single issue and this limits the application of her professional strategies. Finally, for many teachers and teacher educators, Paley's

radical stance towards critical issues in childhood education can be challenging and uncomfortable. Cooper (2009: 8) argues that:

Paley is at heart an activist, who urges us to embrace the privilege of teacher as pedagogue and moral authority inside the classroom. Her classroom studies ask us how far we are willing to go to defend young children against the somewhat pernicious realities of schooling.

As an unabashed advocate of the play-based curriculum, Paley's work challenges current pressures in the USA and the UK to introduce a skills-based early years curriculum and formal literacy instruction, and for this reason also her work may lack take-up as teachers struggle to find time for non-statutory aspects of early education. Furthermore, as noted in our introductory chapter, with the exception of the body of work by Nicolopoulou (e.g. Nicolopoulou, 2012), Cooper, (e.g. 2009) McNamee (e.g. 2015), Cremin et al (2013) and this volume, analyses of the value of the practice of Paley's storytelling and story-acting pedagogy are relatively sparse. Thus the education profession in many countries (with the exception of those teachers who have worked with proponents of the approach in the USA and more recently in England), are arguably unaware of the flexibility and potential of storytelling and story acting for fostering young children's learning. This is problematic in the current context where concerns are regularly voiced about a perceived decline in children's early language (e.g. Nelson *et al.*, 2011) and where practitioners, due to the current structures of accountability, governance and assessment, are obliged to deliver an arguably inappropriately formal or functionalist curriculum. Additionally, it has been argued that children's social and cultural capital as informal story performers and artful language users remains somewhat unrecognised, underestimated, and underdeveloped in educational settings (Maybin, 2005).

Considering the theoretical basis of Paley's approach, most commentators on her work (including Paley herself) agree that it is firmly grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural conceptualisation of play (e.g. Wright, Bacigalupa, Black and Burton, 2007). Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) argue, however, that her work sits within a particular 'take' on sociocultural learning theory called cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). This theory, currently influential with educational researchers in the UK (e.g. Daniels, 2008), draws on Vygotsky's views about the cultural nature of learning and his belief that development and learning depend on the ways pupils and teachers learn how to share 'cultural tools' (van Oers, 2008). According to this theory, social interactions and meaning-making activities combine to form complex interacting systems within distinctive 'learning ecologies'. For example, pretend play and storytelling are described as 'complementary expressions of children's symbolic imagination that draw from and reflect back the inter-related domains of emotional, intellectual and social life' (Nicolopoulou, 2005: 496). A core feature of Paley's pedagogical approach is her understanding that within the particular 'learning ecology' of her classroom, children's spontaneous imaginative activities, such as fantasy play, can be harnessed in a more formal way through story to support diverse areas of social and cognitive development. As Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) explain in their studies, the storytelling and story-acting practice demonstrates the following characteristics of a learning ecology:

- It has tasks or problems that children are asked to, or want to, solve (e.g. make decisions about how the stories should be acted);
- It encourages particular kinds of discourse (as when children dictate their stories);
- It establishes particular norms of participation, (e.g. turn-taking, the number of children on stage, active listening to other people's stories)
- It provides specific cultural tools and material means (e.g. the tools used to record the stories, the 'story stage')
- It offers teachers practical means to orchestrate relations among these elements.

## **Paley's storytelling and story acting: research evidence**

In this section, we reflect on key themes that emerge from the research literature regarding the contribution of Paley's storytelling and story-acting pedagogy to young children's learning in early childhood education. Firstly, we discuss how storytelling and story acting support young children's narrative and cognitive development, and discuss Nicolopoulou and colleagues' influential work in this domain (e.g. Nicolopoulou, 2002, Nicolopoulou et al., 2006; 2015). We then present empirical evidence in the related field of children's oral language (Cooper, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2002, 2005; Nicolopoulou, McDowell and Brockmeyer, 2006; Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010; Typadi and Hayon, 2010) and on how children borrow and rework story elements from each other's stories, popular culture and story books (Nicolopoulou et al., 2014). We reflect on how these practices contribute to the development of cohesion and a common culture in the classroom (e.g. Nicolopoulou and Richner, 2007), and arguably help to prepare young children for elementary education, including enhancing their awareness of writing. We then consider the multimodal and co-constructed nature of young children's storytelling and story-acting practices (e.g. Cremin et al., forthcoming), and finally we outline some key conditions that need to be in place for teachers' training and support, in order to ensure that the storytelling and story-acting practice works well in class (e.g. Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010).

