



# The Power of Stories

by Ellen Veselack

Children have rich imaginations. We see the beginnings of this in infancy as they explore and discover. If we are astute observers, we see what they focus on and how they problem-solve. As they develop, they are able to express their thoughts and ideas to others in more concrete ways. They narrate their play to others, or sometimes to no one in particular as they act out familiar scenes from home or work to better understand the world around them. But what happens to all of their stories? Most of them are gone just as quickly as they come, making space for more stories or to be relived in another context at another time. They are gone, that is, unless there is someone nearby, observing and recording their stories.

At the Child Educational Center, we are engaged in qualitative research in partnership with Dimensions Educational



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Research Foundation. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research centers on interpreting observations. For our purposes, teachers record their observations of children, capturing the essence of an experience, which tells a story. While we get rich data from these written observations for research purposes, there are additional benefits to having children's stories recorded.

## Benefits of Recording Stories

There is so much to be learned about children by observing and recording their stories. There are details captured in written recordings that are missed when recalling an observation from memory. A primary benefit is the information gleaned from the stories. These observations can be a lens through which teachers see the multitude of skills children are developing and demonstrating. When teachers can read and reread the observations and do their own analyses, the layers of learning in all developmental areas begin to reveal themselves. Teachers are able to more fully understand the value of the play children are engaged in and further support their continued learning. Let's take a look at a story recorded in our preschool natural outdoor classroom.

Two three-year-old children, Hannah and Annabelle, were building with milk crates as a teacher sat nearby observing and supporting them. They explained they were building a car and were driving it to South Carolina. "Who is driving?" the teacher asked. Annabelle replied, "I am!" "No, no!" said Hannah, "I am!" After some negotiation between the two of them Hannah said, "I will be the baby in the back seat. Only parents sit in the front and babies and toddlers sit in the back." Another three-year-old child, River, approached them and asked them what they were doing. After explaining their play, he asked if he could join them. They agreed but told him this was their car and he would need his own. He began gathering more crates, setting them around their car and calling it a fence. He then started collecting branches to create a refrigerator and freezer because, "We need food for three dolphins and one sea lion. Look — 1, 2, 3, 4. I am making a big refrigerator. We need lots of food." Another child came over and joined in their play. Together they gathered all of the available crates from around the natural outdoor classroom to use in their play. They played together for over an hour. (Recorded by A. Ivanov, 2015)

If we take a closer look, we can see these children were exploring math concepts; using words such as big and lots. They correctly added up the number of children who needed food and made a perimeter around the cars. They experienced shapes, weight, depth (as they got in and out of the crates) and size. They had an understanding of the world around them in their plans to drive to South Carolina and the need for food for the road. There were social skills at work as they negotiated, compromised, and included others in their play. They demonstrated creativity and imagination in their story creation and problem solving. There were strong language skills at work as they asked questions, responded to one another, and narrated their play. They used visual-spatial and construction and engineering skills as they built. This is a very brief overview of what these children were learning, though much more could be unearthed with further analysis.

Another benefit to recording children's stories is the ability to share a child's development more fully with parents. Written observations are more than just an anecdotal statement of development. The teachers tell a story, effectively painting a picture for the reader and including detail that informs others of the depth of learning that has occurred. Parents are hungry for information about their children. They want to know that their children are not only safe and well cared for, but they are busy, thinking, creating, learning, collaborating, and thriving. These stories give them a window into their child's day and help them envision the complexity of child development. This assists them in better understanding the value of play in their child's growth and how much is gained from seemingly simple stories of their child. They are then able to do their own observations of their children engaged at home and see them from a new perspective; not just as

children at play, but skilled, learning, engaged children at work.

A third benefit is to the program overall. As teachers lean into more detailed observations, they increasingly see the deeper learning going on and the details they include in their written observations increase. The more they observe, the more they see. The more they see, the more they know. This allows teachers to respond to individual and group needs more effectively, creating opportunities for responsive caregiving and curriculum development. They become more fluent in their articulation of program philosophy and practice. They increase their mentoring skills, leading other staff in observing, recording, and reviewing. This grows strong leadership within the program. Tracking development becomes more second nature as teachers incorporate their increased observation skills in their interactions with children.

### Supporting Elements

The stories children tell through their play don't happen without very thoughtful attention on the part of teachers and the program. In order for children to engage in experiences that foster growth and development, there must be several support structures in place. In a recent research study on creativity and imagination, we identified four elements which are critical in supporting children's learning in the natural outdoor classroom: large blocks of uninterrupted time; ample space that is flexible, yet predictable; an abundance of natural loose parts; and a caring, supportive adult nearby (Kiewra & Veselack, 2016). The story above is a great example of what can happen when children have plenty of time to engage. Hannah, Annabelle, and River spent over an hour engaged with one another creating their story. Teachers did not interrupt to transition them into another activity. It is important for

children to be able to work until they decide they are finished. To, in essence, get lost in their play unconcerned about the next transition. This level of engagement is important as it allows children to develop skills, challenge themselves, and work towards mastery. The deeper the engagement, the more learning is happening.

Children also need predictable space that is set up in a way that allows children to know where materials can be found so they can access them readily and independently. They also need the flexibility to move materials to areas that work best for them. The children in the above example knew where to find the materials they needed and felt very at ease moving materials around the natural outdoor classroom. Children who have ample space and an abundance of natural materials and loose parts can carry out their ideas and plans more deeply and more fully. They are able to focus on their experience and not worry about having enough materials to complete their plan or having to negotiate space with other children. This feeling of abundance encourages a sense of community and collaboration, rather than resistance and conflict. The three-year-old children in the story above played both collaboratively and harmoniously, even though there were potential conflict points.

Another important aspect of materials is a wide selection of natural loose parts. There are myriad benefits to children who work with materials that are not manufactured. "Natural outdoor classrooms filled with intriguing natural materials invite creative play inspired by children's imagination.... Premade props for dramatic play do not offer the challenges or opportunities that arise when children must find natural items they can use to represent what they envision. Natural loose parts such as sticks, logs, sand, and snow can be anything children want them to be and are ever changing"



(Kiewra & Veselack, 2016). Natural loose parts have no substitute and children typically are drawn to them over manufactured materials. They are able to see the potential in these materials, which allows them to dream and to tell their stories. Working with nature also builds a connection to the natural world full of textures, patterns, and beauty.

The fourth key element is the role of a caring, competent adult. Children need a supportive adult who knows how and when to intervene. It is a delicate dance for a teacher to be near enough to children to be accessible to them, to know when to stay back and observe, and to understand when a thoughtful, guiding approach is needed. Teachers often err on the side of interrupting children's play, over narrating, or taking over. Children build stronger skills when they are in charge of their play, problem-solving, planning, experimenting, making mistakes as well as having successes. In the story above, the teacher asked a question, but largely allowed children to own their own story and resolve their own conflict. If intervention had been needed, the teacher was nearby and engaged and could easily have stepped in. This kind of

support allows children to grow their own skills and independence.

Children have so many stories and we can benefit if we are in a place where we are able to observe and listen to them. Teachers learn more, parents can have a better understanding of their child's development, and the program grows as a result. It is important to have the space available, ample time, plenty of natural loose parts, and a caring adult. This is the recipe for cultivating opportunities for stories that are rich in engagement, learning, and wonder. Just imagine all the stories that would be lost and forgotten (along with the resulting benefits) if we didn't write them down.

## Reference

Kiewra, C. & Veselack, E. (2016). Playing with Nature: Supporting Preschoolers' Creativity in Natural Outdoor Classrooms. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 4(1), 70–95.