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Storytelling and story-acting: Co-construction in action

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Abstract

In the light of sustained interest in the potential value of young children's narrative play, this article examines Vivian Gussin Paley's approach to storytelling and story-acting, in this case with 3- to 5-year-olds. It scrutinises how children's narratives are co-constructed during adult-child and peer interactions through spoken and embodied modes, as their stories are scribed by an adult and later dramatised by their peers. Data are drawn from an evaluation of an 8-week training programme, based on Paley's approach, designed for early years professionals and undertaken in different geographic and demographic locations in England. Naturalistic data collection techniques including video and field notes were used to record the storytelling and story-acting of 18 case study children. The resultant data were subject to close discursive and multimodal analysis of storytelling and story-acting interactions. Findings reveal discursive co-construction 'in action' and illustrate how the child storytellers, story actors and practitioners co-construct narratives through complex combinations of gaze, body posture and speech in responsive and finely tuned interactional patterns. The study contributes significantly to knowledge about how young children's narratives are co-constructed through multiple modes in the classroom.

Keywords

co-construction, interactions, multimodal communication, story-acting, storytelling

Introduction

There is widespread recognition of the contribution that Paley's (e.g. Paley, 1990, 2004) work has made to our understanding of young children's imaginative play and narrative engagement, with scholars pointing to her perceptive accounts of children's story making (e.g. Cremin et al., 2017; Fox, 1993). Although Paley's (1990) writing tends to focus on individual children's journeys as tellers of tales, actors and learners, she recognises the co-construction of children's stories and the complexities involved. Drawing on social constructivist theory, she argues that each story influences others and that children create a common classroom culture through the stories they dictate and enact with peers. Her work also shows how children incorporate popular cultural themes, characters and phrases into their tales, which are later repeated and modified in other children's stories. She argues, however, that each child's story remains original, preserving a style and symbolism that is 'as unique as their fingerprints' (Paley, 1990: 40).

We add to the literature on the positive contribution of Paley's approach to young children's narrative and social development by focusing on how children's stories are discursively co-constructed in interaction between the child storyteller, practitioner and other children, not only through words but also through finely tuned, multimodal interaction from the moment of their inception to their embodied performance.

We draw on data from a UK-based instantiation of Paley's approach, devised by the theatre and education company (MakeBelieve Arts). This follows a particular routine: during storytelling, the child's tale is scribed verbatim in a class storybook, and the adult scribe underlines characters and sometimes objects in the narrative to highlight roles for later enactment. At the end of the storytelling, the child is invited to select which character they wish to be, and this is circled in the text. In story-acting, later the same day, the audience (children and adults) sits around a stage demarcated by

masking tape. An adult reads the story aloud, inviting children, in turn, to step onto the stage to enact characters or objects, individually or in groups. All performances end in applause, prompted by the story reader, and child actors leave the impromptu stage.

We observed these practices over a period of 8 weeks in six early years classrooms, where it became clear that through the responsive orchestration of gaze, posture, action, voice tone and evaluative asides (in the form of words and sounds), all participants became co-constructors of the narratives. This article addresses two research questions:

1. What are the interactional processes through which children's narratives (in storytelling and story-acting) are co-constructed?
2. What can multimodal analysis contribute to our understanding of the nature of these processes?

Narrative, imaginary play and co-construction

There is strong evidence that shared narrative activity between adults and young children lays the foundation for oral language, literacy and social and emotional development (Schick and Melzi, 2010). However, differences in the theoretical framing of available evidence determine the nature of the claims made. Early work by developmental psychologists and functional linguists focused on age-related changes in the structure and organisation of stories told by individual children, often under tightly controlled conditions (Stein and Glenn, 1979). Defining narrative competence as the ability to produce stories that conform to the structures, forms and conventions common to adult oral narratives, Hudson and Shapiro (1991) demonstrated that the narratives produced by typically developing children become progressively more coherent and better organised during the preschool years. Using the narrative as the unit of analysis, however, simply tells us about age-related differences in children's texts.

By contrast, socio-cultural researchers have identified dialogic strategies that scaffold early narrative development when parents and their children discuss personally experienced events, with significant cultural variations (e.g. Wang and Fivush, 2005). Schick and Melzi (2010) discuss the development of specific narrative competencies associated with maternal scaffolding and narrative practices across East Asian, Japanese and African American cultural groups. Longitudinal studies have established that at around 2 years of age, children begin to organise and talk about their mental representations of past events through joint storytelling activity with mothers and caregivers (Nelson and Fivush, 2004; Wang and Fivush, 2005). These studies suggest this is bi-directional; mothers and children are more concerned with co-constructing an entertaining and emotionally satisfying narrative than a veridical account. Over time, children gradually internalise these stories as intrapersonal, autobiographical memories.