## **Developing children's narrative and cognitive competence**

Many scholars have acknowledged the contribution of Paley's story-based approach to young children's engagement with narrative (e.g. Bodrova and Leong, 2007; Booth, 2005; Fox, 1993; Gupta, 2009), which, it has been argued, is a key foundation for emergent literacy and longer term school success (e.g. McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). Scholarly investigation of Paley's work began in the 1980s, when Gillian McNamee and colleagues published data on storytelling and story acting from 10 classrooms (McNamee et al., 1985). A former student teacher in Paley's classroom when Wally was in kindergarten, McNamee used controlled comparisons to investigate five classrooms' storytelling and story acting over a 12-week period, and five classrooms' storytelling with no story acting. The study

demonstrated that participation in Paley's story-based approach strongly promoted young children's narrative development, but only if both the storytelling and the story-acting components were included.

Nicolopoulou and her colleagues subsequently amassed an extensive body of evidence regarding the development of young children's narrative competence in a range of studies undertaken between 1993 and 2015 in California, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, USA. These studies involved the collection of thousands of stories told and enacted by hundreds of preschool-aged children, mostly 3 to 4 year-olds, from a range of socio-economic groups. Nicolopoulou and colleagues' study methods have varied, but most have combined ethnographic observation of children's classroom interactions, friendships and meaning making, with systematic narrative analysis of the content of their stories, sometimes employing quantitative measures of learning outcomes such as controlled comparisons and standardised vocabulary tests, or coding scheme typologies (e.g. Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou and Richner, 2007, respectively).

Typically, Nicolopoulou and colleagues have worked with teachers over a sustained period of time to support the introduction of storytelling and story-acting practice into preschool classrooms. Their rigorous and extensive analyses of children's stories have provided compelling evidence of middle to high-income and low-income children's engagement with storytelling and story-acting activities, and of tangible progress in their narrative skills and cognitive competence, with children's stories becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated as they become more familiar with this story-based activity (e.g. Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 2006; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Nicolopoulou et al. (2014) propose that combining storytelling with story acting provides a unique and highly motivating forum for young children to compose stories not only for adults but for each other, and to share them in a public space rather than in one-to-one interaction:

...it seems clear that the public *performance* of the children's narratives plays a critical role in these processes. It does so in several ways, but above all by helping to generate and maintain a *shared public arena* for narrative performance, experimentation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization.

(*ital* in original, p45)

Throughout their studies, Nicolopoulou and her colleagues have drawn attention to the interwoven and mutually supportive nature of storytelling and pretend play, suggesting that both are forms of narrative activity - ranging from the discursive development of narrative in storytelling to their enactment in pretend play scenarios. They have also highlighted the considerable cognitive load of coordinating imagination and spontaneity on the one hand, and rule-governed action on the other during narrative activity and social pretend play, and have produced empirical evidence to support Vygotsky's proposal that 'What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behavior in play' (Vygotsky, 1933/1967: 9; see also Nicolopoulou et al, 2015). Indeed, a fundamental aspect of both pretend play and

narrative is the mimicry, or subversion, of observed social rules. Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) argue that narrative activity – whether in pretend play or in storytelling - is one of the first activities where children self-consciously impose rules on themselves, rather than follow rules imposed on them by others. As in pretend play, participating in storytelling and story acting requires children to engage both cognitively and socially in terms of cooperation and self-regulation. Furthermore, research into Paley's technique has found that when stories are written with the intention of being shared, their narrative structure is richer, more ambitious, and more illuminating than when told or written in isolation or in response to 'teacherly' agendas (Nicolopoulou, 1996, 2002).

### **Nurturing young children's oral language and emergent literacy**

Children's oral language skills have long been recognized as an important foundation for emergent literacy and long-term school success (e.g. see Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010; Whitehead, 2010). Key indicators for later school achievement include vocabulary development, abstract thinking, reflective reasoning and print awareness, and these characteristics are highly correlated with middle-class child-rearing practices in the first 5 years of life (Snow, Tabors and Dickinson, 2001). Arguably, an oral language approach to emergent literacy can help to bridge the gap between home and school, and there is a strong body of research evidence suggesting that participation in storytelling and story acting can significantly promote young children's oral and narrative development. This has been found for children from middle-class families (Nicolopoulou, 1996) and from low-income or otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds (Nicolopoulou, 2002), although there are noteworthy differences between these two groups in terms of children's familiarity with narrative when they first enter early education. Children in the former group have been found to apply their existing oral and narrative skills and hone their mastery of language and narrative conventions through telling and acting out their own stories in the classroom. By contrast, children in the latter group may have weaker oral language skills and less familiarity with narrative conventions, and so they begin storytelling and acting by building up basic language and narrative foundations (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015).

