EQUITY AND ACCESS THROUGH STORY WORKSHOP

supporting inclusion for children with disabilities by developing connections between the arts and literacy
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THROUGH STORY WORKSHOP:
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developing connections between the arts and literacy

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To learn more visit us online:
portlandcm.org • opalschoolblog.typepad.com
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INTRODUCTION

Story Workshop is a classroom structure we are developing at Opal School to support language and literacy. It has evolved over the past decade as we’ve researched the question: What is the connection between literacy and the arts?

We are finding that the use of materials such as clay, paint, props, or blocks can play an integral role in language development, and strongly support children to see themselves as storytellers and authors.

This happens, for example, when a child is playing at the water table and imagines or remembers a story. As the child continues to play and explore his story, he may consider more details, the sequence may become stronger, and the language the child uses to tell the story becomes more clear and powerful.

The stories come alive! And we are finding that stories have the power to bring a community together.

Our experiences have taught us that Story Workshop is a powerful example of Universal Design principles at work and therefore strongly supports the needs and rights of children with disabilities to learn within a heterogeneous community of peers. Opal School serves a large population of children with developmental delays, children on the autism spectrum, children with language delays, and children who come from environments high in stress. As a public charter school, we have limited access to the services provided to children with disabilities in the regular public school system, so we must find ways to serve these children alongside their typically developing peers. We are inviting the children to explore the classroom in search of their stories together. And we are finding that strong literacy skills and strong relationships are the result.

WE WONDER
Where do stories live? What stories do the materials inspire? When using the materials, what memories are awakened?
The structure of Story Workshop is built on the foundation of strong research around literacy and the structure of Writer’s Workshop. The research of authors such as Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Ellin Keene, Karen Gallas, and Katie Wood Ray inform our work, as do the municipal pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The prepared Story Workshop environment includes spaces and materials to inspire and entice children. Materials like blocks, paint, water, sand, colored pencils, and collage become the vehicles for the children’s stories.

We invite you to join us to take a peek into the classrooms of Opal School as they prepare for and engage in Story Workshop. In this set of five videos, you will see classrooms serving children ages 3–8. In these classrooms, Story Workshop is a regular structure, taking place four or five days a week for up to 90 minutes each day. This structure has fully replaced the more traditional Writer’s Workshop, upon which the initial research questions were built. We began by asking: *What might happen if we make more room for the arts in Writer’s Workshop?* From that seed of a wondering, Story Workshop has developed into the structure captured in these short videos. We expect it will continue to evolve as we continue to observe and reflect on the relationships between language, literacy, materials, time, play, imagination, and story.

**THE ELEMENTS OF STORY WORKSHOP**

- Preparation
- Provocation
- Invitation and Negotiation
- Creation
- Congress

This series of videos will provide a window into possibilities within each of these five elements and is intended to offer support for teachers who wish understand how we approach this inclusive structure at Opal School.
**PREPARATION**

*prepare for stories*

*Children are miracles. Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for children’s care. When we invite a miracle into our lives we prepare ourselves and the environment around us ... We make it our job to create, with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle! Action follows thought. We can choose to design spaces for miracles, not minimums.*

— Anita Rui Olds (2000) —

We see children as researchers. The school is a learning community where children and adults collaborate as researchers to co-create and document experiences that have originated from their relationships, challenges, and choices. When we begin the year we wonder about the individual gifts that each child will bring to the larger community.

**WE WONDER**

*Where are they from? Where have they been? Who do they love? What are they interested in? What makes them laugh? What makes them cry? What gives them joy? What makes them scared? What are they curious about? What do they dream about?*

In short, we wonder about their stories.

Every child enters the room with their stories. Hundreds of stories. Stories about who they are and what makes them who they are.

We’ve experienced that school can be the place where children’s stories are welcomed by audiences of all ages and become central to making meaning of the world. As Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the municipal pre-primary schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, tells us: “Once children are helped to perceive themselves as authors and inventors, once they are helped to discover the pleasure of inquiry, their motivation and interest explode!” (1994).

What might happen if educators viewed all children as creative, full of imagination and wonder? How might school curriculum be shaped and influenced by teachers who value creativity as the birthright of every child? If we recognize creativity as a valuable community resource, how could we nurture it in our classrooms? And what might happen if we include children with disabilities in our thinking as not children with special needs, but instead with special rights?
In her essay on creativity as a quality of thought (2006), Carlina Rinaldi poses questions central to our work with children:

• How can we help children to find the meaning of what they do and what they experience?

• How can we respond to their constant questions, their “whys” and “hows,” their search for that which we like to think of as not only the meaning of things but the meaning of life itself, a search that begins from the moment of birth, from the child’s first, silent “why” to that which, for us, is the meaning of life?

