Since Anisa genuinely didn’t understand the motivation for her character, there was a need to elaborate with words. This was precisely the reason we tried STSA with the second graders: we hoped the physical acting of scenes from their original stories would be a catalyst for elaboration of details to develop plots, characters, and meaning in their texts. Furthermore, we wanted to see how the acting of stories throughout the writing process might influence how students viewed writing in general and themselves as authors with stories that matter.

Like Paley (2004), we believe “the classroom has all the elements of the theater, and the observant, self-examining teacher will not need a drama critic to uncover character and plot, and meaning. We are, all of us, the actors trying to find the meaning of the scenes in which we find ourselves” (p. 162). In this article, we describe the collaborative storytelling process as a way to create a shared world where students and teachers can connect across differences to enact a dialogic curriculum. In other words, an “interplay between teachers’ and students’ language and experiences” (Dyson, 2016, p. 24) creates a dynamic space where ideas are co-constructed by teachers and children. Stories, plotlines, and acting created new possibilities where writing and drama were tools for the exploration and joint construction of meaning.
Storytelling and Story Acting (STSA)

By listening to and jointly enacting each other’s stories, children have opportunities to “step into each other’s shoes” and see different ways of doing things, saying things, and viewing things (Sachs, Mardell, & Boni, 2014). According to Paley (1990), the centering of children’s stories in curriculum creates a culture in the quest for common ground. Many educators have adopted STSA for their own classroom contexts (e.g., Cooper, 2009; Lee, 2015), attributing a host of benefits to the practice, including social and emotional development, collaboration, and motivation. Perhaps most apparent are the many benefits to literacy learning, such as, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Cooper, Capo, Mathes, & Gray, 2007).

We adapted the idea of STSA for second grade because we wanted to emphasize writing as a collective act recognizing ways students could scaffold each other’s work. We incorporated story acting into writing workshop when students were already composing stories of their choosing.

Let’s return to Andrew’s story about the pterodactyls. We asked Andrew to share his story in group because after talking with him, we recognized that there was much more to it than what made it to the page in his writing. Andrew had difficulty expressing himself and often avoided writing. He also had difficulty getting along with peers. He was often misunderstood as being a pest when he was just trying to make friends. His conflicts with peers sometimes escalated because of his trouble communicating his perspective.

To begin, Andrew explained to Nancy and a small group of classmates that he would like his story to be funny. He shared a mentor text, Yes, Yes Yaul! by Jef Czekaj (2012), that he found humorous and hoped to emulate in his writing. Then he read his story aloud to the group. Andrew’s original story had only a few lines. In it, a group of pterodactyls flew to a castle where dinosaurs were having a party. They knocked on the door (hence the “hurt noses”), but no one answered. The pterodactyls flew away angry to plot revenge. The story also included a drawing of the pterodactyls smashing the dinosaurs’ castle. Andrew explained that he had not finished writing but that the story concluded with this act of revenge. This sparked some questions from members of his group, such as: “Why were they angry?” “Why didn’t the dinosaurs come to the door?” “Why did they even go to the castle in the first place?”

Andrew explained that the pterodactyls were lonely and wanted to join the dinosaurs’ party, but they got angry because the dinosaurs wouldn’t answer, so they decided to get revenge by destroying the castle. Jeremy replied, “They were lonely! That’s really important. You should definitely add that to the story.” At this point, the peers in the group were asking questions to clarify elements of the plot that were left out of the written text. The story was still Andrew’s, but Jeremy and the others were suggesting areas that needed to be filled in:

Nancy: Let’s try acting this out.

Andrew (who wanted to be the director):
Who wants to be a pterodactyl?

The student-actors took their places as Nancy began to read the story from the beginning.

Nancy: Once, there were some lonely pterodactyls . . .

Nancy reads slowly, giving the student-actors time to dramatize the actions of their characters. At times, Nancy stops to ask probing questions.

