Boston Listens: Storytelling/Story Acting in the Boston Public Schools

Boston Public Schools Early Childhood Department
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At the heart of storytelling/story acting (ST/SA) is **listening**—teachers listening to children, children listening to their classmates and children listening to adults—all in service of better understanding each other's ideas and enjoying each others' stories.

The benefits of such listening are multiple; ST/SA promotes language and literacy skills, creativity and social and emotional development.

Based on the experiences of 50 Boston Public School teachers, this guide identifies components that make for successful ST/SA.

At the same time, each group of children and each teacher is unique, and so there are options for ST/SA, some which are listed here. You and your children will discover other options. In the words of Vivian Paley, "A teacher's own observations will inform her best about all these details."

Support materials (e.g., videos of practice, explanations of the approach) are available on the BPS Early Childhood weebly's storytelling tab (http://bpsearlychildhood.weebly.com/index.html). Hyperlinks to the weebly are embedded throughout the electronic version of this guide (available on the weebly).

Logistics

Materials
ST/SA has only a few material requirements: paper, a pencil or pen and perhaps a clipboard. You may also want individual binders or notebooks for each child in your classroom.

Physical Space
You will need an area where children can comfortably sit in a circle (or oval or square) with space in the middle for acting. It is very helpful to delineate the acting area—the stage—with tape. Adults can take a child's dictation anywhere in the classroom that is comfortable and conducive to listening.

Who
Adult Models of stories can come from a variety of sources; teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, family members, community members, volunteers (e.g., Jump Start, Generation Inc.) and older students in your school can all share stories. This is a case where more is merrier. ST/SA is a great way for administrators to connect with your students and learn about early childhood education. Vivian Paley's book *Girl with the Brown Crayon* has a wonderful example of a grandmother sharing a story with a group of kindergartners. Including a range of storytellers helps ensure children will hear stories from different cultural backgrounds.

We recommend that the teacher and/or paraprofessional take down the dictation of the children's stories. Storytelling provides the opportunity, on a regular basis, for teachers to have engaging, fun, one on one interactions with each child in the room. It is also helpful for the person leading story acting to take down children's stories. This said, volunteers (e.g., Jump Start, Generation Inc.) and older students can be trained to take down children's stories.

When
In K2 classrooms ST/SA is scheduled for the ST/SA-Writers Workshop Block.

K1 and elementary grade teachers can take dictation during choice or center time. Story acting, as well as adult storytelling, can take place during any of the classroom group times. Stories can also come in handy during transition times—nothing is better for helping keep a group focused when waiting for the buses to be ready than a favorite story. To infuse stories into their classrooms, we strongly encourage K1 teachers to put ST/SA on their schedules.

Modeling Storytelling (Adult Stories)

Adults' stories provide models for children to draw upon—ideas for how to organize stories, characters to include and plot lines to spin out. Children will rarely copy these models directly, but rather mine them for inspiration. Hearing adults tell stories helps create a culture of storytelling, inspiring children to share their stories with their classmates. Thus children need to hear adult stories on a regular, even daily basis.

This section offers guidance on:

- Stories to tell
- Engaging the audience

Stories to tell
You and your colleagues can draw from a wide variety of sources to find stories to tell children. These include:

A) Personal experiences. Children love to hear stories about the lives of valued adults. Experiences growing up, family members (especially children) and pets are particularly rich sources of stories. See the weebly for examples.

B) Folk tales. Folk tales were originally oral stories. The Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Big Bad Wolf, Abiyoyo, and other stories can all be shared in oral form. Such oral tellings allow for audience participation. See the weebly for examples.

C) Imaginary tales. Imaginary tales can originate in your or others' minds. Loud Mouse is a popular story that Boston storytellers have told for generations. See the weebly to view a telling of Loud Mouse.

Teachers can create their own tales, combining elements of real life and fantasy (e.g., a teacher's cat can visit the school, helping children solve mysteries). In *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Vivian Paley describes how her story about Princess Annabella captivated her kindergartners and supported their learning over weeks and months.

D) Children's stories from previous years. Over time you will amass a collection of children's stories. You can tell some of these stories, which are particularly well suited to being acted out.