We know that children with disabilities are no less searching — no less capable of ideas and feelings and curiosity about the world around them — no less full of stories. How can we create an environment that supports them to express the stories they have to tell, to share their gifts with a community of peers, and to learn by experience what it means to participate?

WHEN PREPARING FOR STORY WORKSHOP WE ARE CONSIDERING QUESTIONS LIKE

• What are the current interests of the children?

• What materials and supplies can be accessible to the children?

• How will we organize the materials to be easily taken out and put away by the children?

• How might we prepare the classroom environment to be interesting and inviting?

• How can we inspire each child to be engaged with and delighted by his own thinking and the thinking of others?

• What do we hear them telling in their play?

• What do we know is going on in their lives?

• What materials reflect those interests and might help extend them?

• What high quality literature will support the children’s efforts to write their own stories?

• What might inspire them to discover new stories?

• In what ways have we prepared ourselves to listen and respond supportively to the children’s work?

• In what ways have we prepared the children to work together with a strong sense of community?
The environment plays a vital role in supporting children’s literacy development. Intentional environments allow children to have plenty of opportunities throughout the day to explore the classroom with everything they bring — their bodies, their curiosities, their cares, and their imaginations.

The spaces around the classroom are intentionally set-up to provoke and inspire. The children are able to work and play within these spaces. They are given the time and space to play with roles and scenarios. They are able to try different things to see what works for them.

WE ASK OURSELVES
What do I believe about children? What assumptions do I carry? How do these beliefs and assumptions show up in my daily practice? Does my actual practice match my values and intentions?

Loris Malaguzzi writes: “We don’t want to teach children something that they can learn by themselves. We don’t want to give them thoughts that they can come up with by themselves. What we want to do is activate within children the desire and will and great pleasure that comes from being the authors of their own learning” (1994).

Opal School Teacher Kerry Salazar reflects on this powerful statement: “That’s what I wanted to do. That’s what I wanted my practice to look like: children being the authors of their own learning. Not just some of the time, but all of the time. That is what it would look like when my beliefs were matching my practice.

“Part of preparation is about my own thoughts, questions and ideas, but another big part of my preparation is about preparing the environment: setting up the space, creating an environment that supports children to tell their stories, and that will match my strong image of children.

“I hope for and strive toward environments that are playful, engaging, naturally motivating, with multiple opportunities for all children to enter into the work.”

ENVIRONMENTS CAN COMMUNICATE WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT CHILDREN

- They are competent and capable.
- They come to this work full of experiences and with stories worth telling.
- When given the time and tools to, they will readily and eagerly take every opportunity to share stories, pieces of themselves.
- They will do so, because that is what we do as humans, from the moment we are born: we share stories to make sense of this world.
- Their work here will be to connect, to understand, and to build relationships with others.
- They will use their most innate and natural learning strategy: PLAY!
TO CREATE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS WE CONSIDER

- Providing multiple kinds spaces for telling stories: whole group, small group, with partners, and space to work alone if needed.
- Quiet spaces and spaces dedicated to telling stories together.
- Spaces where a large variety of materials are readily available.
- Spaces that are flexible, that can be changed with the needs of the children, that can easily be moved, and offer lots of different possibilities.
- *What can be accessible to the children?*
- *What will support many possibilities, but not too many to overwhelm?*
- *What materials will awaken memories we expect they might have?*

Determining accessibility includes observing children in order to support their intentions — for example, when one student did not have enough fine motor control to avoid frustration with small materials, we substituted a magnet board with interesting objects so that the pieces were more likely to stay in place as he played and invented his ideas.

Preparation begins with our image of children. It begins with our belief and knowledge and trust in the incredible capacities of children — all of them.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In the video, what do you notice about the materials teachers are using?

When you look around your own setting, what unexpected materials might you collect to use in new ways?

What materials do you already have that you might be able to see with new eyes?

The tables used during Story Workshop at Opal School are needed for lunch each day. What spaces in your classroom might be flexibly used and how might you organize materials to be easily put away by children?

What could be the motivation behind the teacher’s willingness to give such detail to the preparations for Story Workshop? What do you predict is the result?

What stories do you hear in your classroom? How might you support them with materials?

What materials do you imagine would draw out more stories?

Time must be prepared as well: How will you organize your time to listen to the stories?

