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Becoming the Story in the Joyful World of “Jack and the Beanstalk”

Mera, a drama teaching artist playing Jill, reminds the preschool-age children that last week all the “brothers and sisters” were in their beds and Mother came to wake them up. She directs them to make a pillow with their hands and close their eyes. She, Heather (a teaching artist playing Jack), and Christie (the classroom teacher playing Mother) put on a scarf, a vest and an apron, respectively, while the children pretend to sleep. Mera says softly, “When I count to three, you’ll be in Jack’s bed. One, you can feel the soft pillows under your head. Two, you can hear the wind blowing outside. Three, you can feel the soft blankets over you.”

Mother speaks next. “Good morning children! Did you have a good sleep? Are you hungry for breakfast?” “Yes,” the children respond, as they stretch and rub the sleep out of their eyes. They are now the brothers and sisters of Jack, the character well known for his trips up and down an enormous beanstalk.

With Mera’s soft-spoken words, preschoolers imaginatively leave their classroom behind to enter the world of pretend. Their destination is the world of Jack, where they take on new identities and become in play, as Vygotsky said, “a head taller than themselves” (1978, p. 102). Their transformation is seemingly just as magical as the infamous beans Jack trades for his mother’s milkless cow Daisy.

This article looks into the world of pretend to understand how moving, taking risks, and *becoming* the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk” afforded three- to five-year old children the space and encouragement to take on additional literate identities. I describe a ten-week process drama residency that I studied in three classrooms in a rural Headstart school and, one year later, in two classrooms

in an urban Reggio-inspired child development center. Although many stories could be told from my twenty-plus weeks with preschoolers engaged in the world of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” I focus my gaze now on a prominent theme: the compelling effect of engaging preschoolers’ bodies in movement and pretend, particularly for three children who presented what I choose to call “special circumstances.” Their teachers and I found ourselves frequently repeating these children’s stories and came to realize that children’s bodies are often an unrecognized and untapped symbol system in early literacy learning.

First is Hillary, a child at Bluegrass County Preschool (BCP) (children’s names and BCP are pseudonyms), whose physical limitations meant that she was dependent on her teachers to carry her from place to place and to sit upright on the carpet. Hillary’s participation magnifies the significance of *movement* in story making. Second is Iris, a child at the Early Learning Campus (ELC), who was notably reluctant during process drama and whose teacher had never seen her pretend at school. I mapped Iris’s physical positions in space as she learned to pretend in order to highlight the value of *ritual* in story making. And third is Charlie, whose challenging social behaviors concerned his ELC teachers. Charlie’s engagement, particularly when he embodied a popular culture character, illustrated the manner in which the children’s bodies made meaning as they *pretended*. Together, Hillary, Iris, and Charlie helped me see that movement, ritual, and pretend were ways young literacy learners of all abilities *became the story*.

I resist the deficit meanings associated with labels like “special needs.” Rather, I focus on the circumstances that called my attention to Hillary’s,

Iris’s, and Charlie’s individual, unique participation in story making. Like Edmiston (2007), I understand that “it is particular ways of structuring communities, like classrooms or hospitals as well as wider societal structures, that disable people” (p. 342). For Hillary, Iris, and Charlie, imagining a pretend world with the physicality that drama provides was a new way of making meaning—it afforded all the children new ways of being in the preschool space. Their engagement reminds us that becoming literate is a multimodal experience that embraces “the imaginative potential of all children (with or without disabilities)” (Kliwer, 2008, p. 36).

Process Drama with the Blue Apple Players

The “Jack and the Beanstalk” residency is a curriculum based in the principles of drama as process, as opposed to performance. In it, two teaching artists

from the Blue Apple Players (BAP) take on the roles of Jack and his sister Jill. Classroom teachers play the roles of Mother, Mr. Beano (who trades Jack’s cow Daisy for magic beans), the Silver Harp, and the Goose. The children are not an audience in this type of drama education. Rather, they take on the roles of Jack’s siblings, thereby becoming characters and actively constructing the story.