Whatever a child's starting point may be, through their rigorous and systematic studies over more than two decades, Nicolopoulou and colleagues have consistently found that storytelling and story acting enable all children's oral language to flourish in the long run, particularly when combined with regular classroom book reading practices with adults (for more detail, see Nicolopoulou, 2002 and Nicolopoulou et al., 2014, Nicolopoulou et al, 2015). For example, where teachers used the storytelling and story acting practice in US Head Start preschool classrooms, children from low-income families developed a wider range of decontextualised, oral language skills compared to children in comparable classrooms in the same school that did not use the technique (Nicolopoulou, McDowell and Brockmeyer, 2006). The children in this study also began to think actively about connections between thoughts, spoken words, marks on paper, the arrangement of text on the page and the transformations of spoken to written representation and back.

Similarly, from 25 years' experience of implementing a storytelling curriculum in her own classrooms and working with teachers in Atlanta, New York and Houston, Cooper has found that Paley's storytelling curriculum can have a positive impact on vocabulary development, oral narrative and the kind of literacy skills that support later reading. A key study in this regard is reported in Cooper et al (2004), where 95 children from low and mixed-income families took part in Paley's storytelling curriculum over the course of one school year, some with recently qualified teachers and some with experienced teachers. Oral language pre- and post-tests were used to measure their language and early literacy development (Pearson Assessment of Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT), Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) (3rd ed.) Form IIIA, and Whitehurst's Get Ready to Read!). The children's scores were compared with the performance of young children of the same age in the same or similar schools who had not participated in the storytelling curriculum. The findings showed that in comparison with their peers, children who had been immersed in Paley's story-based approach showed significant gains in oral language and literacy skills, suggesting this is a potent alternative to skills-dominant approaches to early literacy.

At the same time as Cooper's US-based study, Typadi and Hayon (The Westminster Education Action Zone project, 2005) introduced Paley's story-based approach to 22 practitioners in two mainstream school nurseries and two nursery schools in England. The aim of this study was to support the language and communication skills of young children who were learning English as an additional language and were struggling to meet the curriculum milestones for speaking and listening. Paley's curriculum was used in conjunction with a 'Talking Together' teacher training programme, which used video feedback and self-reflection to help practitioners develop effective scaffolding strategies to support children's talk. These included: waiting for children to initiate conversations, following their lead, and using a variety of questioning and modelling strategies to extend children's language and vocabulary. Typadi and Hayon's analysis established that all children made measurable language gains when Paley's story-based approach was combined with 'Talking Together' teacher training.

Typadi and Hayon subsequently introduced Paley's (1990) story-based pedagogy into one pre-school class and five reception classes in two private schools, and worked with these classes for varying lengths of time (between five months to two years), again focusing on children's language development and changes in teachers' interaction strategies over time. All participating children showed improved language ability, confidence, attention level and turn taking. Reflecting across these studies, Typadi and Hayon (2010) concluded that for children in the early stages of learning English, and those with specific language difficulties, complementary programmes should be used to build children's language skills and enable these children to tell and act out their stories. Overall, Typadi and Hayon, (2010: 86) found that Paley's approach provided 'a practical and flexible framework, allowing both one-to-one and whole-class work. It compels adults truly to listen to children and accept their ideas within a large classroom'.

## **Preparing children for school**

The development of oral language and literacy skills, the cognitive load of planning, telling and enacting a narrative (whether in the form of a narrated story or in pretend play) and the progress in young children's cognitive competence that result from their regular participation in Paley's story-based curriculum, all combine to indicate that the approach offers children rich preparation for school learning. These key areas are known to contribute to children's preparedness for success in formal education, along with social-emotional competence, self-regulation, and the ability and willingness to cooperate (for example, see Denham, 2006; Dickinson, McCabe & Essex, 2006).