What tools will you use? Journals? Cameras? Audio recording devices?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Inspiring Spaces for Young Children* by Jessica DeViney, Sandra Duncan, Sara Harris, Mary Ann Rody, and Lois Rosenberry

*Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments* by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter

*The Language of Art: Reggio-Inspired Studio Practices in Early Childhood Settings* by Ann Pelo

*In the Spirit of the Studio: Learning from the Atelier of Reggio Emilia* by Lella Gandini, Lynn Hill, Louise Cadwell, and Charles Schwall

*What About Play? The Value of Investing in Children’s Play* by Susan Harris MacKay (available at portlandcm.org)

*Environments that Support Playful Inquiry and The Wonder of Intelligent Materials Videos* by the Museum Center for Learning (available at portlandcm.org)

**Opal School Blog:** opalschoolblog.typepad.com

**SOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR MATERIALS**

Oriental Trading Company: orientaltrading.com
Learning Materials Workshop: learningmaterialswork.com
Community Playthings: communityplaythings.com
Magic Cabin Dolls: magiccabin.com
Kapla Blocks: kaplaus.com

Floral Supply Businesses
Ball Jars
Yard Sales
Thrift Shops
Recycling Bins
Beach
Woods
Backyard Garden
Children come to school not as empty vessels waiting to be filled. Rather, they come to us full of their own thoughts, ideas, memories, and stories. Everything they do and learn is through the filter of what they already know and believe to be true. To engage in authentic teaching and learning, we must first consider what children find meaningful, what experiences they’ve had that they might be able to connect to. To do this we must listen.

Story Workshop supports a social constructivist theory of learning. We believe that children co-construct knowledge through interactions with one another. We view learning not as isolated and individual, but as a collaborative and creative process. And we know that it is not possible to separate cognitive learning from social and emotional learning. They are tied together, unable to be separated. One does not exist without the other.

We strive to create communities where we tend to the needs of each aspect of learning for all children — where cognitive learning is no more or less important than social and emotional learning. To create this kind of a community we invite children to think, connect, be inspired, share ideas, question, wonder, and create.

We engage in inquiry, which is not a model where the teacher gives information, but instead a model where all minds (children and adults) are engaged in considering a question or idea together, building off of the thinking of others, and creating new, more complex shared understandings together.

At Opal School, one way we convert this theory into practice is by offering provocations. A provocation is a question (about a situation, material, or environment) that is introduced to children to engage and support their interests and curiosity.

We select provocations based on what we know about our students, their interests and abilities. Provocations will look different from day to day and year to year because they aren’t a set of predetermined lesson plans, but a response to
what we observe in the children, a response to their interests and strengths. Because of this, as time goes on, provocations will not be just a repeat of what we did the year before, but instead they will change as the children change. They are designed to provoke thinking and inspire imagination. What will do that for one group of children will be different from the next.

When working with groups of children that include children with disabilities here are some of the considerations we might keep in mind as we create provocations:

- How might we provoke the children’s thinking and inspire their imagination to tell stories?
- What models can we provide?
- What strengths and interests have the children shown that we can build upon?
- What skills do we want to teach? What questions, concepts, and skills do we want to introduce?

Our work is to support all children, with or without disabilities, to see themselves as authors. We can support all children to desire working towards membership in what Frank Smith has called the “Literacy Club.”

Lucy Calkins writes: “The teacher of literacy sponsors a club, a conversation in his or her classroom, and then does everything possible to bring students into that conversation and that community” (1994).

A provocation is an invitation to join the “club.” We are not just inviting children to tell their stories, but inviting them to study and then try out what expert, mentor authors are doing.

When we support children to belong to the “club,” when we believe in what children do, and together get excited about and study what mentor authors are doing, we naturally build a bridge between children and mentor authors.

**SAMPLE PROVOCATIONS TO ENGAGE AND SUPPORT CHILDREN’S INTERESTS AND CURiosITIES INCLUDE**

- Where do we find stories?
- Does this story remind you of another story?
- Does this story remind you of something from your life?
- What makes a story powerful, funny, sad, etc.?
- How do stories begin?
- What makes a story interesting or clear?
- What words does an author use to capture your attention?
A provocation can be an invitation to join the “literacy club” even when it is intended to provide opportunities to learn important skills such as concepts about print, letter recognition, vocabulary development, and grammar that we know young authors need to learn. Valuing inquiry means valuing meaning and taking responsibility for creating context that will have meaning to every child.

**CONCEPT AND SKILL EXAMPLES IN STORY WORKSHOP**

**CONCEPTS AND DEEP STRUCTURES**

- Key vocabulary concepts: schema, connections, detail, mental image
- Strategies for telling or reading a story
- Learning from mentor texts
- Reading comprehension strategies

**SKILLS AND SURFACE STRUCTURES**

- Concepts about print
- Letter recognition
- Vocabulary development and grammar
- Spelling and punctuation
- Genre study

We know that skills taught in isolated direct instruction will likely be learned by the children who are ready to make connections to those skills. But this is a terribly haphazard way to teach and often leads to blaming the children or their circumstances for what looks like an inability to learn. When learning situations are void of meaning and context, children can appear to have limited capacity. Attention to meaning and context supports engagement and memory and increases the likelihood that the children will seek opportunities to put new skills to use in the future.