Similarly, Fivush et al. (2006) argue that everyday conversations play an important role in children's social, emotional and narrative development. When parents scaffold the co-construction of oral narratives about mutually experienced events, they enable children to form mental representations about autobiographical events closely aligned to the internal representations used by other family members, helping to establish a sense of self and shared family identity (Congleton and Rajaram, 2014). Furthermore, this creates opportunities for children to use signs and decontextualized language to convey meaning for personal/interpersonal purposes (Van Oers, 2007) and to use educationally valued discourse practices important for later literacy development, such as reading comprehension (Reese et al., 2010). The oral narrative and conversational skills children acquire during early childhood prepare them for the social life of preschool, enabling them to express their life experiences through narrative and enactment, using objects and action as well as linguistic devices (Ilgaz and Aksu-Koc, 2005).

Ethnographic accounts of narrative in preschool classrooms confirm that the socialisation practices outlined above are important for children's successful integration into the social world of their peers.

Kyratzis and Green (1997) detail the joint construction of everyday narratives by Californian 4-year-olds during drawing activities, demonstrating that peer cultures, friendships and identities are socially constructed in and through common discourse practices and that as children ostensibly narrate a personal story, real or imaginary, this is often jointly produced by several children. Similarly, Puroila et al. (2012) reveal an intricate relationship between narrative and context in their study of Finnish preschool children's spontaneous narratives, arguing that if there is 'space' for children to narrate together their stories become co-constructed. Additionally, Dyson (2009) highlights how as young writers tell stories they appropriate others' voices (from home, school, community and media), thus expanding their knowledge about social practices, symbolic systems and their social world.

Research across disciplines has also established imaginary play as an important semiotic activity that has a profound impact on children's language development, understanding of symbolic representation, and social and emotional development (Engel, 2005; Russ and Zyga, 2016), with specific associations between imaginary play, narrative and early literacy development (Nicolopoulou and Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos et al., 2010). For example, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that the quality of 4- to 5-year-old children's socio-dramatic and imaginary play is a reliable predictor of their performance on standardised tests of narrative competence 3–5 years later (Stagnitti and Lewis, 2015). Similarly, educational researchers have demonstrated that narrative competence proffers a secure foundation for emergent literacy and long-term success in schooling (McCabe and Bliss, 2003; Tabors et al., 2001). Finally, three decades of developmental and educational research have identified the benefits of dramatic play interventions on narrative competence in 4- to 8-year-olds (Bodrova, 2008). While many of these interventions adopt an instruction-oriented approach using adult-led, pretend play activities specifically designed to impact upon literacy skills (e.g. Hakkarainen et al., 2013), environment-oriented interventions that support child-led, socio-dramatic play have also been found to encourage emergent literacy activity (Roskos et al., 2010). This emphasis on the relationship between play, narrative and literacy, however, has been criticised for neglecting other important aspects of development including creativity, the interpersonal skills required to manage play relationships, children's knowledge and working theories about their cultural worlds and how they use these to co-construct meaning (Ahn and Filipenko, 2007; Chesworth, 2016).

Paley's storytelling and story-acting approach

Paley's storytelling/story-acting approach is not an instruction-oriented intervention, nor is it focused on early literacy development. Rather, it can build a classroom culture where storytelling and imaginary play feed off each other to benefit wider facets of development (Paley, 1990). Children's skills as storytellers allow them to construct possible worlds that draw on the imaginative capacities expressed in and supported by their pretend play (Baumer et al., 2005). Recent studies of play and narrative indicate that children's developing story skills help them to own and use symbolic resources creatively (Craft et al., 2012; Cremin et al., 2013). Evidence from the United States and United Kingdom suggests that when Paley's story-based approach is integrated into the preschool curriculum, there are benefits for the development of competencies underpinning successful socio-emotional relationships, peer cooperation, self-regulation and moral understanding (e.g. Cremin et al., 2013; Cooper, 2009; Nicolopoulou et al., 2010).

In the United States, Nicolopoulou et al., utilising randomised control trials, have established that the combination of individual storytelling together with public story-acting is crucial to the approach's effectiveness, particularly for children from low-income backgrounds. Their work suggests that the approach can support children's narrative development, emergent literacy and social competence (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015), with significant and specific improvements in children's narrative skills (Nicolopoulou, 2017). Furthermore, when children share their stories with responsive adults and peers in a public arena, over time, the peer group builds a common classroom culture, which further motivates and energises their participation as storytellers/actors (Nicolopoulou et al., 2010, 2014, 2015). It is clear from this body of work that the classroom cultures are a joint production that develops over time (Nicolopoulou et al., 2010; Paley, 1990).

We suggest that the adoption of a multimodal lens offers nuanced insight into how young children draw on a range of semiotic resources to negotiate this terrain. Multimodal research reveals that children and adults employ a range of semiotic resources in their meaning-making, such as posture, physical proximity, gesture, facial expression and gaze as well as language (Flewitt, 2005, 2006). Multimodality draws attention to the intentional semiotic work of different communicative modes during interaction and to the ‘multimodal texture of engagement in collaboration’ (Taylor, 2016: 83). This more generous recognition of signs of meaning-making makes visible the complexity of significant semiotic work that often passes unnoticed and unrecognised by adults (Bezemer and Kress, 2016).