Process drama is consistent with the qualities of a transactional theory of early literacy learning (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman & Owocki, 2004; 2005). It brings to life the notion that texts are authored as meaning is made by readers and writers—who in this case are drama players. Kress (2005) says we are all language makers. In the world of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” all preschoolers used their bodies to be story makers as well.

“Jack and the Beanstalk” was enacted during ten weekly thirty-minute periods in a predictable

INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

Becoming the Story in the Joyful World of “Jack and the Beanstalk”

In this article, students spent time acting out “Jack and the Beanstalk.” Visit these resources from ReadWriteThink.org to learn other ways to incorporate folktales and fairy tales into the classroom:

Acting Out with Mother Goose

Listening to a story is fun, especially Mother Goose stories like “The Farmer in the Dell” and “Little Miss Muffet.” Add even more fun by acting out the story after reading it. Work together to create a script and make costumes and props. Then invite others to watch and hear your story!

<http://bit.ly/1P6gShb>

Developing Story Structure with Paper-Bag Skits

Lights, camera, action, and a bit of mystery! In this lesson, students use mystery props in a skit bag to create and perform short, impromptu skits. The lesson also promotes listening skills and critical thinking as students view other groups’ performances and determine the conflict and resolution of each.

<http://bit.ly/1G0WB5X>

Using Writing and Role-Play to Engage the Reluctant Writer

In this lesson, students explore the different characters in the story *The Three Little Javelinas* and then write a letter to the author in the voice of one of the characters. By creating their own context, students are able to hone their creativity and continue to cultivate themselves as writers.

<http://bit.ly/1QaRRD4>

—Lisa Storm Fink
www.readwritethink.org

routine. When the teaching artists arrived, they joined the preschoolers seated in a circle in a group meeting area and opened with the Name Game, a rhythmic and repetitive clapping and hand-movement sequence. After Mera or Heather facilitated a brief, verbal, group retelling of what happened the last week in Jack’s world, they pulled out an invisible bag of costumes. Some children zipped into setting-appropriate imaginary farmer jackets, but others pulled on rainbow pants or donned sparkly princess dresses. Once dressed in imagined identities as Jack’s brothers and sisters, Mera or Heather narrated the children into the world of pretend, as described in the opening vignette.

The plot in Jack’s world included many openings for suggestions and variations from the children. Commonly, the giant dies as he falls from the crashing beanstalk, but in the version facilitated by the teaching artists, he was so sad about losing the Silver Harp and the Golden Goose that he cried enough to cause a flood in Jack’s community. Jack’s brothers and sisters had to solve several problems as a result, including figuring out how to return to the castle to confront the scary giant given that they already chopped down the beanstalk, how to get the giant to stop crying, and how to help Mr. Beano rescue his cows that were stuck in the mud and stranded by a swept-away bridge. By the end of nine weeks and lots of problem solving, Jack, Jill, and their siblings eventually taught the giant to make friends and invited him home for a celebratory party.

Inventing Methods to Understand Becoming the Story

Initially, I wanted to understand the meaning constructed by children, their teachers, and the teaching artists during the Jack residency as related to preschoolers’ social and academic development. Detailed field notes from a total of fifty-seven observations, photography, and video recordings documented the thirty-minute drama time in each classroom each week. Fifteen pre- and post-residency teacher interviews explored teacher knowledge about and comfort with drama education and change. I referenced parents’ insights, which

were gathered in a survey at BCP and in informal hallway conversations at the ELC, for how the curriculum flowed outside of the classrooms walls.

Analysis at the conclusion of the first ten-week period at BCP led me to more focused questions in the second ten-week period at the ELC. Now I wanted to explain the joy and engagement I recognized as central to the children’s learning. I also wanted an opportunity to explore my understandings with teachers, so the two drama educators and two lead classroom teachers joined me in a study group. Weekly, we contemplated the Jack activities and designed Reggio-inspired learning experiences that extended Jack into all aspects of the curriculum. Construction projects, visual arts, storybook reading, dramatic play, science experiments, and mathematical reasoning experiences generated artifacts that were windows into children’s imaginations and thinking.