E) Stories connected to curriculum.
For K2 teachers, many books connected to the curriculum can be acted out. These include Abiyoyo, Abuela, Amazing Grace, Big Al and Shrimpy,

Three Little Pigs, The True Story of the Three Little Pigs, Chrysanthemum, Lon PoPo and Roxaboxen.

For K1 teachers, many of the OWL books can be told orally and lend themselves to enacting (e.g., Peter's Chair; Noisy Nora; Gilberto and the Wind; Max's Dragon Shirt). These enactments can take place during the fourth reading. Building Blocks also has stories that children can enact (e.g., Three Billy Goat Gruff; Goldilocks).
Teachers can also create stories that connect to unit themes (e.g., the children's families going on a trip together; how the wind blew a favorite umbrella away). We strongly discourage teachers from constraining children's choice in storytelling by prompting them to tell a story about one of the themes.

Note: A beginning storyteller may worry about remembering all the parts of the story they intend to tell. While children are very forgiving audiences (and will happily prompt you if you have forgotten an important part of a familiar tale) it is perfectly acceptable to use notes or even read from a script.

Engaging the audience
Because stories are so compelling, they are perfect for attracting and keeping the attention of groups of young children. Here are some suggestions for adult storytellers for engaging the audience:

A) Ritual opening. At the start of a storytelling session, rituals can help focus the group's attention. Rituals can include any combinations of turning on a special light (e.g., electric candle), ringing a bell or chimes, reciting a chant (e.g., "Are we ready for a story? Are we ready for a story? Are we ready for a story? Yes! Yes! Yes!").
For examples of rituals, see the weebly.

Rituals can be tied to cultural practices. Some teachers introduce the "Crick-Crack" call and response ritual (where the storyteller says "crick" and the audience responds "crack" three times), by explaining, "On the island of Haiti far from here in the Caribbean storytellers start their stories by saying crick. Now you say Crack. Crick. Now you say Crack."

Inviting children's input in choosing rituals can be part of creating and maintaining a healthy, democratic classroom community.

B) Connecting stories to the children. Stories can be connected to children by having them be the protagonists of stories. They can outsmart villains to help others in their school (e.g., see Baldwin K-1 teacher Kendra McLaughlin's Crazy Raccoon story on the weebly).

Children's play can be mined for story themes and characters. For example, if children are pretending to have underwater adventures on the playground, octopi, sharks and dolphins can appear in adult stories. Stories can also be told to counteract stereotypes children are expressing.

C) Puppets and props. Puppets and props can help engage children in stories. This is especially true for those who are learning to master English. Note: it is likely children will want to explore the puppets that adults use; teachers should decide in advance a policy about this.

D) Audience participation. Giving children a role in adult stories engages them and can help them learn more about storytelling. Participation can involve call and response (e.g., adult storytelling: "Do you think she was scared?" children: "No!"), motions and gestures (e.g., pretending to stomp down stairs as a character in the story is doing) and answering individual questions (e.g., "Ruthie, what are you going to bring to the popcorn party?").

E) Songs and chants. Songs and chants that children can sing also engage children in stories. Stories like Abiyiyo and Way Down South have songs embedded in them. See the weebly for an example.

F) Repetition of stories. Tell favorite stories again. And again. And again. Children love hearing stories they enjoy multiple times, and repetition helps children better understand and master particular tales.

G) Consider pacing, voice and gesture. Slow down to help young children follow and make sense of your stories. Use your voice to draw children in, alternating between soft and loud for dramatic effect. Use gesture to convey meaning.

Children's Storytelling (Dictation)

Supporting children's storytelling involves careful listening and gentle scaffolding. It is an opportunity to engage children one-on-one in a joyful activity. While some children will begin the year telling lengthy stories, others' stories will be shorter. Even a one-word story can (and should) be celebrated and acted out. Overtime, children's comfort with storytelling and their narrative abilities will grow.

During story dictation "teacherly moments" will arise—times when, because a child shows interest, we can support children's literacy and language skills. However, it is critical that ST/SA not be turned into a phonics lesson. The adults' primary role in dictation is listener.