Methodology

The data reported here come from our evaluation of an 8-week storytelling and story-acting training programme for early education professionals and teachers of children aged 3–5 years (Cremin et al., 2013). The programme was delivered by (MakeBelieve Arts) in six classrooms in four contrasting locations: two reception and two preschool classes in state-funded primary schools in two Inner-London boroughs, a primary school reception class in a semi-rural suburban area in southern England and a class from a feeder preschool. We worked with participating staff in each class to select three children (18 in total) for case study – a sample that reflected a range of linguistic, ethnic and social diversity, age and gender.

The study followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) ethical guidelines. The presence of the trainers and researcher observers was explained to the children, their parents and teachers, who were reassured that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any stage, with no need for explanation. The adults were provided with information sheets, explanatory letters and researcher contact details. In addition, ongoing consent and sensitive communication were followed to ensure the children’s welfare was safeguarded. In the event, no participants withdrew. Principles of confidentiality were applied including the use of pseudonyms. Data were secured in password-protected files with restricted access. Children’s participation was voluntary throughout: practitioners introduced the practice to the whole class, and individual children were free to choose if and when to tell their tale and if they wished to enact it. The activity quickly became popular, but no pressure was applied. While for the purposes of analysis, the children’s storytelling and story-acting was video recorded, the resultant recordings were used primarily for analytic purposes, although where permissions were given for educational use, some short extracts have been used in research presentations. In all instances, information about the schools, teachers and children has been anonymised. In publications where video stills were used to support the researchers’ analysis, those that showed individual children were redrawn to safeguard the children’s identities.

Data collection and analysis across the whole project and its attendant training programme is discussed in Cremin et al. (2013). The focus here is on data related specifically to the co-construction of children’s narratives. Sources of evidence include observations and video-recordings of storytelling and story-acting sessions (at the beginning, middle and end of the programme) and copies of the children’s stories, as transcribed by practitioners/trainers. To facilitate data analysis, detailed logs were made of video-recordings and qualitative analytical software (Atlas.ti) was used to enable systematic interrogation of the data (Silver and Fielding, 2008). Following open-ended scrutiny of the full data set (including adult and child interviews and video-stimulated review), five axial themes were identified: children’s agency; confidence; sense of belonging and identity; communication, language and literacy; and creativity in children’s stories and performance. We then identified further sub-themes and coded data accordingly. A sub-set of the data was checked by a researcher not involved in the original coding to ensure consistency.

Observational data were further scrutinised and typical episodes selected for in-depth analysis, along with episodes that ran counter to these trends and brought new issues to light. Drawing on discursive analysis of participants’ moment-by-moment contributions to storytelling and story-acting and the multimodal nature of these contributions, our analysis focused on how children interacted with

practitioners and peers in telling and acting out their stories, and how these processes changed over time. Video extracts were viewed and re-viewed, with and without sound, to enable the identification of patterns of gaze, body movements, facial expression, the use of space and artefacts along with language and how diverse modes combined to create meanings in ‘multimodal ensembles’ (Kress et al., 2001).

In this article, we discuss general characteristics of the storytelling and story-acting we observed and then home in on one story told by Frankie, a 4-year-old boy, mid-way through the programme, in the semi-rural suburban preschool setting. Our focus on one sequence of storytelling and dramatization is purposive; it exemplifies characteristics that occurred across the data sets. This provides continuity for the reader and offers a clear sense of how a narrative was co-constructed through multiple modes by an individual storyteller, other children and the practitioner.

Analysis of storytelling and story-acting: co-construction in action

The children’s narratives in our study were co-constructed in several respects. Most obviously, their themes and plots reflected aspects of life experience and cultural influences from the classroom and beyond, remixing and recontextualising elements from other texts – from popular culture, the school culture and what Dyson (2009) terms the texts of children’s lives. Children also jointly sustained themes across successive stories: for instance, the stories of the 3- to 4-year-olds in Frankie’s class often featured characters falling in a bin, which amused the children. A recurrent textual theme, this also became a performance theme, with the act of falling repeatedly enacted in a similar manner as different characters ‘splatted’ into the bin.

We focus our analysis on how co-construction was produced discursively in multiple modes during storytelling and story-acting. While Paley’s (1990) technique is ostensibly framed around a single child’s narrative (insofar as one child is attributed as the author of each story), the stories we observed were collaboratively constructed by various participants: the child who tells the tale, the adult who scribes and structures its performance and other children – passers-by, hangers on, ratified audiences and co-actors. In the training approach documented, the expressive enactment of stories was encouraged, with the adult story reader acting as ‘stage manager’, a key role in the enactment. For each performance, artistic and regulatory decisions were taken by the teacher which both enabled and constrained the children’s participation – enough children to animate the story without over-crowding the stage, how/when to bolster a character who looked uncertain (e.g. bringing in an extra character or the audience), how/when to enliven things (e.g. quickening the tempo) and judging the moment – when particular strategies would work best. Practitioners commented on the skills involved in this creative management of story performances and the level of responsibility they felt, for instance:

... It is a huge responsibility, so I feel quite a lot of anxiety beforehand. I might take a bit of extra time to read through the stories again if I can just to get it clear in my head so I can keep those energy levels up, keep the flow up, try and keep the audience engaged and listening ...