Nancy: Show me how their wings looked.
What words would describe how they looked and how they sounded?

Anisa: They were flapping.

Angelica: In slow motion when they landed.

Little by little, the students added to the text, filling in rich description, dialogue, and elements of plot. All of the students in the group offered suggestions; as director, Andrew had the final say in what was scribed by Nancy to the new draft.

Over time, the story seemed to take on a new quality as a group-authored text. When they got to
the part where the pterodactyls destroyed the castle, Nancy asked Andrew what would happen next:

Andrew: They are happy and they go back home.

Jeremy: But they will still be lonely!

Nancy (to Andrew): Won’t they still be lonely? Do you want it to end this way?

Andrew shakes his head no. He wants a different resolution.

Angelica: What if the dinosaurs just didn’t hear them when they knocked?

Anisa: Yeah, they could go back to the castle and say they were sorry. They could ring the doorbell this time so the dinosaurs will hear them.

Nancy scribed as they acted and dictated the new resolution. The story was “published” when the group acted it for the rest of the class. The final lines of the story read:

“Hello, who is it? Oh, it’s you guys,” said the dinosaurs in angry voices when they saw it was the pterodactyls that had smashed a tree into their window.

“I’m sorry,” said one pterodactyl.

“I’m sorry,” said another pterodactyl.

“Me too,” said the last pterodactyl.

“It’s okay. Do you want to come in and party with us?” said the T-Rex.

“Yes!” they all said.

They all went inside and did the Diny-Twist.

From that day on, the dinosaurs and the pterodactyls were friends.

## Writing Community

In the example from Andrew’s story, the problem of the pterodactyls mirrored many of his actual problems relating to peers in the classroom. And as became clear to the pterodactyls, there was a solution: he just needed a little help from his friends. The STSA revision group offered a framework for the students to work together, support each other, and begin to develop a shared world (Dyson, 2016). Talking and dramatizing scenes from the story allowed peers to give suggestions on how to develop the plot, resolve the conflict, and unlock the humor that Andrew was trying to express. In the process, Andrew seemed to learn a bit about developing friendships and resolving conflicts. After the experience, Andrew even became a valuable resource as a comedy advisor for other students because they had witnessed his ability to make others laugh through the dramatization on stage. His peers began to consult with him each time they wanted to infuse humor into their own writing. His identity as a writer and friend was nurtured and developed as a result of the peer collaboration that took place during storytelling and story acting.

We explored STSA as a means of helping students collaborate for revision of their writing. In the process, we found that there was a play within the play. As students collaboratively created stories and dramatized them, they were also acting in roles that fostered their own identities as readers, writers, and supportive participants in the classroom community. The characters worked together and helped each other resolve the problems in their writing and even in their lives.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR USING STORYTELLING AND STORY ACTING IN YOUR CLASSROOM

1. Open spaces for student choice during writing, including choice of topics, forms, and single or group authorship.
2. Value students’ language(s) and topics in their stories. Students’ stories and their ways with words are inherently tied to their identities.
3. Integrate quality multicultural literature and diverse texts (in terms of form, genre, perspectives) into classroom practice. Students can take mentorship in writing from the texts they read.
4. The role of the teacher is to probe with questions; guide the acting of scenes; and encourage group input regarding vocabulary, dialogue, and plot elements that can be added or reworked into the story.
5. When acting, props are secondary. Our students enjoyed creating props to use when publishing their pieces. However, we kept them simple to keep the attention on the written story.

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Further Reading on Storytelling and Story Acting
Patricia Cooper analyzes the work of Vivian Paley and provides a theoretical framework that explicitly connects Paley’s pedagogical practices to educational theories and practice. This book offers extensive background in the foundations and practice of STSA.

In this book, Trisha Lee outlines her practice adapting Paley’s ideas about storytelling and story acting in her own work. This book offers a wealth of practical information to help teachers implement STSA in their own classrooms.

References

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