

All Ears: Listening to the Stories of Young Children

Back in the old days, when children weren't expected to learn how to read until they entered first grade, I attended a red brick elementary school in suburban Chicago. My first-grade teacher, Mrs. Jackson, taught us to read using a set of primers very similar to the classic Dick and Jane books, except that the main characters in our primers were a girl named Ann and a boy named Bob. Since my own name is Ann and a boy in my class was named Bob, the primers made perfect sense to me. ("Come, Ann. Come and see. Look at Bob.") Never mind that the real Bob was a sullen boy who rarely spoke to me. I learned to read quickly and enthusiastically. How lucky I was to be the star of the first stories I ever read.

Now, as an adult, I can imagine that the other children in my class, though possessed of perfectly fine names like Maya, Anton, and Suzette, probably did not feel the thrill I felt when we read our primers. And realizing that has led me to wonder whether early childhood education might not be transformed if all children had the chance to star in the first stories they encountered in school.

My fascination with children's story dictation began with this idea that children learning to read will be most interested in stories that have a direct connection to their own lives. We know that children (and adults, too, for that matter) will pay attention to things that are important to them. So a child whose mother is a waitress is probably going to be very interested in a story that takes place in a restaurant. And a child living in Minnesota is probably going to be more interested in a sledding story than a child in Florida would be. If we want children to pay attention to the written word, we have to offer them stories that are so fascinating and meaningful they can't possibly turn away. And we needn't look far. The children will tell us these stories themselves.

STORY DICTATION

Once upon a time a long long long time ago when Alex was here he was so silly I laughed so hard I had to go to the potty.

Maddie, age 4

The term *story dictation* describes what happens when a child tells a story (or offers a description of an event or a person, which is called a narrative) and an adult or an older child writes down the child's words, exactly as the child has spoken them.

Story dictation is already practiced in many early childhood settings. The teacher and the child sit side by side at a low table. The teacher's pencil is poised above the blank page, like a diver about to plunge into the water. The teacher turns her face to the child, and their eyes meet. As the child begins to speak, the teacher's hand begins to move across the page. The day's story dictation has begun.

I wake up by myself. My mommy give my sister and me milk. Everyone put socks on. My mommy put her shoes on. My sister put her shoes on and I put my shoes on too. My mommy drive me to school. I eat breakfast at school and I brush my teeth. I tell story. Miss Linda write the story. The end.

Peter, age 4

Story dictation is a valuable part of any early childhood setting because it fosters children's language, literacy, and social and emotional development. The stories it generates can also be included in a child's portfolio and used as an assessment tool. It is also an activity that helps to develop a lifelong love of stories and books. But what is perhaps most important, the very act of dictating a story gives a child the gift of the caregiver's full attention, helping to build a secure and trusting relationship between caregiver and child.

Most early literacy activities take place in groups. Picture books are read aloud to groups of children during story time. Groups of preschool children are encouraged to play games with sentence strips or alphabet cards. But during story dictation, children enjoy the one-on-one attention of a caregiver. It only makes sense that a child is more likely to express himself creatively and try out new words and ideas when a caregiver listens attentively to what he says and shows her respect for his words by carefully writing them down.

Doing story dictation is a little like trying to save the rain forest; everyone agrees it's a good idea, but no one is completely sure of how to go about it.

Having practiced and observed a variety of approaches to story dictation during my many years as a teacher and director of early childhood programs, it concerns me that many early childhood professionals are reluctant to try story dictation because they're afraid of not doing it correctly. For example, teachers often think that if they don't do story dictation every day, they shouldn't do it at all. And many teachers believe that stories should be dictated only if they're going to be dramatized or acted out in a group. But I believe that something is always better than nothing.

This book grew out of my desire to reassure teachers and caregivers that there is no wrong way to do story dictation. The only requirement is a willingness to try—to show up with paper and pencil, ready to listen and write. During my research for the book, as I talked with dozens of teachers and collected hundreds of story samples, one constant soon emerged: although no two teachers approached story dictation in quite the same way, every child had benefited from the opportunity to tell her story and be heard.

This book is intended for early childhood providers at all levels of education and experience. If you've never tried story dictation, this book will help you take those first steps. If you've tried it but aren't sure you're doing it "right," this book will show you that—contrary to anything you may have heard—there truly is no wrong way to do story dictation. And if you're already doing story dictation regularly and have witnessed firsthand the amazing results, this book will help you look even deeper into the magic of children's stories.

The three parts of this book answer the "why," "how," and "what" questions about story dictation. Part I addresses why people tell stories, why we do story dictation with young children, and how the developmental stages young children go through affect the way they tell stories. Part II explains how to create a time and space for story dictation in an early childhood classroom or a family child care home. It also offers a variety of strategies for building on the stories, such as acting them out, sharing them with families, and using them for assessment and curriculum development. Finally, by examining common themes and patterns, Part III of this book looks at what children's stories mean.

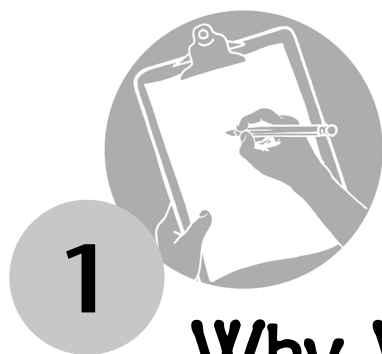
If you're ready to take that first simple step, pick up your pencil and say, "How does your story begin?"



PART 1

Why We Do Story Dictation

Before doing story dictation in an early childhood setting, you might find it helpful to look at why stories matter in the lives of young children. Part I describes the important functions stories serve in all our lives, especially those of children and families, by looking at the roles of culture and identity in storytelling, the many ways stories help us build relationships, and what children learn from the storytelling process.



Why We Tell Stories

Because we used to have leaves
and on damp days
our muscles feel a tug,
painful now, from when roots
pulled us into the ground

and because our children believe
they can fly, an instinct retained
from when the bones in our arms
were shaped like zithers and broke
neatly under their feathers

and because before we had lungs
we knew how far it was to the bottom
as we floated open-eyed
like painted scarves through the scenery
of dreams, and because we awakened
and learned to speak

—Lisel Mueller, from “Why We Tell Stories”