
Storytelling, Story Acting, and Literacy in the Boston Public Schools

An Interview with Jason Sachs,
Ben Mardell, and Marina Boni

Jason Sachs is Director of Early Childhood Education for Boston Public Schools, where he oversees preschool and kindergarten programs across the district. A graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, he worked previously in the Massachusetts Department of Education's Division of Early Learning Services and has served on the Governing Board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Ben Mardell is Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Lesley University, where his concentrations include early-childhood education and Reggio Emilia-inspired teaching. His publications include *From Basketball to the Beatles: In Search of Compelling Early Childhood Curriculum*. Marina Boni is Early Childhood Mentor in the Boston Public Schools. Previously she taught for nineteen years at the Cambridgeport Children's Center, which follows a Reggio Emilia-inspired teaching philosophy. Here Sachs, Mardell, and Boni discuss the Boston Public Schools' Boston Listens Program—informed principally by Vivian Paley's work on storytelling and learning—and how teachers in the program use storytelling and story acting to promote language and literacy in young children. **Key words:** Boston Public Schools; language; literacy; story acting; storytelling; Vivian Paley

American Journal of Play: Let's begin with a brief description of the Boston Public Schools. Give us some sense of the system's size and current key challenges and strategic initiatives.

Jason Sachs: The district has roughly 57,000 students from pre-K through twelfth grade. Twenty-eight thousand are pre-K through grade five, and about 6,500 of those are pre-K through kindergarten. We serve them in about 125 pre-K classrooms and 250 kindergarten classrooms. The pre-K classrooms have a teacher and paraprofessional, and the kindergarten classrooms have a teacher and a half-time paraprofessional. In both types of classrooms, we have twenty-two students or fewer. Boston is a diverse

array of amazing cultures. Eighty percent of our students are nonwhite, and 20 percent are white. Forty-five percent are second-language learners, and 70 percent are on free and reduced lunch. Boston Public Schools had the first public kindergarten in the country, and we now are becoming the first to create our own universal preschool program funded solely by the city rather than by state or federal money.

AJP: What is the Boston Listens program, and how does it relate to the system's particular challenges and strategies.

Ben Mardell: Boston Listens is based on Vivian Paley's innovative storytelling and story-acting approach. At its core, the program involves a child telling a story from his or her imagination and experience. The teacher writes down the story and brings the class together to act it out. In Boston we encourage family members to listen to the children's stories and to tell stories to the children. We also provide models of narratives—having adults tell stories and giving children opportunities to communicate their stories by drawing pictures and constructing with blocks and clay.

Marina Boni: Boston Listens also incorporates professional development for teachers. After we launched the program, we provided an eight-session seminar on its components and on ways to address teachers' concerns, such as how to avoid losing control or figuring out how to listen to children's voices. For example, we suggested that teachers document their experiences with storytelling and story acting by video taping themselves as they tried out various components. The teachers then shared their videos in small groups and gave and received feedback to and from their colleagues. This process got them to share ideas, try new things, and embrace the program. It also informed and helped shape the general approach for the program.

Sachs: Because many of our students need additional opportunities to build background knowledge and vocabulary, storytelling and story acting are wonderful ways to expose students to a wide variety of ideas and vocabulary. But perhaps more importantly, the program is an opportunity for students to express their own ideas. It is also one of the best opportunities for teachers and students to see how creative and brilliant their peers are.

AJP: Before we explore Boston Listens further, please tell us what brought each of you to it.

Sachs: Before coming to Boston Public Schools eight years ago, I worked at a community-based child-care agency and for the state doing research on early-care education. I have a master's in applied child development from

Tufts, and my EdD is from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For my dissertation, I looked at the relationship and consequences of the quality of early-education care programs and student income. I have always been interested in the interaction between variables and in understanding under what conditions things go well or poorly. So much of what public education involves for young students is managing their behavior—getting them off the bus, getting them into the classroom, getting them to lunch, and so on—that sadly the school day presents too little time for them to use their own voices, with their own agenda. Storytelling and story acting allow them to do that.

Mardell: I have been working in early-childhood education for thirty years. For the majority of that time, I've been a classroom teacher, working with children aged six months to six years. I've also worked with adults as a researcher at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Lesley University. Soon after I began teaching, a colleague gave me one of Vivian Paley's books, and it was life changing. I began both telling stories to children and listening to their stories, and later I wrote my PhD dissertation on supporting children's narrative development through storytelling. So when the opportunity came along to support storytelling and story acting in the Boston Public Schools, I signed right up.