Children’s performance styles varied considerably: some gave relatively unmarked performances – standing/walking round the stage in character. Some were subtle – a girl held an imaginary wand and looked at it pointedly, another lifted an imaginary crown and placed it on her head, then stood still. Others were more striking – a girl snarling at the audience as a bad monster; a boy bouncing and shrieking as Monkeyman. Later in the programme, there were spontaneous verbal interventions in the performance from the audience – calling out *fe-fi-fo-fum* as a giant came on stage; howling as a wolf appeared. Sometimes, the teacher asked the audience to suggest movements their peers might make to enact objects or characters – an orange or a pirate.

Our analysis examines such collaborative processes of spontaneous theatrical production in Frankie’s Harry Potter story. The analysis is based on detailed multimodal transcription of video recordings of Frankie’s storytelling and story-acting episodes, informed by observational notes. For reasons of space, we do not include complete transcripts of these episodes, but base our discussion on descriptive

vignettes and two brief extracts from our multimodal analysis of the children and adults' interaction, focusing on the most salient modes of speech, gaze and action.

Frankie's storytelling

Mid-way through the programme, Frankie joins the practitioner, Laura, sitting at a small table in a quiet corner of the classroom and begins to play with some Duplo pieces he has brought with him. Laura establishes the storytelling session by carefully arranging herself and the class storybook in an open space at the table, saying Frankie's name and writing it on a fresh page. Vignette I shows how the storytelling process plays out, and how this is co-constructed between Frankie, Laura and to some extent other children who stop by to watch. Figure 1 shows Frankie's story, as transcribed by Laura.

Vignette I: Frankie tells his story

Laura adjusts her position so she is leaning forward over the table and the book. Oriented towards Frankie and directing her gaze at him, she asks, 'What is going to happen?' Frankie has been through this process before and falls into the established pattern of telling his story one or two clauses at a time for Laura to transcribe – in this case, he begins with a conventional story opening: 'Once there was a little boy called Harry Potter'. The completion of his turn is marked by gaze, as he looks up at Laura. Laura watches Frankie as he speaks – she does not begin to transcribe until it is clear he has finished. She repeats the clause aloud as she scribes, with a brief pause allowing her writing to catch up with her speaking. While playing with his Duplo, Frankie glances towards Laura and watches her writing.

When she finishes scribing, Laura looks towards Frankie, who continues: 'And then Harry gro grewed bigger and then and then he had a wand'. Laura attends closely to Frankie and, again, does not begin to transcribe till he has finished. She interrupts her transcription briefly to speak to a passing child: 'This is Frankie's story, Jack'. Frankie's gaze moves between his Duplo, the practitioner and Jack. During the training, practitioners were told to transcribe children's stories verbatim, without correcting any non-standard features. Laura transcribes 'grewed' but does not transcribe Frankie's hesitation, which she presumably does not consider part of the narrative. She finishes with 'and Harry had a wand'. This is not an accurate transcription, possibly because of the slight disruption caused by Jack but seems to be accepted by Frankie. Frankie continues, 'and and um then and then um um um um the ogre came and Harry sticked his wand in his nose'. Frankie needs to plan his narrative as he speaks, and there are some pauses and hesitations, but Laura remains quiet and attentive until he finishes. Frankie gestures the action of Harry sticking his wand and smiles towards Laura. He is clearly pleased with this episode. After Laura transcribes this (slightly inaccurately as 'Harry sticked his wand on his nose'), she comments positively, 'hmm that's funny'. Excitedly, Frankie explains that Harry sticks his wand up someone's nose in the Harry Potter story and Laura agrees, 'he does yeah'. Frankie introduces another character, Hagrid: 'and then the um and then a big um a big giant came and it was Hagrid'. Frankie seems pleased with this episode; he smiles as he utters 'Hagrid' and mouths 'it was Hagrid' in time with Laura as she repeats and transcribes this clause.

Laura invites Frankie to continue and Frankie introduces a new group of characters: 'and then the ghoulies came and Harry Potter waved his wand and the ghoulies were killed'. Laura leans forwards to check whether the creatures are 'ghoulies' or 'goonies' and to catch Frankie's response. Two other children come to the table to watch and one of them, Alex, repeats the word 'ghoulies'. Frankie acknowledges this, smiling. Alex sits between Frankie and Laura. Laura explains that this is Frankie's storytelling time and suggests Alex might go and play. He leaves, and Laura returns to her transcription. Perhaps because she has been distracted by Alex's interruption, she mistranscribes Frankie's last clause: 'the ghoulies were killed' becomes 'killed the ghoulies' (see Figure 1).