All these facets of learning are embedded explicitly and implicitly in Paley's approach. For example, the children's and teachers' involvement in story activities require their mutual adherence to certain ground rules: that a storyteller is entitled to the uninterrupted and focused attention of the teacher whilst the story is being told; that the stories will be scribed exactly as they are told (and this can be problematic for some teachers!); that the storyteller can choose which character they would like to act out; that all children must sit quietly and neatly around the improvised stage so that everyone has room for a 'front row' seat; that the roles will be allocated in strict rotation around the stage; that it's ok to choose not to act out a role; that all stories and enactments will be celebrated by the whole class clapping, and so forth. These may seem aspirational rules for young children to adhere to, yet their regular repetition during the rhythm of everyday classroom activity enable children to make sense of them, and over time, to promote important dimensions of their social competence such as cooperation, social understanding and self-regulation (Nicolopoulou, McDowell and Brockmeyer, 2006). However, when working with large classes of disadvantaged, ethnically diverse children, Nicolopoulou's research has established that unless the storytelling and story-acting practice is incorporated as a regular activity (e.g. at least twice-weekly), the benefits to children's social competence, and to their language and literacy development are unlikely to persist in the long-term. The repetition and rhythm of the approach, and its embeddedness in the classroom culture are therefore key.

## **Sharing interests and developing a common classroom culture**

Young children's lives unfold in overlapping sociocultural worlds: at the most immediate level these include their families, peer groups and classroom cultures. These intimate relationships are embedded in larger community and institutional structures, which in turn are enmeshed in broader cultural frameworks. Children's interactions are intertwined with these contextual layers, simultaneously constituting and maintaining the social contexts that can enable or constrain them, and that structure their nature and impact. Even if children's home cultures and languages vary, the symbolic play and learning spaces offered in early education can lead to a sharing of conceptual tools and systems of meaning-making. As Nicolopoulou et al. (2014:43) argue, 'an effective approach to understanding development requires that we pay systematic attention to the ongoing interplay between three dimensions of the

human world that are at once analytically distinct and mutually interpenetrating: individual, interactional or relational, and collective.'

With Paley's approach, children's storytelling and acting becomes part of the classroom culture, but each child tells their story voluntarily and spontaneously. This rather unusual format for narrative in the classroom means children are free to choose their own characters, topics and plots, and their stories are told and acted out in a shared, public space. Each child's storytelling and acting is embedded in the ongoing context of the classroom culture and the child's relationships within that culture. The public nature of the story sharing, and the interpersonal relationships within that space, facilitate narrative cross-fertilisation: children pool their interests from within and beyond the classroom through the stories they tell, often sharing their interest in elements reworked from popular culture and story books, and borrowing characters and plots from each other's stories. Through their storytelling and acting, children form and sustain a shared culture of collaboration, experimentation and mutual cross fertilization of ideas that serves as a powerful matrix for their social, cognitive and linguistic development (for further discussion, see Nicolopoulou et al., 2014).

Unsurprisingly therefore, children have been found to use their stories as vehicles to affiliate themselves with sub-groups of other children within their classrooms, seeking and affirming both friendship and prestige (e.g. Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997, 2002) and building up gendered subcultures within the classroom. This gendered polarization in story themes and characters has been observed consistently in studies of middle-class children, and less so with children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged families – an area identified as ripe for further investigation (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 2014). Over a series of studies, Nicolopoulou and colleagues have found gendered differences in both the form and content of children's narratives, including different approaches to social relationships, the social world, and images of the self. For example, girls' stories have typically (but by no means always) featured networks of stable and harmonious relationships, with activities located in specified physical settings, such as the family and home, whereas boys' stories have often featured conflict, movement, rivalry and disruption, with heroes and 'extravagant imagery' (Nicolopoulou et al., 2014: 47).

The educational and social significance of the storytelling and story acting practice therefore intertwine. Participating in storytelling and story acting engages and mobilises children's interests and motivations through play, fantasy and friendship, and the public and peer-oriented facets of the activity help to create a community of storytellers and actors in the classroom, drawing on the power of peer-group processes to realise important social-relational developments for children. As McNamee (2005: 276) eloquently suggests:

A central theme in Paley's work is finding a home for the homeless in school: the lost, the lonely, the excluded, the forgotten, the misunderstood, the rejected child (and his or her family). In creating a classroom each year as a place for the mind and heart of each child to grow and flourish, she studies the

premises of fairness, friendship and kindness, and how they can and ought to work in the community of the classroom.