Provocations also offer opportunities for creating shared language and shared understanding of words, concepts, and ideas. When we offer children opportunities to think, reflect, discuss, and act together we are inviting all children to bring their unique perspectives. We give them an opportunity to stay open and learn that we need the perspectives of others — not just some, but all.

Provocations can take many forms beyond auditory directions. We know that all children — with or without disabilities — learn best when their minds and bodies are both engaged, when they can take in new information using all of their senses. Teachers are mindful of the needs of all children and create provocations daily in response to these needs.

A provocation might be a story read aloud, it might be a song, a dance, a painting, a poem, a new material, a simple noticing, or a question. Provocations might be offered to the whole group or to individuals. Children with disabilities are supported by teachers, who are thoughtful about the ways in which they invite children to engage and respond to those provocations, not just through spoken or written words, but in a multitude of ways.

Children will be invited to explore provocations through materials such as clay, paint, blocks, collage, drawing and more. They will have opportunities to act out their ideas, to have discussions and ask questions, listen and be listened to. When the senses are fully engaged teachers can expect to see all children respond to provocations in meaningful and thoughtful ways.
REFLECTION

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do I notice are the strengths, interests, and curiosities of the children I teach?

How am I keeping track of what I notice?

What are the children already doing? How might I build off those interests to engage their curiosities further?

What do I want the children to learn? What am I expected to support them to learn?

What kinds of books, experiences, or materials might I provide?

What questions will I ask?

What have I heard the children say that I might bring back to them to provoke further thinking?

What kinds of shared language and understanding do I hope we will create together?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Already Ready: Nurturing Writers in Preschool and Kindergarten by Katie Wood Ray

About the Authors: Writing Workshop with Our Youngest Writers by Katie Wood Ray

Lessons from a Child: On the Teaching and Learning of Writing by Lucy Calkins

Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades by Debbie Miller

Mosaic of Thought by Ellin Keene

To Understand by Ellin Keene

Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs by Ellen Galinsky

Imagination and Literacy: A Teacher’s Search for the Heart of Learning by Karen Gallas

Einstein Never Used Flash Cards by Kathy Hirsch-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Diane Eyer
MENTOR TEXTS AND RELATED PROVOCATIONS

A Story, A Story by Gail E. Haley
Where do stories come from?

When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry... by Molly Bang
Who needs this story?

Bear Has a Story to Tell by Philip C. Stead and Erin Stead
What do you notice about Bear’s story? Where do your stories come from?

Honey, I Love by Eloise Greenfield
What do you love?

Stand Tall Molly Lou Melon by Patty Lovell
What details does the author use to help us get to know and connect to Molly Lou Melon?

Junkyard Wonders and Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco
Authors write about things they really care about. What do we know about Patricia Polacco and what she cares about from reading her stories? What do you care about?

Mud by Mary Lyn Ray
What do you notice about the words Mary Lyn Ray chooses to describe mud? What mental images do you get as you listen?

Owl Moon by Jane Yolen
I have never been owling. What does Jane Yolen do to help me understand and connect to her story?

So Much! by Trish Cooke
Where do you think Trish Cooke got the idea to write this story?

The Snail’s Spell by Joanne Ryder
Joanne Ryder begins by saying “Imagine you are...” How might you use that language in your own story? How might you give your readers a surprise?

Lucky Song by Vera B. Williams
What kind of a feeling do you want your readers to get when they read your story? What feeling do you think Vera B. Williams wanted her readers to get?

Atlantic by G. Brian Karas
What would it sound like to write your story from the perspective of something or someone unexpected (like the Atlantic Ocean)?

Max’s Words by Kate Banks
What kinds of words might we collect?

The Quiet Book by Deborah Underwood
The invitation and negotiation time of Story Workshop lasts only a few minutes, but is key in supporting children to be metacognitive about their plans each day. After the provocation the teacher invites children to engage in creating their stories. Each child has an opportunity to be thoughtful and reflective about where they might go in the classroom to do this. The child shares that plan, then teacher and child negotiate. The teacher has the opportunity to check in, listen, nudge, encourage, and hold accountable. The teacher supports the children to become more articulate and more intentional about their plans each day.

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM THE TEACHER

- What is your plan?
- Where will you go/what will you do during story workshop today?
- Will you go back to a story or start a new story?
- Are you finding a story or do you already have an idea?
- What is your idea? Will you share a sneak peek?
- Is this a story you care enough about to stick with?
- What material will support you to tell your story today? Why?
- What are you hoping to discover in clay today?
- What is your intention?
- I remember yesterday you said you’d try small blocks. What made you change your mind?
- Yesterday you told your story in collage. Would you like to try it in paint today?
Allowing time for individualized invitation and negotiation holds space for children to slow down and share their intentions during story workshop. It is a time for reflection, a time to consider what works and what didn’t, a time to consider new possibilities, and a time to share ideas with an eager audience.