Laura explains to Frankie that they have reached the end of the page. She reads the story out to him, underlining characters but not objects. Frankie smiles broadly towards other children who are looking on. When she has finished reading, Laura checks the story with Frankie and asks which character he would like to be. When he replies 'Harry Potter', she says, 'I thought you were going to say that Frankie', thanks him for his story and notes they will act it out in a moment.

Figure 1. Frankie's story in the class storybook.

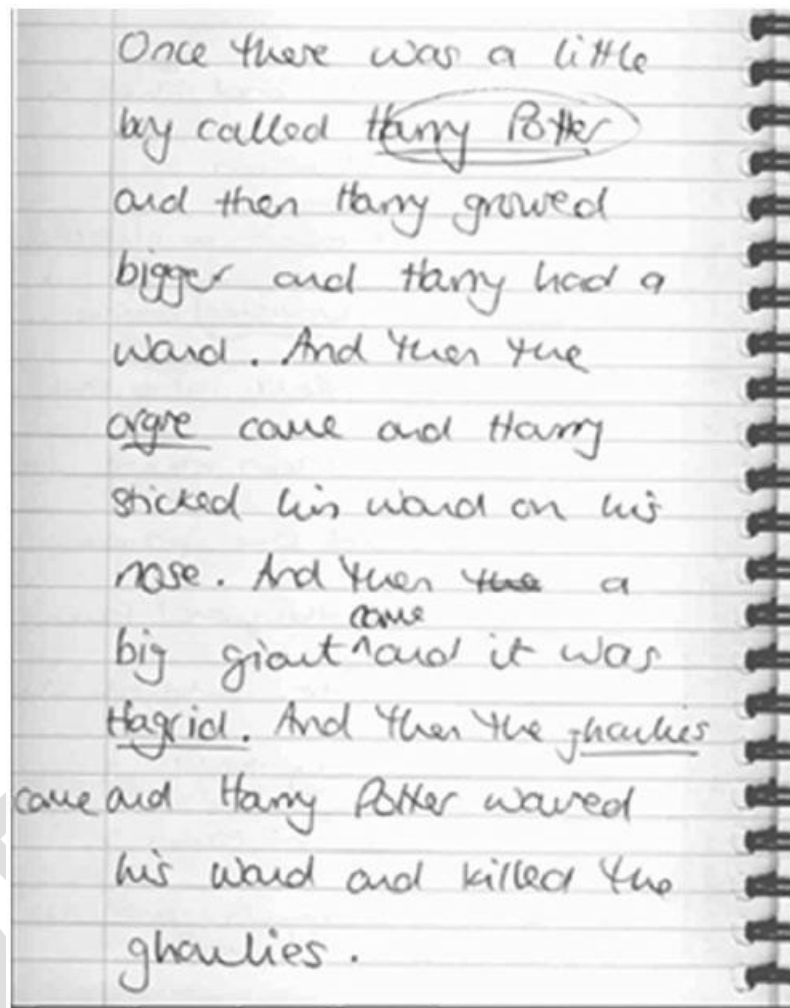


Figure 2 shows the transcription of two consecutive clauses in Frankie's narrative as these are recounted: 'And then Harry gro- grewed bigger and then and then he had a wand'. This transcript illustrates the multimodal co-construction of Frankie's narrative. Laura elicits Frankie's narrative clauses by a shift in her body orientation and by gaze (Turn 4) and maintains her attention on Frankie as he narrates. Frankie is attending to his Duplo pieces as he speaks and as Laura writes but also looks up towards a passing child, Jack, and he monitors Laura, glancing towards her as she pauses in reading back his words.

Frankie's oral story may be seen as a process of co-construction in several respects. First, it borrows characters and events from the Harry Potter stories Frankie has encountered in his life beyond the classroom and mixes these with other characters from popular culture, the ghoulies. The plot (a hero fighting and killing baddies) reproduces a common story theme that recurred in this class and others, particularly (but not exclusively) in boys' narratives. Vignette I and Figure 2 also illustrate the modal complexity of discursive co-construction in the storytelling and scribing process. Throughout the

episode, Frankie and Laura draw on multiple semiotic resources – modes – to collaboratively construct the scribed story: Frankie uses gaze to monitor Laura and her writing; waiting until she has finished writing before continuing; and taking particular interest when she scribes aspects of his story he seems to be particularly pleased with, such as Harry sticking his wand up the ogre’s nose, and Hagrid’s arrival. Through her actions, body posture and gaze direction, Laura signals clearly to Frankie when it is time for him to speak, and that her full attention is on him and his story.

Throughout the episode, Laura attends closely to Frankie’s utterances and checks unclear words with him. She usually transcribes accurately, but also ‘neatens up’ hesitations and repetitions, and changes Frankie’s wording twice after being distracted by another child. Other children also play a part in the process, repeating words and exchanging gaze and smiles with the storyteller. In this extract, the practitioner intervenes to minimise these interruptions, although across the data set such intervention is unusual. While other children in this episode do not stay for long, they, nonetheless, constitute an unofficial audience of which Frankie is aware and sometimes acknowledges, and their approbation and interest may affect the story form.