### **The multimodal and co-constructed nature of storytelling/story acting**

Whilst past research into storytelling and story acting has documented the significance of the approach for children's cognitive, linguistic and social development, the focus of attention has been primarily on the analysis of language, with some discussion of how story enactment enhances the benefits of storytelling (e.g. Nicolopoulou et al., 2014). More recently, scholars have begun to consider the contribution that multimodal analysis can make to understanding the interactional processes through which children's narratives (as scribed by an adult and later dramatised by the class) are co-constructed by multiple players and through multiple modes (e.g. Cremin et al, forthcoming).

This work has made visible the complexity of how children's narratives are finely-tuned multimodal co-constructions from start to finish, with often subtle support and encouragement expressed by peers and teachers through silent modes, including adopting open and attentive body postures towards story tellers and actors, fine-tuning gaze direction and gaze aversion in response to storytellers' hesitancy and need for time to reflect on how their story might develop, or how they might enact the challenging prospect, for example, of 'being an orange' (Cremin at al, forthcoming). This multimodal strand of analysis offers scope for further investigation of the complexity of classroom interaction, and the layering of meanings as expressed between peers, and between teachers and children, through multiple modes.

### **The enduring need for teacher support**

Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) outline some key conditions that need to be in place in order for the storytelling and story-acting practice to work well. In her early studies, Nicolopoulou observed that many teachers found it difficult to relinquish control to the children during storytelling/story acting activity, and to manage children's transition between story acting and other quieter, possibly less stimulating activities. This was resolved by creating a classroom environment where children were provided with a clear set of rules about how to move between activities. When working with disadvantaged children, teachers also found it difficult to make acting run smoothly with relatively large groups. In part this was because initially, children had little knowledge and understanding of narrative structure and tended to include long lists of characters in their stories so that they could include all their friends. Providing ample opportunities to tell stories alongside other book reading practices allowed teachers to scaffold children's developing understanding of narrative structure and offered a solution to this problem.

Across many of the studies cited above, and indeed in the studies reported in this volume, many teachers expressed concern about the simplicity of children's initial

stories. This has led to the realisation that it is important to provide professional development activities for teachers that could ‘guide their understanding and appreciation of children’s narrative development so that in turn they could guide children’s narrative development in productive ways’ (Nicolopoulou and Cole, 2010: 66).

## **Storytelling and story acting in US and English classrooms**

In this section we outline the spread of storytelling/story acting beyond Paley’s own classroom, and how the approach has been taken up in geographic pockets of the USA and, to a lesser extent, in England. With the publication of Paley’s first book, *White Teacher*, which appeared to critical acclaim in 1979, and *Wally’s Stories* in 1981, educators were able to read about her story-based work with children. Paley continued to describe aspects of the approach in many of her subsequent books (e.g. *The Girl With the Brown Crayon* in 1997). In the thirty plus years of national and international speaking engagements that followed the publication of *White Teacher*, Paley would often arrange for a group of young children to join her on the stage to demonstrate storytelling/story acting. These speaking engagements have inspired several generations of American teachers, and an occasional policy maker, to adopt the approach.

Storytelling and acting is embedded in the graduate program and student teaching experiences of early childhood educators at Erikson Institute, Chicago, where McNamee is currently director of teacher education, and where online studies have helped to spread Paley’s work nationally and internationally. Formerly a teacher in one of the experimental classrooms in McNamee’s research, in the mid-1980s Cooper became director of the Trinity School for Young Children in Houston where she made storytelling/story acting a core part of the school’s literacy program. This work was further developed thanks to a grant to start the Teachers’ Network for Early Literacy at Rice University, which has disseminated storytelling/story acting to classroom teachers throughout the Houston area (now renamed School Literacy and Culture (SLC), see <http://literacy.rice.edu/>). In the years since, close to 500 teachers have been introduced to Paley’s work through an intense year-long residency programme in which teachers attend monthly seminars and receive in-class coaching from mentors. SLC staff also mentor approximately 250 public and private school teachers in storytelling/story acting each year through its summer institutes, writing camp, and other professional development efforts, and provides a Vivian Paley scholarship for a year-long residency.