At the conclusion of the residency, the teachers asked their classes to identify four important scenes from the story for tableau, which positions bodies into “a still, silent performance that involves three-dimensional representation” (Wilson, 2003, p. 375). The children volunteered to participate and collectively decided how to shape their own bodies. The drama educators participated and encouraged the children to intensify their stances and expressions to show the story. Finally, we invited reflections from the children in individual and group interviews.

Creative drama has been shown to promote language development in early childhood settings (Mages, 2008), but I needed my research to be grounded in an arts-based, ethnographic paradigm that would intentionally document more than verbocentric data. I needed methods that would allow me to value emotions and to view children, teachers, and literacy as multimodal, dynamic, and holistic. Arts-based research methods (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Narey, 2009) supported my desire to see

For Hillary, Iris, and Charlie, imagining a pretend world with the physicality that drama provides was a new way of making meaning.

ways, photographs captured what would otherwise be “fleeting moments” of the signs and symbols the children used to construct and express meaning (Kliewer, 2008).

Video

Both classrooms in the ELC were equipped with overhead video cameras that recorded a bird’s-eye view of the space and made group and individual movements “pop” to our attention, particularly because the sound (and thus oral language) was not highly audible. I noted places in the field notes that related to themes evolving in the analysis (such as shifts in Iris’s participation, for example, as discussed below) and identified associated moments in this video and to more conventional video recordings from a handheld camera to map individual children’s participation and to trace proximity and movement. The study group watched video clips and discussed individual children’s participation as well as broader changes over time. I particularly used video when movement occurred across larger classroom spaces.

Play and Multimodal Early Literacy Learning for All Children

The research and practices described here exist in the theoretical space where all young children are active inventors (Whitmore et al., 2004), social participators (Rowe, 2010) and designers (Kress, 2005) of their literacy learning. I view literacy as fluid, dynamic, and multimodal (Kress, 2005; Siegel, 2006). In this project, I focus especially on embodied multimodalities as part of early literacy development to better understand what Kliewer (2008) calls young children’s “symbolic presence—their drive and potential to collaboratively and imaginatively construct meaning and make symbolic sense of the surrounding world” (pp. 40–41). During drama, the children in this study never put pencils to paper, nor did they read the “Jack and the Beanstalk” story in a book (although they engaged in these conventional literacy practices many other times of the day and week). Thus, the text was “an embodied action that represents and convey[s] a particular meaning” (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009,

p. 214). As Kress argues, “Unless we understand the principles of meaning making in all of the ways in which children do, we won’t . . . really understand the ways in which they try to make sense of print” (2005, p. xvi).

These ideas rest squarely on the bedrock of early childhood development theory that says that play is the primary means for children to learn. Vygotsky (1978) knew that children in play are a head taller than themselves. Piaget (1951/2013) believed play strengthens children’s abilities to think abstractly. Bruner (1983) claimed play to be deeply related to children’s development of thought and language. Contemporary research on play recognizes its value for essential learning skills in the 21st century, such as those related to digital literacy (Vasquez & Felderman, 2013; Wohlwend, 2010), dispositions of social justice and equality (Souto-Manning, 2010; Vasquez, 2014), and popular media (Wohlwend, 2013).

Imagination, as part of play, allows children to conceive of things they have not yet experienced for themselves, including defining themselves as literate. For children who are viewed by deficit mainstream school discourses as “less than” more “normal” children, a view of literacy as embodied and multimodal opens the door to local understandings of children’s participation (Kliewer, 2008; Collins, 2011) and, therefore, children’s identities. In process drama as described here, all children can imagine new places, whom they might become in those places, and ways to solve problems in those spaces (Catterall, 2009).