Figure 2. Extract from the multimodal transcription of Frankie’s storytelling.

Turn	Elapsed time	Participant	Speech	Action and gaze
4	0.25	Laura		<i>Turns towards Frankie, looking at him.</i>
5	0.26	Frankie	<i>and then Harry gro- grewed bigger and then and then he had a wand</i>	<i>Alternates his gaze between looking ahead and down toward his Duplo. He may partly be monitoring Jack, who passes by the table. Frankie rests his Duplo on the table. On ‘he had a wand’ he takes a single black piece in one hand and looks at this as he speaks.</i>
6	0.26	Laura		<i>Maintains body orientation and gaze towards Frankie, attends closely to him as he speaks.</i>
7	0.34	Laura	<i>‘and then Harry grewed bigger’ (8 secs)</i>	<i>Turns towards the book. Looks down at the page and scribes Frankie’s words, reading these out as she writes.</i>
8	0.34	Frankie		<i>As Laura writes, Frankie handles the piece of black Duplo, examining this. He removes the top piece from his Duplo stack, and adds the black piece. In the pause after ‘bigger’, he glances up towards Laura. He adds the top Duplo piece to the stack.</i>
9	0.46	Laura	<i>‘and’ this is Frankie’s story Jack ‘and (1 sec) Harry (2 secs) had a wand’</i>	<i>Continues to look down as she writes. As she addresses Jack (out of shot), she glances towards him, then back to her writing.</i>
10	0.46	Frankie		<i>Continues to look at the Duplo stack, handling this. Briefly glances up, probably towards Jack. Taps Duplo stack on the table. On ‘Harry’, looks towards the teacher then back to his Duplo.</i>

Frankie's story enacted

A key element at play in the co-constructed story enactment is the children's shared familiarity with story-acting procedures, which sets a tone of eager anticipation for story actors and listeners. In this episode, Frankie's joyful participation as the story author and self-elected hero contrasts with his often quiet and reserved classroom demeanour. Previously, Frankie had turned down some opportunities to act out other children's stories. Here, although his gaze and attention are closely focused on the practitioner and he remains physically close to her, he is clearly enjoying the enactment, possibly imagining the story as if he were Harry. Vignette II gives an overview of the 2-minute story-acting episode.

Vignette II: performing Frankie's story

*The class sits around the story-acting 'stage'. Laura introduces Frankie's story and invites him to sit in front of her. Frankie skips over, smiling delightedly as he faces his classmates. Laura congratulates him – 'Well done, Frankie' – and reads '**Once** there was a little boy called **Harry Potter**', touching Frankie gently as she asks, 'Frankie you wanted to be Harry Potter didn't you?' Familiar with the story-acting routine, Frankie takes his place on the stage, glancing round his peers before fixing his gaze on Laura as she reads, 'And then Harry **grew** bigger'. She gazes at Frankie, and prompts, 'Can you show me Harry growing bigger?' Shifting his gaze momentarily away from her, Frankie stretches tall on tiptoe and Laura gasps, conveying amazement at his stature.*

*She refocuses on the story, and Frankie fixes his gaze on her as she reads 'And then Harry had a wand', whispering to Frankie 'Where's your wand?' Frankie holds up an imaginary wand and shows it to her. Laura continues reading, 'And then the ogre came', asking first a boy and then a girl, who both decline, if they would like to be the ogre. The next child, Joe, accepts, steps onto the stage and prompted by Laura to 'Show me your ogre, Joe', stomps vigorously around, making grunting noises and flapping his arms in a menacing fashion, before falling down – much to the class' amusement. Laura continues, 'And **Harry** stuck his **wand** on his nose'. Frankie turns towards Joe, raising his wand arm but does not move. Quietly, Laura prompts, 'Go on show me sticking the wand on the ogre's nose'. The 'ogre' stands up and Frankie moves forwards, extending his imaginary wand towards Joe, who groans and falls to the floor again. Laura continues, 'And then a big giant', and invites Fiona to act this role. Fiona stands, imitates Joe's dramatic falling action, and leans up on her hands. Meanwhile, Joe stomps around the stage. Laura reads in an explanatory tone 'And it was Hagrid'. 'Ooh' says Fiona, still lying on the floor. The story climax is reached with three boys being invited onto the stage as ghoulies, who excitedly join the ogre in his stomping. 'And Harry **waved** his wand and **killed** the ghoulies'. On hearing this, the ghoulies fall to the floor, mimicking the ogre's earlier demise. Laura concludes the performance by commenting, 'Well done, and our ogre is still stamping around – that's brilliant and that's Frankie's story, shall we all clap "Thank You"?' Frankie smiles, looking delighted as everyone claps vivaciously, and the practitioner, also smiling broadly, offers her final congratulations, 'Well done, Frankie'.*

This vignette illustrates the central role of the practitioner: Laura's stage management and directing are significant, and her voice affords weight and significance to even the smallest actions in the tale she narrates, using different inflections, engaging in dramatic whispering and responding enthusiastically to the slaying of the ogre and the ghoulies. She also encourages the children's ongoing participation by congratulating them on their performances.