Included in this section are:

- Guidelines for storytelling (dictation)
- Suggestions about scaffolding children's storytelling
- Advice on issues that likely will arise when children tell stories
- Supporting children learning English and children with special needs
- How dictation can support literacy skills
- How dictation can promote language development

Guidelines for storytelling (dictation)

A) Choosing the storytellers: A list. A list of who will be telling stories is recommended, to help children know when they will be sharing a story and to ensure fairness. The easiest way to develop a list is to go down your class roster, assigning children to a day of the week or simply having a certain number of storytellers each day. While the number of children per day and the number of days per week that stories are told will depend on each classroom situation, we recommend that children be able to tell a story at least once every two weeks.

   Some teachers prefer to have children sign up to tell stories. This can happen daily or at the beginning of the week. Children can then be assigned a day based on how many stories can be told each day.

   Telling should always be voluntary.

B) One page limit. Lengthy stories take a long time to copy down (robbing other children the opportunity to tell stories) and can be **very** difficult to act out. Let children know at the beginning of the year that their stories can be as short as they like, but no longer than one page. The idea of "to be continued" can be introduced to children whose stories exceed the one page limit.

C) Taking dictation. Try to write down verbatim what the child tells you. There will likely be some conversation throughout the storytelling session (see scaffolding for suggestions about the nature of the conversation).

D) Read back the story. When a child has finished telling their story we recommend reading the story back to him or her and asking, ""Is there anything you want to add or change in your story?" Treating the story as a text increases print awareness and provides an opportunity for more sophisticated narratives

E) Organizing the story transcripts. Depending on how you want to use children's story transcripts, you can save their stories in individual notebooks or a collective class story binder. For ideas on using story transcripts see "Communications" (page 12) and "Family Engagement" (page 13).

Note on laptops: Because of the literacy benefits of writing down children's stories by hand (see below), we discourage the use of laptops in taking down children's stories.

Suggestions about scaffolding children's storytelling

While some children will begin the year confident in their storytelling abilities, others will have trouble getting started. The challenge of scaffolding children's telling is to provide just the right amount of support that aides children's development without taking away their ownership of the story (and decreasing their motivation to participate in storytelling).

If a child is having trouble starting, teachers can provide visual prompts to help them identify story settings and characters Examples of prompts can be found on the weebly. Puppets and/or felt boards can also support children's efforts. Teachers can ask, "Who is going to be in your story?" and "Where does the story start?"

If a child's story seems to stall, teachers can ask, "Does anything else happen?", "What did x [a character] do then?" or "How did you feel when that happened?" Of course, dictation should never resemble a cross-examination. Only a few questions should be asked and these questions should be motivated by a genuine curiosity to better understand what the child is thinking. For examples of teachers scaffolding children's stories are on the BPS early childhood weebly.

Support can also be provided by peers; story dictation does not have to be a private affair. Knowing a friend's interests, peers can give suggestions about characters, settings, and sometimes provide language to support the storyteller. Vivian Paley explanation of how peer support can help children share their stories is on the weebly.

Advice on issues that likely will arise when children tell stories

A) Inappropriate stories
Some stories are inappropriate for sharing with the whole group, either because they concern private family matters or will reflect poorly on the storyteller (e.g., bathroom language). We recommend you tell the child that this particular story can't be shared, but that you are happy to take down dictation of a different story to be acted out.

B) Stories with fighting and killing
Some young children are exposed to violent images through the media. Grappling with issues of power and control, many children are drawn to stories involving superheroes and fighting. Whether or not to censor stories with violent themes is a controversial issue.

Because stories are a way children make sense of the world, we recommend that children be allowed to tell stories involving superheroes and fighting. Importantly, when children act out these stories we can help them learn how to enact these themes safely, using the idea of stage rules (explained below). Vivian Paley's perspective on the issue is enlightening (see the weebly).

C) "Stuck" on a theme
It is not uncommon for a child to tell stories with similar themes. Similarly, children in a class will tell the same kind of story as a way of connecting (e.g., "we are the kids who tell pirate stories"). Teachers may reach a point where they feel that they can't stand to hear another ninja (or princess or _____) story.