With time, the approach spread to Boston, after Jason Sachs, the head of Public School’s (BPS) Early Childhood Department, was inspired by hearing Paley speak at the 2011 National Association for the Education of Young Children’s annual conference. Paley was invited to speak at a BPS professional development conference for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, and later the same year, 25 teachers attended a seminar led by Marina Boni and Ben Mardell to learn more about the approach, and to help craft a guide for colleagues about storytelling/story acting (see <http://bpsearlychildhood.weebly.com/storytelling.html> ). This was incorporated in the

revised BPS kindergarten curriculum in 2013, and two years later in the revised pre-kindergarten curriculum. As a result, storytelling/story acting is now part of the mandatory curriculum in 250 kindergarten and 120 pre-kindergarten classrooms (serving 4,000 and 2,000 children respectively in the Boston area). The BPS Early Childhood Department is now working with 30 school districts in Massachusetts to help them implement their kindergarten curriculum, which includes storytelling and story acting.

The history of storytelling/story acting in the USA is one of organic, decentralized and episodic growth. Beyond Paley, there are others who speak and have written about the approach, including Cooper (1993), McNamee (2015) and Katch (2001), another graduate student of Paley. As champions retire, sometimes activity declines, but at the same time, new areas spring up. For example, in the winter of 2016/15 teachers from public school and community based preschools signed up for a four session seminar on storytelling/story acting in Somerville, Massachusetts.

In England, Paley's curriculum is less well-known, but it has received consistent promotion since 2002 through the work of Trisha Lee and the story-based programme of professional development offered by her London-based theatre and education company 'MakeBelieveArts'. The UK instantiation of Paley's work led by this company, initially entitled 'The Helicopter Technique' and now known as 'Helicopter Stories: Letting imagination fly', is self-evidently based on Paley's (1990) book *The Boy who would be a Helicopter*. Lee, with a background in theatre and education, has worked with Isla Hill and other MakeBelieveArts staff, to introduce the approach in several Local Authorities in England, including Tower Hamlets, Lewisham, Kent, Thurrock, Cheshire, Bristol, and Oxfordshire, among others. MakeBelieveArts has developed a three-tiered approach to enabling schools to adopt the approach: 1) one day training events; 2) modelling, supported by sustained in-class support; 3) a mixture of in-class support and training via intensive courses. Take-up following their annual conferences on creativity, which foreground children's play, has been substantial. They have also piloted work with parents, introducing them to the Helicopter Stories approach, and have worked with primary schools where older learners 'take story' for younger classes and support enactment (Lee, 2015). In addition, Lee has integrated the child-centred and creative nature of the approach into the teaching of primary mathematics (Pound and Lee, 2014), widening the reach of Paley's story-based pedagogy. Lee's (2015) most recent publication *Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories* offers practical professional support for educators on how to implement storytelling and story acting in early years or early primary classrooms. Paley who is the company's patron, fully endorses Lee's subtle development of the dramatisation element of the approach.

The MakeBelieveArts story-based training programme was formally evaluated in 2012 by the Open University (discussed below), and has subsequently established four certified Centres of Excellence in Tower Hamlets, Gravesham, Sittingbourne and Thurrock. These teacher-led centres deliver introductory and full day Helicopter Stories training sessions to support others in developing the approach within their own settings. The MakeBelieveArts' website presents a rich repertoire of children's oral stories, often uploaded by teachers from the Centres of Excellence, demonstrating

the diversity and difference of children's unique stories, as well as elements of commonality.