Theoretical principles related to multimodality, play, imagination, and identity are not restricted to children who fit in tidy categories of typical development. Research that focuses on individual children with developmental delays and special educational needs extends these principles and, in so doing, strengthens them. For example, Kliewer (2008) shares a compelling ethnographic portrait of Isaac, a four-year-old with trisomy 21 who dances

These ideas rest squarely on the bedrock of early childhood development theory that says that play is the primary means for children to learn.

and rumpuses to his teacher’s reading of *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), thereby becoming a full member of the literate culture in his inclusive preschool classroom. Likewise, Flewitt, Nind, and Payler’s (2009) detailed multimodal analysis of four-year-old Mandy’s literacy practices in three settings emphasizes the importance of embodied action in inclusive settings. Their attention to Mandy’s bodily communication and Mandy’s teachers’ view of these communications as intentional and meaningful show Mandy as valued and competent as well as a child with complex needs. Indeed, drama as a particular multimodal pedagogy has been shown to reach “even the most remote, hard-to-reach, socially challenged children. . . . [and] move [them] towards more effective participation within a social world” (Peter, 2009, p. 16).

Hillary: Movement within Pretend Increases Engagement and Joy

Hillary was a four-year-old at BCP who had significant physical limitations and developmental delays.

She was pushed in a wheelchair outside of the classroom, and her teachers carried her, held her up, and attended closely to her during classroom activities. During the Jack residency, she sat on the floor against a supportive backrest with an adult beside her. I rarely heard her make any sounds. Hillary, however, called my attention to the power of movement in drama and learning.

When children were engaged in the “Jack and the Beanstalk” drama, they were joyful. Their faces lit up, they giggled and laughed, their eyes widened, and they often expressed their delight with words and sounds. I looked for moments of joy and engagement in my field notes (“Their faces are gleeful”) and in images (emotional facial expressions, bodies leaning into the story) and discovered that these moments frequently intersected with movement. For example, the following occurred when the children had sung the giant to sleep with a lullaby so they could escape from the castle.

Jack whispers dramatically, “Brothers and sisters, the giant’s asleep. We’ll see him tomorrow.” Jack leads the tiptoeing children away from the giant. Casey puts her

NOW ACT!

Techniques from Process Drama

The “Jack and the Beanstalk” residency (10 weeks, multiple roles, etc.) may seem overwhelming if you are new to drama education ideas. However, you can infuse your preschool and elementary language and literacy curriculum with techniques from process drama that don’t require special preparation or materials. You will likely be delighted with what you learn about your students’ understandings about story.

- *Individual tableaux* (sometimes called frozen pictures) work well in a section of a story with a lot of action. When reading a book aloud, ask children to use their bodies to become a character, then “freeze.” Tap a child on the shoulder and ask what she is thinking to reveal her understanding of the story and character.
- *Group tableaux* involve several children collaboratively creating a frozen scene. Explore with them what it is like to “be the story.” Digital photography will preserve the tableaux so that children and teachers can return to them for further analysis at any time, and you can share the action with families in newsletters.
- *Visualization* into a pretend world will heighten children’s engagement and show you what is happening as your students transact with a text. Ask the children to close their eyes as you talk them into a scene in a story, leaving plenty of space in your description for their imaginations. After you talk them back to the real classroom, invite sharing and discuss why individual imaginations differ.

Each of these techniques offers a window into children’s thinking and provides insights into children’s comprehension of story that are likely not visible via other assessments.

finger to her lips like Jack. They tiptoe in a circle and get back to the beanstalk and climb down as Jack narrates. “C’mon brothers and sisters. How many steps does it take to go down the beanstalk?” They count down, 10, 9, 8, etc., pumping their arms and high stepping their legs. . . . The children make eye contact with me as they pass me in the circle. Their dancing eyes convey a conspiratorial and delighted look.

Such engagement increased when the action moved off the carpet to other areas of the classrooms. On one particularly engaging day, the children in Hillary’s class moved off the mat to go to the giant’s castle. Hillary remained on the mat, momentarily (and very atypically) forgotten by the group and physically unable to move on her own, or so I thought.