We have the following advice:
1) Patience. While it can be grating on adults, repeating story themes is helpful for children who are learning story structure and other narrative elements. It makes sense to keep one variable constant while engaged in this process. Curley School teacher Laura Shea explains the virtues of patience, describing how her children's stories changed over the course of the year.
2) Tell stories. Adult stories provide examples of other kinds of stories to tell.
3) Use the children's interests to further learning. Repeated pirate stories provides the opportunity to introduce information about who pirates were (and are).
4) Discuss the repetition. Have a class discussion about why certain story themes are repeated. Ask children what they like about these themes. A high level conversation is likely to occur.

Supporting children learning English and children with special needs

The non-verbal elements of ST/SA provide children learning English and children with special needs wonderful opportunities to participate in classroom life.

The verbal aspects of ST/SA mean that often stories told will differ from native English speakers and/or typically developing children. Short stories—of one sentence or even one word—should be accepted and celebrated. When possible, children can tell stories in their home language (see weebly for an example).

Not all children will want to tell a story at the start of the year. Storytelling should **always** be a choice. Experience shows that overtime, almost all children choose to tell stories.

While important not to confuse learning English with a special need, the verbal elements of ST/SA mean that children learning English and children with special needs benefit from similar supports. These supports include:

- Adult stories. Children learning English often use their teacher's stories as models for their own tales.
- Prompts based on listening. By observing children at play and listening to their conversations, teachers come to know their students. When a child is having difficulty starting a story or expressing his or herself, teachers can make suggestions based on this knowledge.
- Visual props. Boardmaker images, "story stones", puppets and felt boards all provide images that children can use to "tell" their story, pointing to and manipulating images to explain their ideas. Teachers with iPads can use this tool to provide symbols and images to support children's storytelling.
- Going to the story. Children who are hesitant to tell a story may be creating wonderful tales in the block area or dramatic play. Teachers can go to the places children are playing to get their stories.

Decisions for appropriate adaptations are determined based on the specific individual needs and IEP of the students.

For children with limited English, these supports allow teachers and peers to help co-construct stories. Sometimes this co-construction involves teachers or peers giving suggestions to help children start their stories. Other times it will involve providing a word the child can't express.

BPS teachers share their experience supporting children's storytelling in interviews on the weebly:

Megan Nason, a K/0-K1 inclusion teacher at the Curley School, shares thoughts about supporting children with special needs through observing their play, providing props and co-constructing stories.

Erica Lilley, who teaches in a K0-K1 multiple disability classroom at the Blackstone School, shares thoughts about supporting children with visual props and co-constructing stories with them.

How dictation can support literacy skills

During dictation, moments will arise when children notice features of letters, their sounds and spelling of favorite words. Or they might comment on the unfolding layout of the words on paper. All of these moments are ripe for helping cultivate children's concepts of print. Depending on the child's understandings of print, that attention can be given to spoken words becoming written words, words being written from left to right and top to bottom, or decoding. For example, after the story is completed the adult can go through the text and underline all the characters in preparation for dramatization. With assistance, some children will be able to decode some of these words (e.g., "here is a character that begins with a K. Think about what sound the K makes. So this words is?"). For examples, see the weebly.

However, teachers will want to be very careful not to turn dictation into a phonics lesson. Stories are told to make meaning and communicate.

How dictation can promote language development

Dictation can also be used to support language development. During dictation the opportunity to supply a new vocabulary word will appear (e.g., a child will talk about "cat hair" and you can explain that is called "fur"). Dictation is also an opportunity to discuss parts of stories: characters, setting and action.

Similarly, teachers can offer grammatical corrections. While there may be the temptation to correct children's grammar as they tell their stories, we caution that one should tread carefully here. Our recommendations are:

A. Write down exactly what a child says, staying true to his or her words.
B. If a child is making a grammatical error and you feel they are able to learn the standard grammar or the mistake will make it difficult for others to understand the story, offer them an option—"I can write this as you told me, or I can write it as it would be like in a book. In a book it would go like this: _____. What do you prefer?"

Note: In reading stories to the whole class, some teachers with a high proportion of children learning English will correct grammar so children hear the stories in Standard English.

Story Acting (Dramatization)

Story acting brings children's ideas to the group. It gives a compelling reason for children's storytelling, celebrates children's ideas and provides an opportunity for the class to create meaning around a text of great interest. For examples of story acting see the weebly. Useful advise from master dramatist Trish Lee can also be found on the weebly.