Boni: I have also been involved in early-childhood education for close to thirty years, the last eight with Jason's department, coaching teachers. I have mentored kindergarten teachers going through the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) accreditation process, and I have facilitated a variety of types of professional development, including programs inspired by the preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia and, of course, programs on storytelling and story acting. When I was an adolescent, I participated in improvisational theater groups where stories would come alive, and my passion for storytelling and story acting is deeply connected to those early experiences. Jason invited me to join his department in the Boston Public Schools after he attended a meeting in my classroom and saw me and my students acting like wolves when we were studying a unit on these animals. Before that, I had earned a degree in art history and literature from New York University and a master's in child development and early-childhood education from Wheelock College.

AJP: Tell us more about why you regard storytelling as important to early-childhood development. In general, how do telling and listening to stories promote children's cognitive and literary development?

Mardell: Because storytelling and story acting are based on two elements of most interest to young children—stories and play—they find telling and listening to stories very engaging. This makes storytelling and story acting wonderful literacy activities—for several reasons. I can easily give you half a dozen or more.

First, we know from research done by the National Reading Panel Report of 2000, for example, that a robust vocabulary is essential to reading comprehension and success in school. Storytelling and story acting provide a rich context for vocabulary development as children listen to and use words in authentic ways. During dictation, children may ask for help with specific vocabulary or during story acting they may ask for help about the meaning of words. Dramatization brings words to life. So not surprisingly, children who participate in storytelling and story acting score higher than their classmates with comparable socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

Second, storytelling and story acting also develop essential narrative abilities; they provide a bridge between the contextualized speech of young children and the decontextualized language of books and writing. Most young children's speech is about the here and now. Children tell us, "I don't like *that*," "I want *it*," and "he hit *me*." Contextual cues—children pointing, adults surveying the environment and sharing experiences—all support such conversations. The written word is a different type of language, offering no contextual cues to support understanding. And it is language about the then and there, taking us away in time and space. The written word is generally set outside the immediate context. However, stories have contextual cues—tone of voice, gesture, and movement—that convey the meaning of words. In this way, storytelling and story acting serve as a bridge between the dominant language of early childhood and the more abstract language of literacy. As research has confirmed, narrative development is a strong predictor of success in reading and writing.

A third area where storytelling and story acting support literacy development is literacy subskills such as print awareness and phonemic awareness. During story dictation, children notice the left-to-right and top-to-bottom movement of print. They attend to features of letters, their sounds, and the spelling of favorite words. By seeing print used for meaningful purposes, children are motivated to begin writing themselves.

Of course, storytelling is not a purely cognitive pursuit. Storytelling

and story acting also support children's social and emotional development. Some children come to school confident and ready to interact with their classmates. Others, because of shyness or special needs, are more reserved. Storytelling and story acting take all children's ideas seriously. Their ideas become known and are celebrated. Children's confidence increases, and they become more willing to participate in discussion.

Storytelling and story acting also foster a sense of belonging and a social connection in the classroom. In *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, Vivian Paley tells of a child who initially didn't fit in. Jason stood apart from his classmates. Through participation in storytelling and story acting, Paley and Jason's classmates were able to forge bonds that brought him into the classroom community. In Boston, Chris Bucco, a prekindergarten teacher, found similar results with several children on the autism spectrum. Storytelling and story acting gave Chris an opportunity to provide these children with strategies to enter into play that transferred to blocks and the dramatic play areas.

And then there is self-regulation. Learning to self-regulate—to wait, take turns, and defer—is a major task of early childhood and important to later school success. Research confirms that storytelling and story acting promote self-regulation. This is not surprising because the activity provides a compelling reason to take turns and follow rules.

I can keep going, but I'll end this list with creativity. In her book "*The Having of Wonderful Ideas*" and *Other Essays on Teaching and Learning*, Eleanor Duckworth observes that, "the more we help children have their wonderful ideas and feel good about themselves for having them, the more likely it is that they will some day happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened upon before." From figuring out how to act out being a dinosaur or a flower to telling a meaningful, one-word story, storytelling and story acting afford numerous opportunities for children to have wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves for having them.