It is a structure that ensures no child slips under the radar. As teachers encourage children to articulate plans, we often hear new words or ideas that become shared language and a part of the culture we develop together with the children. Teachers make their expectations clear and develop routines that support the way we all want Story Workshop to look like, sound like, and feel like. Invitation and negotiation time is an opportunity for teachers to act as memory keepers of the work that is happening from day to day. We will question their intentions when they jump from one story to the next, or when they seem unfocused. We will gently challenge them to try something new, and hold them accountable for the nudges we give. Children experience the close and careful attention of adult listeners providing an authentic audience who value their work deeply, and have high expectations for their processes and products.

Questions serve as our guide as we work to nurture this piece of story workshop.

**WE WONDER**

*How do we develop/invite children into a culture of creating stories? How do we support children to find ideas they care deeply about?*

We work from a set of assumptions that all children enter into the classroom full of stories they want to share with the world. No matter what their experiences before they get to us, all children have stories worth telling. We provide time and space and expectations so that children will nurture these stories.

We spend time talking with each child and supporting them to find and tell stories that they really care about. We expect children to spend extended time engaging in the creation of their stories because we know they can. We communicate to them from the very beginning of Story Workshop that the work we are doing is meaningful and worthwhile. Their stories are valuable and deserve to have an audience. So we provide that for them and they respond as authors do, with more stories.

*How do we hold expectations high for all children? How do we play the role of memory keeper for children's stories?*

*What happens when we encourage children to be metacognitive about their processes? What happens when we invite children to think about and articulate their intentions?*
REFLECTION

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do I hope for and expect during story creation time?

How can my invitation support those hopes?

What kind of tone do I want to set for story creation?

What do I know about my students?

When will I know to nudge? How will I know if they need more time?

What systems of organization will I use?

What other possibilities might I offer?

What shared language do I hope to develop?

How might I support them in articulating their plans?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

“The Pedagogy of Listening” by Carlina Rinaldi

Arts and the Creation of Mind by Eliot Eisner

The Geography of Story Workshop Book and Video
by the Museum Center for Learning
(available at portlandcm.org)

The Storytelling Animal by Jonathan Gottschall
**STORY CREATION**

facilitate expression and engagement

*Make sure, above all, that children become familiar in their minds with images, that they know how to keep them alive, that they learn the pleasure of reactivating them, regenerating them, and multiplying them with the maximum of personal and creative intervention.*

— Lella Gandini (2005) —

In Stephen Nachmanovitch’s brilliant book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life (1990) and the Arts*, he observes that artists play with the things they love — painters with color and light, musicians with tone and silence. And “children play with everything they can get their hands on.” Play creates images and images nurture words which leads to more play, more images, more words.

We asked these 6-year-olds: **HOW DO MATERIALS SUPPORT YOUR WORK AS WRITERS?**

**AMELIA:** Materials do have a little present inside and when you get used to one material a bit, BAM, you find out a little surprise, “OH I want to use these ideas in my own writing.” Materials don’t only want to make you want to make a story, they make their own story sometimes and tell you.

**ADALINE:** It was interesting to let your ideas out by using different materials.

**RIVER:** They give you new ideas better than your old idea.

**SENNAN:** It’s really important to use materials because if you just started writing, it might not be as interesting as if you tried dramatic play or watercolor because if you just do writing, you don’t get more ideas, it’s just not interesting.

**JADE:** Sometimes you might want to go places like maybe even to the park to find things and also sometimes you might even want to try pictures and watercolor because it really gives you inspirations of stories you want to do.

**ACE:** Some materials are good for getting unstuck, finding things, words, or bringing up your story.
We are inviting the children to explore the classroom in search of their stories. We are wondering together: Where do stories live? When using the materials, what memories are awakened? What connections are made? What words and new metaphors do the images inspire?

Story Creation is a time of looking for and finding stories from the child’s real or imaginary life. Children play with materials, talk to each other, and tell and write their stories. This part of Story Workshop can last 45 minutes or more each day. Key questions we ask ourselves include: How can we support the children to invest deeply in their stories? How can we support the use of the arts as languages? What does it mean to listen genuinely to the children’s stories? How can we organize our observations and questions?

As social constructivist educators, we want to create classrooms as learning communities that support the creation of narratives that position children as protagonists — people who can act and have an impact. As Karen Gallas writes in her book Imagination and Literacy (2003):

“The path to literacy is not a private introverted path. It requires interaction with and validation by a community of peers ... Literacy is a process of merging who we believe we are with what we show we can do.”