## **Methodological approaches to the study of storytelling and acting**

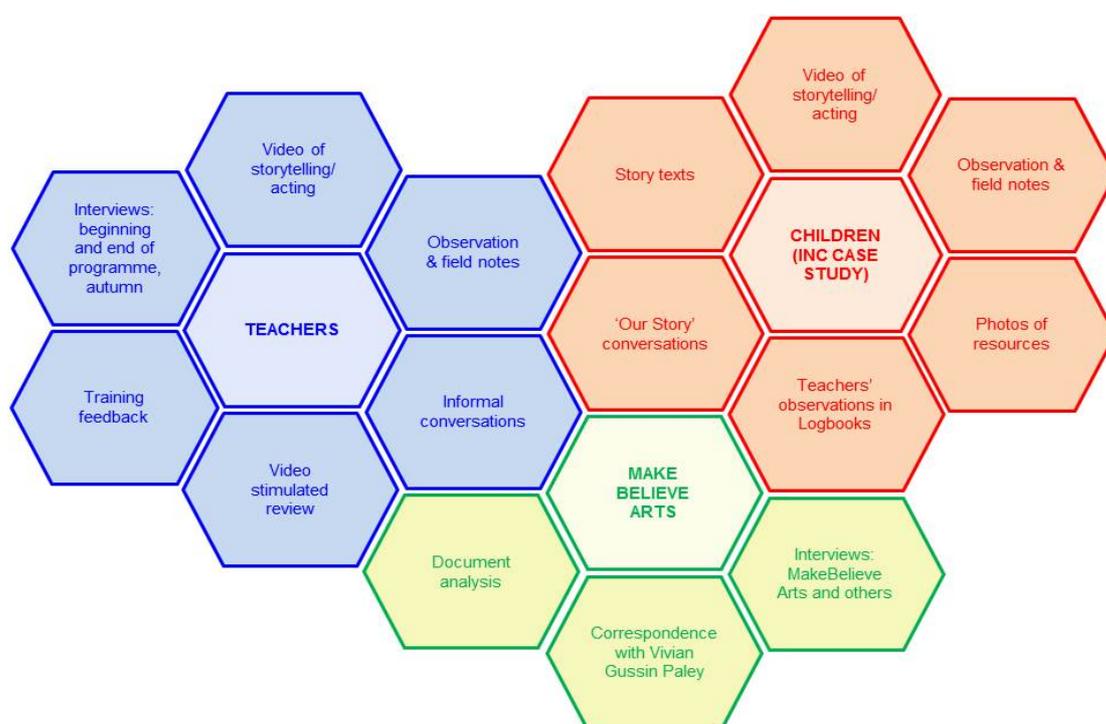
Paley's studies of her story-based pedagogy gained validity through the rich perceptiveness of her ethnographic accounts of young children's learning (e.g. 1979, 1981, 1986, 1990), but her work did not enter into the kinds of methodological or theoretical debate that is typical of academic research. Studies in the USA by McNamee (2015; McNamee et al, 1985), Nicolopoulou and colleagues (e.g. 1997, 2002, 2005; Nicolopoulou et al, 2014, 2015) and Cooper (1993, 2009) have tended to blend detailed linguistic analysis of children's stories with ethnographic observations of their telling, scribing and acting over weeks or months. These investigations have often featured quantitative analysis of experimental test results, employing control groups and standardised assessment instruments in order to measure and compare the degree to which individual children's stories display certain attributes over time, such as vocabulary and narrative complexity. Details of these scholars' methodological approaches are reported in chapters 3, 7, 8 and 10 of this volume.

Findings from the UK-based study reported in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 9 arise from a year-long project to evaluate MakeBelieveArts' 'Helicopter Stories' training programme (funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation). The evaluation was conducted in six settings: three primary school Reception classes for children aged four-to-five years (two in inner-London and one in a semi-rural setting), and three of their feeder preschool nurseries for children aged three-to-four years, which were located either in or near the primary school settings. During a six-week training period, MakeBelieveArts' trainers worked closely with practitioners to establish the 'Helicopter Stories' pedagogic principles. The trainers/mentors then returned once a week to observe the technique in action, and to reflect with teachers on the development of the approach in their setting.

Using a combination of ethnographic and multimodal methodologies for data collection and analysis (Flewitt, 2011), the researchers documented the delivery of the training programme in each setting, and returned to the settings in the following school year to assess its sustained use in the schools and nurseries. The robust methodological framework for the evaluation study is illustrated in Figure 2.1, and included: *ethnographic observations* of the children's storytelling and acting (some video-recorded and others described in field notes with accompanying photographs, resulting in 17 hours of video recordings and 124 pages of field notes); *close scrutiny of the children's stories* as scribed by the teachers and trainers (6 teacher-scribed story books and 3 child-scribed storybooks; total over 350 stories, told by 147 children); *teachers' structured observations of 3 case study children* chosen by teachers as representative of each classroom's cohort, and educators made weekly notes on any progress they observed in these children's language and communication, sociability and inclusion in classroom interaction (total 18 detailed teacher logbooks); *scrutiny of school records* including student data and profiles; and *teachers' written evaluations* of the training programme. Furthermore, three rounds of *interviews were audio-*

recorded with the teachers/early years educators in each class at the beginning, middle and end of the training programme (total 13 hours audio-recorded interviews), and these insights were supplemented by *field notes* of impromptu conversations with staff during the ethnographic observations of the practice in action. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with the MakeBelieveArts Trainers in each setting (total 3 hours audio-recorded interviews). Finally video-stimulated reflective review was used with classroom teachers and support staff, and children's perspectives on the storytelling and story-acting episodes were reviewed using the 'Our Story' picture-based storytelling application for iPads, to prompt children to reflect on their story telling and acting experiences.