AJP: Ben, you said a colleague recommended Vivian Paley's work to you. Jason and Marina, how did you discover it?

Sachs: I saw Vivian present at an NAEYC conference where she challenged the audience to think about a culture in which we do not support narrative structure in children. Her work frankly just seemed like a perfect fit for Boston Public Schools. The respect it shows for students and the opportunity it presents for vocabulary development motivated me to figure out how to bring it here.

Boni: Vivian came to our Boston Public Schools kindergarten conference as the keynote speaker and inspired us to launch Boston Listens.

AJP: Have you remained in contact with her?

Boni: Absolutely. We stay in touch and keep her updated with our progress and our plans. In response, she writes us long and insightful letters. We share them with the teachers during our training seminars.

AJP: How does Boston Listens differ from Paley's approach to storytelling?

Mardell: At the core, storytelling and story acting involve dictation and dramatization. Using their experiences and imaginations, children tell their own stories to an adult who writes the narratives down. At a group time, the teacher reads these stories as children act them out. These activities follow Vivian Paley's approach. A cool thing is that storytelling and story acting require few materials: paper, a pencil or pen, and perhaps a clipboard, though many teachers also procure individual binders or notebooks for each child in their classroom.

In Boston Listens, we also include adult stories, communication after the actual telling of stories, and family engagement. Of course, Vivian Paley told many stories to her children and encouraged families to participate in storytelling, as well, so these three components are certainly not in contrast to her approach.

AJP: Tell us more about those components.

Mardell: Adult stories provide children with models for stories—story structure, themes, and characters. This doesn't mean that children will copy adult stories. They shouldn't and they don't. But they can learn a lot from them. Children represent their stories after they have told them—through drawing, building, or modeling with clay—extending their developing communications skills in other media. We encourage family involvement because they obviously play an important role in their children's education, and we encourage the families to tell their children stories and listen to their children's narratives. In Boston, we have families who find it difficult to find books in their native language, so the message about reading to their children may be unsupportable. Of course, we want children to be read to all the time, but everyone can tell a story. And stories can be told at times when you can't read a book, like when you are stuck in traffic.

AJP: Have you observed any similar or other programs elsewhere that have inspired you?

Mardell: Before we launched Boston Listens, we asked Vivian Paley if she knew of

other places where storytelling and story acting were being used more widely than in individual classrooms. She referred to four wonderful educators.

Gillian McNamee, a professor at the Erikson Institute in Chicago, conducted one of the first empirical studies on storytelling and story acting and found that it enhanced children's narrative development. She has helped numerous teachers learn about storytelling and story acting.

Patricia Cooper started a large-scale training program about storytelling and story acting at Rice University and is currently at Queens College in New York City. Her book *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley* is a wonderful description of the importance of Paley's work.

Trisha Lee, founder and artistic director of MakeBelieve Arts, is helping train hundreds of teachers in storytelling and story acting across England. A recent Open University evaluation of her work confirmed the value of the technique.

Jane Katch, who—like Vivian—once taught in the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, has also written a powerful book about how storytelling helps teachers better understand children and helps children learn. The title is *Under Deadman's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play*. Jane currently teaches at Touchstone Community School in Grafton, Massachusetts.

All four of these educators have been very generous in their support of Boston Listens.

AJP: Tell us more about story acting. What does it entail?

Mardell: Story acting is what it sounds like. The teacher reads a child's story, and the group acts it out. Story acting brings the child's story to the group and celebrates her ideas. This provides both a compelling reason to tell stories and an opportunity for the class to create meaning around a text of interest. It allows children to learn from one another as they creatively figure out how to depict a family, a forest, and even a tissue box. It gives teachers the opportunity to learn about their children as they work together to bring a story to life.

AJP: How widely is Boston Listens currently implemented in the district?

Boni: Teachers who have participated in our training are for the most part implementing storytelling and story acting in their classrooms. We are piloting a new Focus on K2 curriculum in fifty-one schools this year, and already at least half of those 165 teachers are making attempts to facilitate

the program components. Some have not figured out the logistical aspects, but our goal is for all of them to facilitate storytelling and story acting in some form this year.

AJP: How does Boston Listens relate to Common Core standards?