Museum Center for Learning Director, Susan Harris MacKay reflects: “I was a long time teacher of Writer’s Workshop and I remember children’s occasional struggles with writer’s block. Story Workshop has eliminated that struggle entirely. Never does a child lack a story to tell, or a material to engage and inspire ideas. These days, when a child isn’t sure where to begin, a few minutes with a piece of clay, or a moment at the easel and an invitation to play, is guaranteed to bring up an idea and the desire to share it. When I was in Reggio Emilia in 2002, I had the opportunity to hear Jerome Bruner give a presentation. He spoke about how the object of school should be to make learning more playful — because if you are not playing, there is too much negative consequence. This may be especially true for children with disabilities who face more negativity and challenging consequence than their typically developing peers.”

For all of us, learning is optimal when we are in a state of “relaxed alertness” — an environment that challenges us intellectually and emotionally, and encourages us to take risks, to try out ideas, without the fear of blame, ridicule, or shame. We can readily see it in the faces of children when they are fully present and engaged. This is the place where creativity thrives.

In an environment prepared to engage and sustain interest, the teacher has extensive time to focus and work with individuals. One of the special rights of children with disabilities is that they receive a high level of individualized attention. This is possible in classrooms where every individual can sustain his own project for long periods of time.

We know that the social and emotional parts of the brain are intertwined with the cognitive parts of the brain. We connect this with related research that has shown children who are taught skills through direct instruction and children who learn skills through play, learn those skills equally well. But the children who learn through play have an opportunity to make meaning that leads to greater engagement, and a contact with emotion that leads to lasting memory.

If we want children to explore their capacity as authors, offering them a multitude of invitations and materials to play and work with, while immersing them in opportunities to share and to hear excellent examples of published writing, is critical. Not only do children play with materials and words, they play with ideas, possibilities, genres, process, and audience. While they play they build the muscles of strong writers. Descriptive, compelling language becomes the norm for all children.
FROM MY DOG LUCY
BY STELLA, AGE 5

I found a dog at a shelter that was really cute. I picked it and I got to hold it when I was sitting down. I thought that she looked really cute! My mom and dad told us that we could have her but we would have to think what to name her when we were in the car on the drive home. When we got home we chose that her name should be Lucy and we all thought that was a really good idea! A few days later, we chose to take Lucy skiing and see if she would like it. “Did you like it Lucy?” Lucy panted, “He, he, heh.” Since she put a smile into her panting, we knew she really liked it.

FROM THE SNOWY TIME
BY K.D., AGE 5

I was visiting with my cousins in Arizona. One day it started snowing! My whole family came out. My mom and my cousins. It’s only snowed two times in Arizona. Once it snowed when my mom was 5 years old. Once it snowed when I was three. That’s this story! We were trying to scrape up the snow before it melted. I was trying to catch it on my tongue.

We have found that children with disabilities are no less interested or able to use materials to find and express their stories. All children develop language to connect with others and express their experiences. Children who have struggled with typical language development are often even more inspired by the opportunity materials afford. In our experience, we have observed many children with disabilities to use Story Workshop to find their way to connection with peers. We support them by paying attention to what it is we believe they are trying to say, and offering materials to help them say it. Story Creation is strongly aligned with principles of Universal Design. This individualized workshop provides multiple means of expression, representation, action, and engagement.

We pay attention to what draws a child’s interest, and we respond with extensions and related opportunities in the prepared environment. For children who love the blocks, we consider how can we offer a variety of building materials in many parts of the room. For children who prefer a dramatic play environment, we listen to the themes of their play and create experiences with other materials that invite tangible extension.
For example, children who pretend to visit the beach, may find small containers of sand and shells, a book published by another author about the beach and an invitation to find a story. For children who struggle with fine motor control, we teach keyboarding and take dictation. For children who struggle with reading, we make sure their stories become the books they have as reading material because we know the best way for them to connect print language, is to be assured that print has meaning.

Teachers use Story Creation time to support ideas, offer suggestions and feedback, to monitor the development of skills, to assess, to observe, document, connect, and encourage. During Story Creation time, teachers are also monitoring the group for opportunities for powerful sharing during Story Congress, which follows the Creation time each day. Teachers want the work of one Creation time to influence the next, and for the ideas of children to inspire others. Teachers are intentional about the use of Congress time. Often, for children with disabilities, teachers seek and select meaningful moments for sharing with the group so that the child can be seen for her potential to contribute to the community of inquirers and authors.

Especially in the early months of the school year, we spend extended time intentionally developing the culture of Story Workshop with the children. There are other parts of the school day during which children have time for free exploration and other kinds of project work and investigation. We seek opportunities throughout the day to introduce materials, including their use and care, and offer children time to explore them without expectations for crafting and sharing story. We engage the children in dialogue about the distinctions in our expectations. We ask them to discuss questions such as: *What do you think is the difference between Story Workshop and Explore time?* We offer mini-lessons about spelling and punctuation right alongside of the appropriate way to clean a paintbrush and how to recycle clay. While the children are working, we are alongside them, listening to them, and asking them: *What is your story?*
REFLECTION

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What connections do you make with the classroom work you see in this video?