Teachers new to story acting may want to begin the process in small groups, building up their own and their children's capacity to engage in the activity.

Include in this section are advice about:

- Acting out the story/choosing the actors
- "Stage rules"
- Rituals
- Supporting the actors
- Supporting the audience
- Support for English language learners and children with special needs
- Extending learning after the dramatization

Acting out the story/choosing the actors
Begin the dramatization by reading the first words of story. When you come to a character, turn to the child next to you and ask, "Can you be the x?" Likely he or she will come on the stage and start acting the part. Of course, a child can always decline the role. Continue around the circle. We recommend avoiding negotiating with children about roles they want to play—it should not be an option to say, "I don't want to be the princess, but I do want to be the knight." Going around the stage in this manner is fast and efficient, allowing many children to participate in dramatization and many stories to be heard.

Note: 1) We suggest letting the author of the story choose what ever character he or she wants to be or to watch the dramatization. This can be determined when the story is dictated.
2) Some children may be hesitant to take on gender specific roles (e.g., a boy being reluctant to play the mother). We suggest saying, "Boys can pretend to be anything they want: girls, moms, dinosaurs, anything."

Continue reading the story, pausing as you encounter new characters and asking the next children sitting around the stage if they would like to take on these roles. You can be expansive in your definition of characters; a house, a forest or a car can be acted out by the children. Including inanimate objects allows more children to participate in the dramatization. In stories with many characters, you can have actors sit down when their parts are finished.

Note: Early in her career, Vivian Paley had the author choose the entire cast. She changed this practice out of considerations of fairness (some children were asked to be actors far more than others). Going around the stage to choose the actors is also **much** faster system, allowing for more stories to be acted.

"Stage rules"
Stage rules create a safe environment for story acting. The basic rules are: 1) You have to stay one arm's or leg's length from one another when pretend fighting, and 2) No leaving the stage. Children quickly learn these rules.
See http://bpsearlychildhood.weebly.com/dramatization.html for their explanation of stage rules. These rules can also be invoked in dramatic play, as children learn how to separate their imagination from real actions.
See http://bpsearlychildhood.weebly.com/the-wisdom-of-vivian-paley.html for Vivian Paley's explanation about how stage rules can help create a safe environment for acting out stories.

It is almost inevitable that stage rules will be broken by inexperienced actors. Here we recommend reenacting a scene to illustrate how actions can be acted out safely (e.g., "let's practice how we can show Batman is punching Joker without Ryan touching Tom").

Rituals
Similar to adult stories (page 4), rituals can help engage a group in story acting. A special light and/or sound can signal to the children that it is time to attend to a dramatization. On the weebly, Blackstone K2 Sheltered English Instructor teacher explains how inviting children's input in choosing rituals helped create and maintain a healthy, democratic classroom community.

Supporting the actors
New actors may be shy about performing on stage. Micro-acting (small, restrained body movements and facial gestures) are common. Teachers can point out and celebrate these actions. Teachers can also offer prompts (e.g., "show me how a turtle crawls"; "remember how you pretended to be a baby in the house area?"). These prompts allow children to determine how they want to portray characters (as opposed to the teacher modeling actions).

Songs (e.g., Going on a Bear Hunt) and whole group transitions also provide opportunities to practice acting (e.g., "let's sneak down the hall like robbers"; "let's stand like trees while we are waiting to go into the art room").

Supporting the audience

Focusing the audience's attention on the actors, rather than spending time trying to manage the audience's behavior, helps everyone attend to the acting on stage. Trish Lee explains this technique on the weebly.

The audience can be enlisted to help actors, acting out what a character may look like.

You can ask the actors to take a bow and encourage the audience to applaud at the end of stories. Soliciting children's input in the creation of rituals building a culture of storytelling/story acting.

Support for children learning English and children with special needs

Some teachers read the story twice—once before enacting begins so actors can anticipate their roles and a second time to prompt actors during the enactment. During the first reading the class can discuss how to act out different roles. Other teachers read the story line by line, so actors have to listen carefully and so the outcome is a surprise to the audience. In either case, we recommend reading slowly so actors have time to perform. Referring children to peers for suggestions can also help dramatization. Teachers find the need for such support decreases over time.