Sachs: I don't believe the Common Core design process and associated professional development really include thinking about younger students, particularly in regard to texts. Nevertheless, there are applicable connections. I would imagine that the designers of the Common Core want students to come to the idea that words are meant to transmit information from one person to another. I think storytelling and story acting help students see that.

AJP: In your guide for teachers participating in the program, you detail five storytelling-related practices that give children and adults multiple opportunities to listen and learn. Can you briefly describe those for us and tell us what opportunities and benefits they provide?

Mardell: These components are adult models of storytelling, dictation, dramatization, communications, and family involvement. We have already touched on these to some extent, but it's worthwhile to think about them all together.

Adults' stories provide models children can draw upon—ideas about characters, plot lines, and narrative structure. Except in rare instances, children will rarely copy these models, but rather they will mine them for ideas. Adults telling stories help create a culture of storytelling and inspire children to share their stories with classmates.

During dictation, teachers support children's storytelling by careful listening and gentle scaffolding. This is an opportunity to engage children one-on-one in a joyful activity. While some children will begin the year telling lengthy stories, others' stories will be shorter. During story dictation, teaching moments arise, and children watch intently while the teacher writes down their words. They may ask about punctuation or particular words, and this leads to conversations about question marks and initial constants. However, it is critical that dictation not be turned into a phonics lesson. The teacher's primary role in dictation is listener.

After stories have been told and dramatized, additional opportunities can be provided for children to enjoy stories and communicate their ideas. Children can illustrate their stories. The illustrations can be displayed on a bulletin board, put into an ever-growing binder of classroom stories (that

are read by children, teachers, and classroom guests), or placed in individual portfolios. Stories can also inspire making collages and painting and suggest themes for construction in the classroom's block area.

As children's first teachers, family members can support children's learning through stories. We encourage families to tell stories at home (or on a train ride) and listen to their children's stories. We also invite family members to share stories at school. It is important to explain to families how stories support children's success in school. We've put together a family-friendly fact sheet, a sample newsletter, and a video for families explaining how storytelling and story acting support children's learning. These are found on the Boston Public Schools early-childhood weebly at <http://bpsearlychildhood.weebly.com/storytelling.html>.

AJP: What types of stories are told or encouraged in the program?

Mardell: Stories might develop from personal experiences (children love to hear stories about their teachers' lives), folk tales (for example, "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" or "Abiyoyo"), and imaginary tales that teachers create (such as stories about children solving mysteries).

AJP: What role does repetition play in the program?

Mardell: Children enjoy hearing particular stories again and again. Some themes will reappear in their stories: princesses, ninjas, super heroes. It is important to understand that young children often don't tell stories to be original or unique, but to belong. Telling a story that repeats the theme of a friend's story is a way of connecting.

AJP: Let's go back to story acting. Tell us more about its benefits.

Boni: The children love to see their stories come alive and their ideas appear on the stage through the action of their classmates. In fact, children are probably most excited about this element of the program. Sharing their ideas with their friends boosts their self-esteem. Ben noted earlier how story acting helps children build their vocabulary. For example, if someone doesn't know what digging means, the rest of the children can act it out and make it visible. Also, when children are acting out a character or a story setting, others can see different ways that can be done, and so they can inspire each other. During their acting, children are also working hard on their self-regulation skills, waiting, taking turns, figuring out how to move their bodies safely in the setting, and, of course, listening to each other and collaborating to make the stories come alive.

This enhances creativity. Further, by observing how the children portray

stories, adults form a sense of how the children's understanding of stories and characters is developing.

AJP: Are there guidelines for story acting, as there are for storytelling, and if so, what are some of the principal ones?

Mardell: We advise asking the story author what character she would like to be in his story. After that, we suggest choosing other actors by going around the circle. When a new character appears, we ask the next child in line, "Can I see you be x [a character]?" We also advise being expansive in the definition of characters. Including houses and trees allows more children to participate in the dramatizations.

Boni: Some of the principal guidelines are connected to the issue of self-regulation. We strongly recommend that the teachers and children form stage rules to make things feel safe for everyone—for example, standing at arm's length away when pretending to punch and so on. Some groups have used rituals in order to set the mood for the dramatization. Although this isn't necessary, it's an opportunity to emphasize the importance of this particular time; some folks have used a gong or bell to signal the beginning of the action. Also, we advise keeping the focus on what the actors are doing rather than micromanaging what those who are watching are doing.