Hillary scoots, pulling herself across the mat with one leg, trying to reach the others and makes a squeaking sound. The children and teachers crawl under the ribbon that represents the castle door. They are whispering. Everyone is quiet and crouched. Hillary shrieks. They reach together to open the closet door to get the silver harp. Jack shifts in and out of narrator voice as Hillary shrieks again. “‘Make a circle!’ So Jack and all of his brothers and sisters came back to the castle. . . . ‘Everybody reach out and open the door.’ Jack reached in and got out the Silver Harp.”

My reflection on the observation describes my thoughts:

My greatest moment of joy (and goose bumps) was when Hillary scooted across the floor This was the first time I’ve seen her move on her own steam, and I realized that if motivated and left to her own devices, she was fully capable of getting herself across the floor with speed and determination. She also vocalized several times with squeaks and shrieks that are audible on the recording.

In highly engaging moments like rescuing the Silver Harp, all children were moving—including Hillary—to different locations in the classroom, moving their bodies in specific ways, like crouching down or tiptoeing, and lowering or raising their voices to accomplish something in the plot, be it to build a bridge to save Daisy and the other cows, or to not wake a snoring giant. Hillary designed her own participation in story making, to be what Kliever (2008) calls a “literate citizen” with a

complex symbolic presence and a “rightful place in the swirl of the inclusive preschool community” (p. 10), even if it was not planned with her unique qualities in mind.

The body expresses meaning in drama. In a case study of drama education in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms that paralleled this study in several ways, Wee (2009) found that “students’ body movements in their homeroom are minimal and primarily instrumental, but those in drama are exploratory and expressive” (p. 493). When children moved to pantomime milking a cow, to dance in a rainstorm, to pat down the ground around just-buried bean seeds, and to pull cows from the mud, virtually every child actively participated with their bodies and brains, according to their abilities. A live-action photo taken in Christie’s classroom at the ELC (see Figure 2) illustrates the ways most children’s bodies moved when they left the carpet—in this case, bending, crawling, and tiptoeing as quickly as they could to rescue the Silver Harp, which had waited for them since their last visit. Blurred images emphasized movement and drew the attention of the study group throughout the SPRP.

As illustrated in Hillary’s scooting and in Figure 2, the children’s “movements [were] not random actions, but rather represent[ed] a state of consciousness involving full engagement and awareness” (Wee, 2009, p. 496). In each of these moments, the children *enacted* the events of the story, used their bodies to make meaning; they *became* the story.



Figure 2. Children in Christie’s class scurried under the castle door to rescue the Silver Harp.

Iris: Rituals Provide Safety and Enable Risk Taking

Iris was a happy five-year-old child in Renea’s ELC classroom who would probably not attract the attention of any unknowing visitor on an ordinary day. She was always willing to talk to me, and she interacted easily with the other children and teachers. Iris

Rituals help build learning communities for all ages.

liked drawing and writing with invented spelling in her journal, and she particularly liked wearing stripes. Iris gave the study group a lot to think about in relation to participation in drama, and considering the position of Iris’s body in space deepened my understanding about embodied learning.

Over the ten-week Jack residency, all children increased their participation. Parents and teachers labeled such changes with descriptions like “more confidence” and “willingness to engage.” Five weekly rituals offered some explanation for these changes:

- Playing the Name Game
- Putting on imaginary costumes to become characters
- Closing eyes to visualize going into the world of pretend and back
- Waking up in the world of pretend with a morning stretch and chant
- Singing the Goodbye Song

Rituals help build learning communities for all ages. The Jack rituals provided predictability and therefore safety for preschoolers and their teachers, thus encouraging more active engagement and increased risk taking over time, both necessary elements for learning (Cambourne, 1988; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Repeated drama structures helped the children recognize and anticipate Heather and Mera’s teaching moves and framed the associated pretense of entering Jack’s world (Peter, 2009). The ritual of the Name Game, in particular, made shifts in children’s participation visible week to week and allowed the study group to compare changes over time.