Yet her vocal contributions are not the sole influence on the unfolding drama. Rather, the enactment is co-constructed through multiple modes *and* by multiple participants. First, the spatial arrangement of the stage, with every child seated on the 'front row', constructs equitable involvement in the unfolding drama. This seating arrangement was repeated in every instance of story acting, and its importance

was emphasised throughout the training programme, silently bringing Paley’s underpinning philosophy for equity and social justice into the story-based pedagogic frame (Cremin et al., 2017). A front row seat for everyone also enables direct gaze exchange between the practitioner and all participating children: each invitation act begins with gaze exchange between the practitioner and child, realising interpersonal meanings that are reassuring for the children and encourage their participation. For example, Laura often directs her gaze to Frankie to signal ‘your turn now’, swiftly following this with a whispered verbal stage direction, such as when she encourages Frankie to ‘show me sticking the wand on the ogre’s nose’. The multimodal transcript in Figure 3 offers a detailed representation of how the adult and child participants draw on gaze as a semiotic resource to manage each other’s participation. For example, gaze exchange precedes the practitioner’s speech when she invites the three boys onto the stage (Turn 1), and Frankie’s change of gaze direction (between Turns 3 and 4), from the ghoulies to Laura, acts as a mutually understood prompt for her to continue reading the story and maintain the pace of the action. If we were to pay attention only to the spoken words, we might be led to believe that the teacher is managing the story enactment, and the children are silenced. However, detailed multimodal scrutiny of the patterns of interaction reveal that the child who has told the story takes turns with the teacher to control the pace of the story-acting, negotiating action through their subtle and silent use of gaze exchange and only then does the teacher read aloud the next section of the scribed story.

Figure 3. The centrality of gaze in co-construction in action.

Turn	Elapsed time	Participant	Speech	Gaze	Action
1	01:25- 01:29	Laura		<i>to seated boys</i>	<i>leans forwards to make eye contact with each boy in turn</i>
	01:27- 01:29		<i>Simon, Ben and Alex could you come and be the ghoulies?</i>		
2	01:29	Simon, Ben, Alex			<i>stomp onto the stage</i>
3	01:29	Frankie		<i>fixed on ghoulies</i>	<i>smiling, stands still, swaying slightly as boys enter stage</i>
4	01:34	Frankie		<i>glance to Laura</i>	<i>orients body to Laura</i>
	01:35	Laura	<i>and Harry Potter waved his wand and the ghoulies were killed</i>	<i>from Frankie to book</i>	<i>reading from class story book</i>

Another striking feature of story-acting is children physically mimicking each other’s actions. Vignette II shows how Joe embraces the role of ogre with gusto, dramatically stomping around and falling to the floor. This is echoed by Fiona when she joins the stage as ‘a giant’. Moments later, when Laura explains the giant is Hagrid, Fiona slips out of character and utters a quiet ‘Ooh’, perhaps realising that her dramatic interpretation is out-of-keeping with Hagrid’s legendary bravery. Joe’s

energetic stomping is imitated by all three ghoulies who also mimic his dramatic falling when they are ultimately slain by Harry Potter. Here, it is the children, not Laura, who co-construct the dramatic action by imitating each other's performances, although Laura's silent smiles and evident delight in their lively interpretation undoubtedly serve as encouragement for their self-expression.

Discussion

As Frankie's example reveals, the joint enterprises of storytelling and story-acting are produced in collaboration between multiple participants. The storytelling participants (the tale-teller, scribe and onlookers) and the story-acting participants (the practitioner-narrator, story author, co-actors and audience) all contribute to the multimodal co-construction of children's narratives.

Practitioners actively co-constructed the children's stories in multiple ways. An interactional pattern of finely tuned monitoring, through a combination of gaze, action and speech, persisted throughout each storytelling. Practitioners used gaze extensively, listened attentively, checked if anything was unclear and carefully scribed children's words. While in Frankie's storytelling, Laura appeared to lead with her questions, she also took her cues from Frankie. She looked at him as he voiced each clause and waited until he gazed at her to signal the completion of his turn: only then did she begin scribing. Her body posture, like the other practitioners', was oriented towards the storyteller. This, combined with her full attention and gaze direction, appeared to open an interactive space that invited (and perhaps prompted) the young storyteller to speak. Throughout our observations, practitioners also interpreted each tale as it was being told, reading it back to the child with emphatic expression that enhanced the meaning. The final read-through, when practitioners underlined key 'characters' (signifying them as roles), created an oral rehearsal of the drama to come. At this moment, practitioners exerted control over the story by deciding on the 'characters', one of whom the storyteller chose to enact.