Some teachers have also had success in inviting their children to discuss how the dramatization went to give the actors some feedback about their actions on the stage.

AJP: When in the school day or where in the curriculum do storytelling and story acting take place?

Boni: In our Focus on K2 curriculum guide we have alternated storytelling and story acting with a writers' workshop. Each week, the teachers present two or three days of storytelling and story acting followed by two or three days of writers' workshop. This prevents competing activities going on at the same time. For teachers who are not early adopters of Focus on K2 or are teaching younger children, we suggest getting stories during arrival time or during centers. For children who are not sleeping, rest time might be another good time to record a student's story. For story acting, we suggest using the closing meeting at the end of the day. Also, we encourage teachers to have all of the stories gathered on a particular day acted out on that same day. This means that teachers have to gauge in advance what is the manageable number of stories for each day.

AJP: You have several times referenced training teachers in storytelling and story acting. Tell us more about that.

Boni: We are in the second year of facilitating a Boston Listens seminar, which accommodates twenty-five teachers at a time. We have included storytelling and story acting in the two-day professional development required for all the Focus on K2 curriculum early adopters. As Ben noted, we also include video and images on the early-childhood department weebly, where teachers can easily access program components and find ideas from a wide variety of options. In addition, we have spent considerable time observing and modeling in classrooms.

AJP: How have teachers responded to the program? What are their challenges?

Mardell: Teachers have been enthusiastic because their children enjoy storytelling and story acting. But there have also been challenges. For example, even before Sandy Hook, the issue of violence in children's stories and play was controversial. Some children are exposed to violence in their daily lives, and in communities where guns and fighting are all too present, it is particularly disturbing to see children acting out shooting and killing. Yet many children are drawn to super-hero play, and violence has long been a feature of young children's stories.

So when we started this program, teachers had to decide how to respond. Through conversation, they developed a consensus to allow stories about fighting and violence. The teachers understood that stories are a way children make sense of the world. Teachers were also swayed by Vivian Paley's argument that by helping children safely dramatize these stories, we help them learn that they control the story, not the other way around.

Still, many teachers remained uncomfortable allowing such stories. Some admitted they rushed through the dramatizations of stories with fighting and violence and wondered if their students knew that other themes were valued more highly. One teacher brought a group of colleagues a video of a dramatization of a super-hero story she facilitated. Collective analysis of the video helped those teachers gain a deeper appreciation of the learning that occurs during such dramatizations. Not only did the boys involved not hurt each other as they pretended to battle, but they carried out an elaborate choreography that required considerable coordination and thought. Of course, teacher conversation about such stories is continuing.

AJP: Are there other challenges?

Mardell: Yes. The question of scaffolding has also arisen. Some teachers maintain

that they should act simply as scribes and should not offer any instruction during dictation. They worry that questioning will undermine children's ownership—and ultimately their interest—in storytelling and that, besides, children can develop narratives without adult prompting. Other teachers see dictation as a wonderful opportunity for one-on-one instruction. They believe that dialogue and questions enhance narrative development. Those who hold the first position allow clarifying questions. Those who hold the second position note that dictation should never resemble a cross-examination. These teachers describe their approach as “gentle” scaffolding. That's where they ask questions like those we noted before. “Does anything else happen?” “What did x [a character] do then?” “How did you feel when that happened?” They make sure only to ask a few questions per dictation session.

AJP: Are there particular circumstances in which scaffolding questions arise more frequently?

Mardell: Yes. Concerns about scaffolding arise most often in working with children learning English and children with special needs. The nonverbal elements of storytelling and story acting give children with special needs wonderful opportunities to participate in classroom life. Also, storytelling and story acting include elements that experts recommend to support language learning—frequent opportunities to talk, connections to students' lives, an interesting topic, and a tangible outcome.

A complicating factor is that a child's cultural background influences how he tells stories. Diverse cultures have different ways of organizing stories, and teachers unfamiliar with a particular cultural style of storytelling may evaluate children's stories as underdeveloped or disorganized. So we emphasize the importance of teachers' learning about different narrative styles and keeping cultural backgrounds in mind as they support children's storytelling.

AJP: Do the teachers employ any additional techniques in working with children with special needs or those learning English as a second language?

