

Interview with ...

Vivian Paley

For many Talking Points readers, Vivian

*Paley needs no introduction. Her numerous books chart her growth as a progressive educator—mostly in the role of a kindergarten and preschool teacher. As her books attest, Ms. Paley learned to listen to children and to make her own learning a crucial part of teaching. For her, teaching is not about dispensing facts, but about finding out what is important to each of us. From her first book, **White Teacher** (Harvard University Press, 1979), to her most recent, **In Mrs. Tully's Room: A Childcare Portrait** (Harvard University Press, 2001), Vivian Paley has probed ways in which social issues permeate who we are as learners and as teachers. For her, drama has been an essential tool in examining the social and emotional worlds that are the foundations of literacy and learning. For this issue of **Talking Points**, Allen Koshewa spoke with Ms. Paley about the importance of drama in her own classroom, and in classrooms she has observed in recent years.*

Allen How did you begin to incorporate drama into the classroom?

Vivian Watching the children at play, I began to understand that drama formed the primary substance of their relationships in the classroom. “Who will we pretend to be?” began the morning, and “What else can we pretend?” continued the sense of belonging throughout the day. To the extent that each child experienced a variety of roles and plots and had time to think about them and talk about them did the classroom feel like a happy and productive place.

The lead to integrate writing and drama came from the children, who looked for ways to prolong and preserve the feelings engendered in play. The idea of moving their stories to a printed page and acting them out on a designated stage was sensible and appealing. Almost immediately the process became the core of my kindergarten program. Drama, of course, is entirely local, so that character, plot, and theatrical convention change with each new group of actors. Children in rural Michigan put cougars and hunters in their stories, while those in New

York City might even put in a doorman and an elevator. Babies and monsters thrive everywhere.

Allen Can you give an example of how young children might explore drama?

Vivian Tanya is exploring drama when she says, “Remember when I was the big sister, but now I’m the baby?” Now, this is very important. She realized roles can be changed, and she made a very conscious decision. This is what transferring roles onto the stage enables spontaneous play to accomplish. She was the big sister; it was a choice. Now she is the baby. However, she, in a sense, needs to answer why or to have the opportunity of answering why. And almost every child wants to do this.

Tanya says the baby is crying and Lily has to be the sister to take care of her. Now think of what this represents: she has realized that it’s the baby, the baby’s role, that’s much more appealing to her right now, not the big sister. And she has an opportunity in this story—which is to say, in theater, to make herself the person who is being taken care of. This role suits her. So Lily has to be the sister to take care of her. This is the children’s legitimate thinking that causes them to decide “No, I don’t want to be the big sister anymore, I want to be the baby.” It’s not just stubbornness, or the desire to argue; it’s a level of abstraction and understanding. If you want that sense of being cared for, playing the older sibling won’t provide that. You are the older sibling, but you can be the baby that’s taken care of.

Allen So, you are sort of saying, aren’t you, that the abstraction is the ability to project yourself into different social possibilities?



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Vivian Yes. Also emotional possibilities. After all, emotion is, you might say, the purpose of theater. To help the audience, actors have to enter into this emotional realm, to sense the reason why one role is done this way and another role another way—the emotional underpinnings.

Allen Is there a difference in the way you approach drama with preschool children as compared with older children?

Vivian It's exactly the same thing, except that with older children I can go to the abstraction immediately. With preschoolers, you find a little play episode going on—and of course it's going on all over; you don't have to look very hard, as this is in the nature of early childhood. Now with first grade, second grade, or third grade you can bypass that easily. You can demonstrate with a story out of someone's journal, or a story told incidentally in some other way. You don't have to wait for the fantasy play; you can simply begin with the story and have the children act it out in a group. But there are not that many differences between us when it comes to theater. There are certain basic emotions that will open us up to expressing something that we can't express otherwise.

In Tucson, older children who didn't open up right away responded to my impulse to talk about the younger children. I had been warned by the teacher whose class I was visiting that it would be a challenging class. The class was a first/second blend, in a Title I, bilingual school. The teacher told me it was a particularly resistant group and not to be disappointed if it didn't go as easily as it did in kindergarten. So my reaction was that it doesn't matter. Whatever we learn we'll learn. I knew that we would come across something; it's in the nature of theater. You learn something, whether it suits your preconceived expectations or not. Now the teacher's warnings were correct. There was a sense of awkwardness. Finally, after a little discussion, I said impulsively, "By the way, perhaps you would be interested in a story told by two-year olds." And I told about the two-year olds I wrote about in *In Mrs. Tully's Room*, who created complete dramas with one word, "Mama." The children melted. Immediately the girls began telling stories.

Allen What tips would you give early childhood teachers who have not used drama but would like to try?