During story-acting, practitioners continued to act as co-constructors of children's stories, playing a key role as 'stage managers' and interpreting each tale by inviting children to act out roles. These choices were clear in the case of individual characters (e.g. Hagrid, a princess), but decisions were needed in the case of groups (e.g. how many ghoulies or pirates?), and the performance of objects (e.g. several children might be invited to become a castle or bridge). Sometimes, these decisions were made in discussion with children. Practitioners also encouraged children to get into role (e.g. 'Show me your ogre Joe') and invited the audience to participate (e.g. 'Shall we all fix the computer?'). Significantly, all practitioners performed each story as they read it aloud, mediating the tale using expressive intonation, facial expressions and action. Their multimodal engagement and fine-tuned responses to the silent cues offered by the storyteller and story actors (particularly through gaze as illustrated in Figure 3) added to the complex, multimodal negotiation of the processes of enactment, positioning children and teachers alike as co-constructors.

Similarly, children actively co-constructed their narratives in the telling. Their tales, assembled from multiple sources, drew on and alluded to texts from literature and popular culture, from school culture and their home lives. The 350 stories (from 147 children) scribed over the 8 weeks affirm the work of Engel (2005) who argues that by their fourth year, children's stories enable them to slip between play simulating everyday life ('what-is' narratives) and a pretend world of fantastic possibilities ('what-if' narratives). Children's narratives remixed and recontextualised elements from these worlds, which they introduced tentatively, often checking their peers' and teachers' attention and responses through silent modes (Flewitt, 2005). During storytelling, children used gaze direction to closely monitor the adult scribes, by looking at them or their writing and waiting until an approbatory gaze was returned before re-commencing their tale. Other children also played a part, frequently gathering around the teller/scribe duo to listen and watch, demonstrating interest and attention through proximity, body posture and the gazes and smiles exchanged with storytellers. In commenting on the cultural transmission involved, Faulkner (2017) suggests that these onlookers are learning through intent participation (Rogoff, 2003) how to create a story likely to be enjoyed by their peers, and their physical presence creates an immediate purpose for the child's story to be told.

In story-acting, children's involvement was, in part, enabled by being seated in a single row around the 'stage', facilitating direct gaze exchange between practitioner and participating children. The practitioner's gaze was both invitational and affirming as children enacted different roles, sometimes also prompted by sotto-voce stage directions and open requests to enact the character more visibly. The children's interpretations were neither lone contributions nor solely dependent on the practitioner-narrator's guidance or the story text. They were spontaneously collaborative inventions that formed part of the developing story-acting ecology of each classroom. As such, they illustrate how the stories were co-constructed in and through action and were skilfully orchestrated through the subtle and fleeting interplay between diverse modes, particularly gaze, embodiment and the practitioner's expressive reading aloud of each child's scribed story.

While the data indicate that Paley's story-based approach offers rich opportunities for peer collaboration and multimodal engagement, nonetheless practitioners may need support in order to recognise and value the collaborative co-construction involved and, in particular, their own role in shaping and structuring children's tales. The approach also has potential to help practitioners come to appreciate that verbal language is by no means the only or even the central semiotic mode that children draw on as they make meaning in this and other playful contexts.

Conclusion

Previous research examining Paley's (1990) story-based approach has tended to focus on its contribution to individual children's competences, their narrative development, emergent literacy and social-emotional capacities. In contrast, this article offers a novel examination of the interactional processes through which children's narratives (in storytelling and story-acting) are discursively co-constructed. Multimodal analysis exposed the complexity of this narrative co-construction and revealed that these practices are finely tuned multimodal co-constructions from start to finish. Our analysis of the moment-by-moment processes of co-construction made visible the close attention demonstrated by both adults and children and the mutual bridging involved through the fine-grained deployment of gaze, body posture, action and speech. The subtle, multimodal monitoring reveals the practitioners' sensitive attunement to the children and their stories, which were respected and jointly constructed in interaction with the young people during storytelling and enactment.

For all its benefits, we acknowledge that Paley's approach to storytelling and acting encourages particular kinds of narrative engagement that shape the stories told and enacted, and there are, of course, many other possible ways to engage children in story. As Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) observe, Paley's approach demonstrates a very specific learning ecology that arguably both constrains and enables children's possibilities for storytelling and story-acting (the resources offered, tasks to be completed, participation norms and the teachers' practical orchestration of these elements).

Play and narrative drive young children's meaning-making and are important for children's socialisation. However, in western societies, the downward pressure of accountability, reductive assessment systems and 'the basics' serve to limit children's world-making play opportunities. Paley's story-based approach offers an effective 'counter-vailing force' (Cooper, 2009) to this constraining agenda. With minimal but significant resources, particularly the children's bodies, the approach opens interactive spaces in which children and adults engage in collaboratively co-constructing narratives. Nevertheless, attention needs to be paid to practitioners' awareness of the subtleties and complexities of their own and the children's multimodal interactions during the collaborative co-construction of storytelling and dramatisation.

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Notes

1. In the 'Speech' column, pauses of 1 second or more are indicated to the nearest second.
2. Emboldened text denotes emphasis in the practitioner's voice.
3. As our analytical focus is on gaze in this extract, we allocate this a separate column in the transcript.

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