Mardell: Yes. While it is important not to conflate learning English with a special need, the verbal elements of storytelling and story acting suggest that children learning English and children with special needs benefit from similar supports. Those we use include: accepting and celebrating short stories—even one word; providing teachers' stories as models; providing prompts based on listening—by observing children at play, teachers come

to know their students, and when children have difficulty starting a story or expressing themselves, teachers can make suggestions based on this knowledge; using visual props—board-maker images, story stones, puppets, and felt boards all provide images that children can point to and manipulate to tell their stories and explain their ideas; going to the story—children who are hesitant to tell a story may be creating wonderful tales when they play in a classroom’s block area or in the corner set aside for dramatic play, and so teachers can go to where children are playing to get their stories.

While most children can tell stories independently, supports such as these allow teachers to help construct stories with children who need assistance.

AJP: Overall, how have the students responded to Boston Listens?

Boni: I find that if teachers give the program a chance, the children love it and often name it as their favorite part of the day or week. During the second week of school this year, I walked into the classroom of a teacher who had been involved in the program in the previous year, and she said, “Second week of school and another group of children is hooked.” The students like it because it connects them and allows them all to speak a common story language!

AJP: Can you give us some examples of where you have observed the program making particular differences in children’s classroom engagement, participation, or learning?

Boni: Here’s one about a boy I’ll call Jackson. He was a kindergartner in a Sheltered English Instruction classroom last year, and his experience exemplifies the value of storytelling and story acting. At the beginning the year, Jackson was shy and reserved, but his teacher eventually coaxed him to dictate a story. His first story was: “It was somebody’s birthday. I don’t know who. I don’t know who’s birthday it is. It’s not me. But it’s somebody’s birthday. That’s it.”

When Jackson saw his and classmates’ stories dramatized, his interest increased, and he became an enthusiastic actor and eager to tell more stories. Through listening and speaking, his vocabulary and narrative abilities blossomed, and here is his final story of the school year: “Once upon a time we were in the veterinary clinic. There was Douglas, Dimas, and Ashley. We weighed the cats. We measured them with the tape. We gave them a bath and food. We were taking care of them. Then a cat died. The doctor came and took him away. He was gone. Then the doctor brought him back to life. The end.”

It is worth noting that at the time Jackson told this story, the dramatic-play area in the classroom was set up as an animal hospital. He drew on the richness of the curriculum to create his story.

AJP: What are the connections between Boston Listens and play?

Sachs: One is the students taking the lead. They lead the dance of what is talked about and what words and images they want to evoke.

Mardell: Boston Listens is play—not only in the story acting but also in that often stories emerge from play and play is the acting out and making sense of stories. Consider what play is. Play is freely chosen and intrinsically motivated. And the kind of play we have in Boston Listens is sociodramatic play, which has a story line and involves social interaction.

So the connections are stories and narrative, social interactions, and motivation. The children want to do this and always have a choice to tell a story and participate in dramatization. As Jason noted, they control what they are telling. The characters, the plot line, and the setting are all up to them.

Of course, play of Boston Listens and the type of play that take place in the corner of a room at home or out in the backyard, out of earshot of an adult, are not completely the same. The play of Boston Listens is a teacher-scaffolded activity. If done poorly—for example, if a teacher takes control of the storytelling or the dramatization—it can become quite “un-play-like.” But when done well, it can promote other play in the classroom. As we have already said, it engages children who, because of certain needs, have trouble entering into play. Also, it helps children better understand that they control the story and characters rather than the other way around. So even though in the movie, Ironman punches people in the face, during story acting, children understand that they are pretending. This provides positive spillover effects in the dramatic-play area.

Also, when a child’s story is acted out, it becomes known to the whole class. So rather than just a handful of children knowing that Juan really likes ninjas or Kendra tells stories about cats, the entire class knows. Play is a main way children get to know one another, and, in this kind of play, the process of becoming known is accelerated.

AJP: Is there a public dimension of Boston Listens? If so, what are your goals for the program beyond Boston Public School classrooms?

Mardell: Storytelling and story acting have a public-relations problem—they are fun. In today’s educational climate, where rigor is a key byword, individuals not familiar with early-childhood development may wonder about the

value of activities based on story and play. So we have partnered with the Boston Children's Museum to make the learning involved in storytelling and story acting visible to the community.