Vivian Storytelling is the beginning. When it's the teacher's story that becomes important and the teacher narrates, the children learn to listen. As for the children's dramas, begin

with one story. Listen to the children at play and choose the first "plot" you hear. "Jenny, are you the mother? Is Teddy the baby? This is a story we can act out. If you tell me what you are pretending, I'll write it down." Then, bringing everyone together, tell them, "This will be our stage. Jennie has dictated a story with two characters, and we will act it out." From then on, the children understand they are a community of actors and the teacher is their scribe.

Allen Vivian, how does drama with preschool children spur thinking and learning?

Vivian As the heroine of *In Mrs. Tully's Room* says, "When my babies do their stories they really see each other. That's what we need to go after in school, the seeing and listening to each other." Furthermore, because they yearn to be listened to, children willingly push themselves to explain their ideas with more fluency and agree to behaviors that will keep the story going. In Tanya's story, Barney offers to be the noise, because she says the baby hears a noise. But he upsets Tanya by roaring and stomping. Tanya tells him, "It's too heavy." "But I'm a monster," he explains. "No," Tanya says, "It's a puppy that we losted and I'm feeding you puppy chow." Now, this directly shows what theater can do that nothing else can do. To continue to be in her story, Barney will change quickly from being a monster that is roaring and stomping too heavily to a puppy that she can feed puppy chow to. This is the child's point of view, which makes theater work.

Allen I'm thinking about how this has worked in contexts other than your own classroom. I know that this approach has caught on in London. How did that happen, and how have the teachers adapted your ideas?

Vivian Yes, this storytelling and story acting of mine is very big in the London inner city schools, mainly because of a theater group called the London Bubble Theater—a wonderful group of people. They had been looking for a way to assimilate themselves into the schools. And the London Arts Council was looking for something new and innovative concerning literacy. They were particularly looking at schools in North London, where there are a lot of immigrant children and poor families, and they had been very dissatisfied with the previous approaches to drama education. So when they came across my book *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, they realized that this is it. This is drama, the theatrical approach to what they were trying.

They started in one school and now they are up to eight schools. But they did it as theater people, with a lot of time for rehearsals, because that was what they knew. So it ended up that they only got through two stories in a day, with a lot of restlessness. The teachers were saying, “We don’t have enough time for all of this.” So the directors came to Ball State in Indiana to see me making a film, a documentary on storytelling and story acting. They wanted to see how I did it. During the visit, they realized that it’s just the children dictating their stories and then acting them out and that’s what this is all about. They could do many stories in one day. The following year, I was invited to England and I demonstrated in their classrooms—kindergarten, first-, second-, and third-grade classrooms. I’ve not done it with older ages, but their teachers have done it. And it works with any age, including high school. It simply puts someone’s—anyone’s—story on a stage. The children, whatever their age, understand exactly what’s going on. They don’t need training to get started, nor do the teachers. What they have to learn and what teachers need to learn is that the children bring theater with them. They are more tuned into theater than we grownups are because we have forgotten all about it. We need to give this only slight structure.

Allen In the case of young children, the teacher is the scribe, and the written word provides some of the structure. Do you find that children inevitably move from dictated stories to writing their own?

Vivian Yes, and the intersections of storytelling, writing, and drama create a seamless process. The moment a set of circumstances is imagined, we see the action and hear the dialogue; our thoughts jump ahead to new possibilities and interpretations. Writing down our stories, whether by dictation or otherwise, and acting them out, expands our vision and heightens our expectations. That the process works so well with young children and continues to command our attention throughout our lives points to an essential truth about the way we think and learn.

Allen What do you see as the function of drama for children?

Vivian Young children visualize the action in their minds as they combine words and movement in play. To capture

the full meaning of their imagery within the social context of language and myth, the acting out of their stories with classmates, in a more formal setting than the doll corner or block area, serves to bring us to the next level of abstraction and understanding. When Tanya dictates her story she adds a mother and a dad because, she says, “the baby hears a noise and the dad wakes up.”

Children start off wanting more than anything else to know what another child is thinking about. That’s the basic agreement between storytellers, actors, and audience. All of them

want to know what’s on the storyteller’s mind. We set that up in the theater and have a written script to explain everything. But the process begins when we are very young.

We do not teach theater to young children; we give them an opportunity to extract the essence of play and thereby build community. Since play is the life of children, every sort of social issue comes into it. And since all children want to play out their stories, all we are doing is giving them a basic structure within which classroom theater can evolve.

The overwhelming need of drama is to communicate. It overrides all spurious issues such as social power plays, the need to monopolize (or the inability to do so), and the usual

problems with speech or language. It overcomes everything that stands in the way of a child communicating an idea. The ability to communicate an idea is worth every struggle—every compromise you make to go along with the community-based rules, in this case the rules of theater. To express ideas is the most profoundly human act of all. The simple need to communicate is, after all, the basis of community, and of education itself. Tell me your story and I’ll tell you mine; we’ll put all our stories on a pretend stage and then we’ll know who we are. ●

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