Extending learning after the dramatization

Conversations about stories and acting can extend the learning provided by ST/SA. Conversations can occur immediately after a performance. Later, video can remind the children of the story.

Teachers can ask what children enjoyed about the story and performance and if they have any suggestions or requests for the storyteller and cast. Teachers can draw connections between stories, share their impressions about stories, and ask children their impressions about individual stories and emerging themes across stories. Terms such as characters, setting, plot and suspense can be included in such conversations.

Over time, you and your children will establish your own way of dramatizations. Occasionally, you may want to discuss how your rules and rituals are working. An example of such a discussion is posted on the weebly.

Communications

After stories have been told and enacted, teachers can provide additional opportunities for children to enjoy the stories and communicate their ideas. In K2, much of this activity can take place in centers. In K1, these activities can take place during the OWL center time.

A) Art center

Teachers can print out the text of stories and have a child illustrate the page. These pages can be displayed on a bulletin board, put into an ever-growing binder of classroom stories (that are read by teachers, children and visitors to the classroom), or placed in individual portfolios. Stories can also inspire collage and painting.

B) STEM center
Stories suggest themes for construction (with blocks and other materials). Teachers can invite children to build their stories set in castles or pirate ships.

C) Reading, writing and language center
There are a variety of programs (e.g., iBook Author; Storyrobe) that can be used to help children create books about their stories. These books can include illustrations, audio files and video.

Video or audio of dramatizations be made available. Children enjoy watching these performances and, if transcripts are available, can read the story as it is acted out.

Activities in the centers will also help children generate ideas for stories.

Family Involvement

As children's first teachers, families can support children's learning through storytelling in multiple ways. It is helpful for teachers to explain to families how stories support children's success in school by increasing attention spans, enlarging vocabulary, learning about sequencing of events, using their creativity, learning to express themselves, etc. Family friendly facts sheets are available in Spanish and English. Newsletters can explain how storytelling works in the classroom. Danielle Gant, a parent of a BPS K2 student, explains how families can support storytelling in a short video that can be shared with families.

Teachers can also:

A) Share children's stories at conferences with parents/families
Sharing video and/or transcripts of children's stories delights families and provides the opportunity to explain the value of storytelling and how families can support children's learning through stories. They also provide opportunities for families to see children functioning in the classroom and witness their school performance.

B) Encourage families to tell stories and listen to the stories their children tell
Stories can help pass the time while waiting for dinner to be ready or on long bus rides. For families with limited books in their native language, stories are a particularly good way to share their culture with their children. Everyone can tell stories. Encourage families to listen to the stories children tell, explaining how important it is that they show interest. Teachers can suggest that families ask questions about the stories and act them out.

C) Invite families to share stories in school
Family members telling stories in school can be formal (at a group time) and informal if parents are uncomfortable with telling stories in front of the whole class (at the snack table). Teachers can then repeat these stories to the class. If families are unable to come to school, teachers can find out what stories are important to families, particularly stories that are traditional to their cultural groups, and share these in class.

D) Share stories from school
Send stories home via email or paper copy. Families can read these stories and celebrate them, and even act them out again at home. Teachers have found that families will send storytelling binders back to school with new stories in them. This is especially valuable for children reluctant to tell stories at school.
Teachers can also share video of story enactments, emailing them home or during parent-teacher conferences.

E) Request stories from home
Asking families to send in stories from home allows children reluctant or unable to tell stories at school to share their stories with classmates. On the weebly, Megan Nason explains how stories from home enriches classroom life.

F) Hold a family story event
Teachers at the Blackstone organized a family storytelling event that had two parts. Parents attended a 45 minute workshop on the importance of storytelling and learned ways they could support their children's stories, including telling stories to their children. The workshop notes and a list of storytelling suggestions for parents in Spanish and English are posted on the weebly. At the end of the workshop families broke into classroom groups and wrote a short story to share with their children. The parents then went to their children's classrooms where they watched the children acting out their stories. They then acted out their story for the children.

Though the workshops were held during the school day, attendance was high. Teachers made posters and placed them around the school, sent home a bi-lingual flyer and invitation (that the children decorated). The day before the event, children were sent home wearing bracelet reminders. These materials can be found on the weebly.

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