What questions does the video provoke as you reflect on your own classroom?

What surprises you?

What challenges do you face?

What is something new you think you could try?

How will you document this experience?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Bringing Reggio Emilia Home: An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education** by Louise Cadwell
- **Wally's Stories** by Vivian Gussin Paley
- **Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times** by Celia Genishi and Anne Haas Dyson
- **Essays into Literacy: Selected Pages and Some Afterthoughts** by Frank Smith
- **Children's Language: Connecting Reading, Writing, and Talk** by Judith Wells Lindfors
- **Sometimes I Can Be Anything: Power, Gender, and Identity in a Primary Classroom** by Karen Gallas
- **The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation** by Lella Gandini, George Forman, and Carolyn Edwards
- ** Twelve Best Practices for Early Childhood Education: Integrating Reggio and Other Inspired Approaches** by Ann Lewin-Benham
Story Workshop closes each day with Story Congress. This is a time during which children receive feedback from peers and teachers in the form of comments, compliments, and questions in order to support the author’s story development. Teachers also use Story Congress as an opportunity to build community, to practice listening and making connections, to inspire children to take on new challenges and to refine the values, expectations, and culture of Story Workshop.

**WE ASK OURSELVES**

**HOW CAN WE FACILITATE AUTHENTIC LISTENING AMONGST THE CHILDREN?**

It takes time to learn to listen. During Story Congress, we are mindful of the connections children are making to each other’s stories. We ask them to share those connections regularly with such questions as: *Who was reminded of their own story? What pictures did you make in your mind? What are you wondering?* We model engaged listening ourselves. We share the emotions and connections we are having with the author’s story. We give feedback on listening behavior and attitudes. We talk about how it feels to be listened to. We pay attention to what support looks like for individual students as they learn to become listeners and contributors to the community of authors. *What kind of seating works best? Does it help to have something to hold?* We develop strategies with children for choosing “smart spots” and knowing what it means to be a “brain buddy.” All of these strategies help support the growing willingness of the community to support one another — to understand their challenges, and to offer their strengths.

**WHAT FORMS MIGHT THE CONGRESS TAKE?**

Story Congress can take many forms, but is always focused on reflection and connection. Congress can take place between a teacher and a child. It can take place between two children who are invited to sit “eye to eye and knee to knee” and share with one another. It can take place as part of a publishing celebration or when a piece is in its very early stages — when an author is finished or stuck or has barely begun. Story Congress might work best one day with small groups of students and another day with the whole group. Some days it can happen at the beginning of the workshop in order to provide the day’s provocation.
HOW CAN WE USE THE CONGRESS TO DEVELOP A SENSE OF OUR COMMUNITY AS AUTHORS?
We are mindful each day of giving children productive opportunity to take the author’s chair and share their work. This is a particularly powerful time to give children with disabilities center stage as the protagonists in their community. The teacher can sit alongside these children and offer them individualized support for the sharing of their stories. Raising the status of each individual by making space for and inviting connection to their stories is one of the best ways we have found to make sure that children with disabilities develop value equal to any of their peers. The feeling of Story Workshop is often a point of reflection. We ask the children regularly questions such as: How did it feel today during Story Creation time? How did it feel when the group was listening to your story? Why do you think it felt that way? What does a person look like when she’s listening? What does a connection feel like? Why do people tell stories?

IN WHAT WAYS CAN WE PROMOTE THE EXPRESSION OF IDEAS?
Story Congress can take many forms and can showcase a variety of modes of expression. Children can act out each other’s stories with costumes or props or pure imagination. They can read or dance or share a set of paintings. Children can be encouraged to ask questions of one another, to pay attention to the need for clarifications and to learn to listen carefully enough to care about them. Teachers are mindful of the terrain to be explored in a year of Story Workshop and are actively seeking connections throughout the Congress structure. How might one child’s story or process or another child’s question or connection to that story be used to highlight and reflect on a skill or strategy you want the children to learn? The practice of Story Workshop requires and supports the divergent thinking of everyone involved. This habit of thinking openly about possibilities for expression is what supports children with disabilities to have access to a wide variety of entry points.