Further documentary material from the MakeBelieve Arts' Archive was analysed, including practitioner feedback and evaluations of previous training instantiations, observational accounts and in-house evaluations. Eight interviews were conducted with educational advisors who had long-term association with MakeBelieveArts, and with the organisation's Director Trisha Lee.



**Figure 2.1 Sources of evidence for the MakeBelieve Arts' evaluation**

The full data set outlined above was subjected initially to open-ended scrutiny. Audio-recorded interviews, teacher logs and field notes were transcribed and qualitative analytical software (Atlas-ti: Muhr, 2004) was employed to map axial themes across the data sets. Ethnographic analytic techniques helped to situate the children's sign-making in the social practices of the classroom context, and this ethnographic lens informed the detailed multimodal analysis, making explicit how the children expressed their individual and collective funds of knowledge through interwoven semiotic modes when telling and acting out their stories. After coding and initial analysis, typical episodes were selected for detailed analysis, along with any episodes that ran counter to trends in the data and brought new issues to light. In-depth

exploration of these data extracts combined interactional analysis (cf. Swann 2007, 2009) with multimodal analysis (cf. Flewitt, 2006, 2011, 2012). Interactional analysis focused on how the children interacted with practitioners and peers in telling and acting out their stories and any changes over time. Multimodality was employed to analyse the video data, both with and without sound, permitting in-depth scrutiny of the diverse modes used during storytelling and acting, focusing on gaze, action, the use of space and artefacts along with language, and how these modes were blended to create meanings in a 'multimodal ensemble'.

The highest ethical standards were maintained throughout the MakeBelieveArts evaluation. Practitioners and parents received information and an explanatory letter about the research, with opportunities to discuss participation in the study, and their right to withdraw themselves, or in the case of parents their child, from the research process at any stage with no adverse effects. The project was explained verbally to children, and they were reassured that they were under no pressure at any stage to participate. The researchers and practitioners monitored participating children to ensure they did not appear uncomfortable. In the event, all children in each class participated and none withdrew. Principles of confidentiality were observed throughout: raw data were kept secure in password-protected files with access restricted to the research team, and pseudonyms are used to protect institutional and participant identity. Permission to use specific images was granted.

## **Conclusion**

Empirical research investigating Paley's storytelling and story acting practice, carried out over more than two decades and employing diverse methodological approaches in schools across the USA and in England, has produced compelling evidence of the contribution this practice can make to children's language development, narrative skills, cognitive abilities, and social and emotional competence, particularly when both storytelling and story acting are included regularly in classroom practice over lengthy periods of time, and when supplemented by other regular reading practices in the classroom. Narrative is known to play a crucial role in children's identity formation, and in their efforts to explore complex concepts that they encounter in their daily lives, particularly when offered in contexts that are genuinely meaningful, engaging, and stimulating for the children themselves. Research presented in this and subsequent chapters suggests that Paley's approach offers rich insights into their developing understandings of the world, including their conceptions of themselves as effective learners in classrooms to which they feel they belong, regardless of their ethnicity, language, social or cultural background and learning support needs. Participating in storytelling and story acting engages and mobilises children's interests and motivations through play, fantasy and friendship, and helps children form and sustain a shared culture of peer-group collaboration, experimentation and mutual cross fertilization that serves as a powerful matrix for their learning and development.

However, empirical research has found that practitioners require training and mentoring in the approach - to understand its underpinning philosophy for social justice, to be reassured that it is ok to transcribe children's stories as they are told, to gain confidence in managing the sometimes excitable story enactments, and to resist the teacherly temptation to correct children's inventive uses of language and grammar. For some children, particularly those with additional learning needs, the technique works particularly well when supplemented by additional programmes of support, albeit in mastering the principle language of instruction used in a given classroom, or overcoming the social and cognitive challenges presented by specific learning impairments.

In contrast to the current curricula focus on specific literacy skills, as discussed in Chapter 1, and the increasing tendency to measure children against a set of one-size-fits-all standards of 'readiness' for school, Paley's story-based curriculum offers children and teachers a holistic experience of early language and literacy that has real purpose, and encourages interaction and collaboration between peers in a creative and expressive activity. In addition to laying important foundational skills and knowledge for young children's later schooling, the approach offers preschool and elementary educators the opportunity to get to know children, their strengths and interests, and enables teachers to plan for the individualized learning of children from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds, who bring with them an even wider range of skills and knowledge.

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