AJP: Tell us more about the role of the Boston Children's Museum.

Mardell: We concluded the first year of Boston Listens by celebrating the children's learning at the Boston Children's Museum. The museum hosted children and their teachers in its family-friendly theater called Kids' Stage. One hundred children from thirteen classrooms participated. The children dramatized selected stories not only to the delight of parents, grandparents, siblings, and cousins, but also to the delight of members of the community at large.

We informed Boston school committee members, city councilors, and state policy makers about the program by inviting them to attend and asking them to bring a story for the children to dramatize. Felix Arroyo, a city councilor and candidate for mayor, came and shared a story from his childhood. We also handed out a family-friendly fact sheet in English and Spanish and showed a video to explain the logistics of the program and what the children had learned through storytelling and story acting.

In the introduction to the performances, we told the audience that while what they were going to see would certainly be cute, it was important to look beyond the cuteness and think about what the children were learning by having to figure out how to be particular characters, coordinate their actions with other children, and take turns. We said: "All year children have been telling stories in their classrooms. They have been listening to each other and their teachers. Tonight is our chance to celebrate their expertise in telling stories and acting them out—their wonderful ability to play. Tonight is our turn to listen to them."

AJP: Insofar as you know or understand, how does the Boston Children's Museum regard its participation relative to its educational mission or community-outreach activities?

Mardell: Jeri Robinson and Beth Fredericks at the museum have been wonderful partners and have invited us back to celebrate Boston Listens with them again. They see the celebrations as a way to connect to the Boston Public Schools, to bring in families who normally don't come to the museum, and to support learning through play.

AJP: As you have noted, Vivian Paley famously documented her classroom work through her many best-selling books. The museum preserves her

papers in its Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, but her papers do not include the audio tapes she made of storytelling and story acting in her classrooms because she did not preserve them; she felt she could save and share the stories and experiences best through her books. How do you document the storytelling and story acting that occurs in Boston Listens?

Boni: Vivian Paley's work inspired us to use video to capture many of the elements of Boston Listens. We have video taped adults telling stories, children giving dictation, and groups acting out the stories on stage. We have also photographed some of the work the children have done to communicate their stories in other media. In addition, we have interviewed some of the children and teachers and asked them to share their experiences with storytelling and story acting. Also, as we said previously, the teachers have gathered and continue to gather the children's stories in binders, and we have assembled some the interviews with the children—where they talk about the components of the program and about the things they were learning—into video for our early-childhood weebly.

AJP: To what extent is Boston Listens—and your methods of documentation, in particular—influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching, learning, and documentation?

Boni: We consider documentation a tool that informs us of how and what children are learning. Reggio Emilia documentation takes many formats, including panel boards, video, visual essays, and more. So we have that in common with the Reggio Emilia approach. Also, to get teachers to analyze their storytelling and story acting practices, we invited them to video the different components and bring the videos to our seminars for feedback. We used a protocol—a ladder of feedback (clarifying questions, appreciations, concerns, and suggestions)—to guide the conversations and encourage the teachers in giving and receiving feedback.

Mardell: This work in our seminars is also informed significantly by ideas developed through research described in *Making Teaching Visible: Documentation of Individual and Group Learning as Professional Development*, a product of Project Zero.

AJP: Do you regard Boston Listens as a model that other systems should consider using, and if so, to what extent are you willing and able to assist them in doing so?

Mardell: We hope that others will be inspired by our work and realize that story-

telling and story acting can be used in a large, urban district to benefit all children.

AJP: Where would you like to see the Boston Listens program in five or ten years or beyond?

Sachs: Embedded in our curriculum, from pre-K to grade five. I would like to see more public schools, especially those serving low-income students, implement this work. As I mentioned before, too much time is spent managing students and getting them to perform mundane and uninteresting tasks. Storytelling and story acting are their times to express themselves and for the adults and other students to listen to them. I believe that through this process mastery, respect, and growth naturally happen.

AJP: Do you have any final suggestions for teachers, administrators, and parents reading this interview?

Boni: Find a way to give twenty minutes per day to this program because it is both instructive and fun, and the children in your classrooms will be quickly hooked on it.

Mardell: Trust the children. If we provide children with the right support, the right scaffolding, and opportunities to tell stories and act them out, they will do amazing things.