HOW CAN WE USE THE CONGRESS TO EFFECTIVELY PROMOTE OUR EXPECTATIONS FOR OUR WORK TOGETHER AS STORYTELLERS AND WRITERS?
From a social-constructivist perspective, the author’s chair is a powerful place. Teachers are very mindful of this and use it wisely. Teachers are often planning the Congress during Creation time. What child, or children will offer the most useful inspiration, challenge, provocation, or model for the others? What group of author’s work will provide the most productive collection of models or contrasts on any given day? Who has tried something new that others might like to try? Who needs a boost of confidence? Who made particularly interesting use of that day’s provocation? Who had an important insight to share? Who needs a chance to celebrate? Teachers are also mindful of children getting equitable opportunity to share over time, and find methods to keep track of who is sharing from day to day.
REFLECTION

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What are the needs of the individual children with disabilities in your care?

How might you structure time for them to share in ways that creates success, confidence, and a sense of belonging?

How can success, confidence, and a sense of belonging become first priorities for all students?

What mindset shifts might it take to trust that the skills and strategies we want them to learn are more likely to follow when those issues are attended to first?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Knee to Knee, Eye to Eye: Circling in on Comprehension
by Ardith Davis-Cole

Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives
by Peter H. Johnston

Teaching with Intention
by Debbie Miller

One to One: The Art of Conferring with Young Writers
by Lucy Calkins, Amanda Hartman, and Zoe Ryder White

Hidden Gems: Naming and Teaching from the Brilliance in Every Student’s Writing
by Katherine Bomer
CLOSING THOUGHTS

testimonials on Story Workshop

SIERRA FREEMAN
Special Education Teacher
Portland Public Schools

Over the last 6 years at Opal school I have observed children enrolled in Special Education and receiving services for delays in both reading and writing make enormous growth in their connections to literacy through the use of Story Workshop. Again and again I have witnessed access to the visual arts support children in becoming more deeply engaged with texts and also able to tell their own stories as members of a community of authors.

In past educational settings I have observed children with similar special education needs as the students at Opal become disengaged from the entire literacy experience. These students have been disconnected from texts, where the text was challenging and they had no entry point except for reading. These students also often resisted sharing their own stories, as written language was the only accepted format. When they could not write down their words at the same level that they could imagine and tell the story, they would simply stop completely or vastly oversimplify their stories to match their writing abilities.

On the other hand, at Opal School, I have seen Story Workshop serve, time and time again, to allow students with Special Education needs to enter into story telling through other languages such as paint, collage, or building. Through the honoring of these languages as means of communication, I have seen students become deeply engaged in the telling of detailed and sophisticated stories. In the end, the deep and meaningful investment in their work has led to desire and interest to be challenged in their learning of written language. This deep connection to their work and belief in themselves as authors, despite challenges with reading and writing, has lead to increased confidence and willingness to be challenged across content areas, a deeper connection the classroom community and to measurable progress with both reading and writing.

SUSAN HAAS
Parent of Child with Special Rights
Portland, Oregon

When my son began kindergarten, his storytelling was very concrete and technical. His play was almost entirely parallel and while he had a great deal of factual knowledge and an ability to read well above grade level, he displayed very little evidence he had an understanding of what it means to take another’s perspective. We had worked for years with him on activities designed to develop theory of mind, but to no avail.

The real breakthroughs came when he had access to the Story Workshop curriculum at Opal. Engaging his senses with the physical materials motivated him to participate in story development with his peers. The materials grabbed his attention, his peers would take interest in his work with the materials, and somehow magically they would share a moment.

He learned so much about others in those moments, which he later applied during the development of a class story. The story involved a magic crystal. To support the concept of the magic crystal, the class had been introduced to a physical crystal which they could come to when they wanted help figuring out a classmate’s “inside” story when their play led them to a disagreement.
The children had also individually developed characters for the class story. My son’s character was named Monstrous. One day, the teacher asked the kids to define their characters as good or bad. My son had defined his as “good AND bad.” On the way to school one morning, he was telling me about Monstrous and how he was both good and bad: “Monstrous’ friends told him that his job was to keep the crystal safe. Someone came and tried to get the crystal! Monstrous had to defend the crystal! Afterwards, he felt sad because he wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. He was just trying to stand up for himself.” This shows the kind of perspective taking that a child on the Autism Spectrum has a very difficult time obtaining. Where the traditional methods of developing theory of mind failed, Opal’s Story Workshop curriculum succeeded.

Kindergarten Classroom:
Story Workshop has changed my classroom and students in many ways.

First, we now think about stories on a daily basis. It is never just a lesson where we learn about how one storybook is made. Instead, we work on creating our own stories in every subject daily. The stories range from long to mini-stories.

Secondly, Story Workshop has helped me to understand where my students are individually in creativity and planning skills, and how to support them better.

Finally, Story Workshop has helped me to support the individual, creative side of each of my students. Students can create their own short story, pair themselves with a friend, or participate in a large classroom story. The possibilities are endless.
Citations


For more information about the Museum Center for Learning please visit us online:

portlandcm.org • opalschoolblog.typepad.com