When the drama residency began, Iris refused to sit in the circle and buried her head in a teacher’s lap or shook her head “no” when invited to join in. She said she didn’t like costumes and scary things. Renea remarked that she had never seen Iris play pretend at school and voiced provocative questions: “Why is it important that preschoolers pretend? Can we teach a child to pretend?”

I used the overhead video to map Iris’s body’s changing position in space. Figure 3 collapses Weeks 1–9. At first (Weeks 1–5), if she was on the carpet with the other children, she was often the only child sitting while everyone else stood, and more than once she remained sitting on the carpet when the group moved to a different space. It was common for her to sit outside of the circle, often perched on a wooden stump stool next to an adult, as in Week 5. Beginning with Week 6, however, Iris joined the children more and more, particularly during small-group pantomime. The map documents her coming into the circle—and the world of pretend.

Changes in Iris’s participation occurred slowly. Renea and Martha (an assistant teacher) often used physical touch to reassure Iris, either by extending a hand of invitation or wrapping their bodies around hers to engage physically. Week 7 was pivotal. Martha sat behind Iris on the carpet and manipulated her hands and body like a puppeteer to literally show her how to eat pretend breakfast cereal

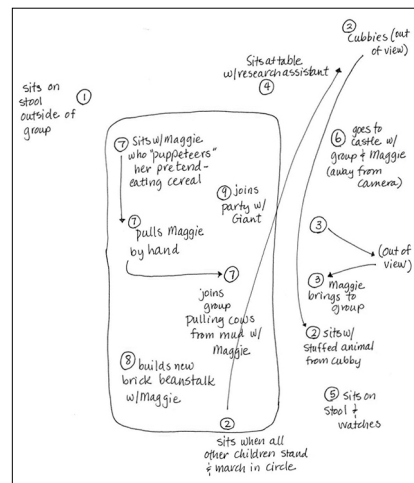


Figure 3. A map of Iris’s body positions in space indicates increasing risk taking with pretend over time.

with the other children. The two of them laughed and played together. When I overheard Iris whisper a plot idea to Martha that she didn't seem able to say aloud to the group, I shared it with Heather. Heather selected Iris's idea, which was to dig out some cows that were stuck in the mud, for the class to dramatize. This time, Iris pretended with more physical independence, although Martha was right behind her and their bodies paralleled one another's movements.

Iris never said her name in the Name Game, but her position in a tableau activity during Week 10 indicated tremendous growth as a risk taker. Iris showed a new sense of agency on this final day, first by declining an invitation from Renea to dramatize one scene and then speaking up clearly about the scene she wanted to enact. Then she used her body to chop down the beanstalk with gusto. Iris is the first child on the right in Figure 4. The distance between her and the teachers upon whom she had relied for the first nine weeks and the blur of her swinging arms indicate that she was now independently engaged and willing to literally move into and *be* the story.

Repetition, mediation from caring adults, and time supported Iris in taking risks to pretend. Renea noted that the day the giant cried was a turning point. Iris's mother shared her observations at the end of the residency, saying that Iris now seemed “to be able to talk about and think about things that



Figure 4. Iris's position, recorded in tableau, indicates increased independence as she pretends to cut down the beanstalk.

are scary without anxiety.” Rituals are fixed structures that help children “feel secure in the learning environment and organize their experiences systematically” (Wee, 2009, p. 498). Such structures in drama like the Jack residency are effective mediators that help children with special circumstances, as I've called them here, “to make creative choices and decisions within gradually broadening boundaries” (Peter, 2003, p. 22).

Charlie: Navigating real to pretend enables children to BE the story

Charlie, a five-year-old in Christie's class, expressed exuberance with a loud voice that was often shared without Christie's invitation and with flailing arms that invaded other children's private spaces. Charlie loved to take on the identity of the “Red Hulk,” which meant potentially dangerous moves accompanied by loud, interrupting vocalizations. He sometimes said “banana” rather than Charlie in the Name Game, which caused his buddies to roar with laughter. But my video camera also documented numerous times when Charlie sat quietly with a raised hand to

offer an appropriate idea. Although Charlie liked to look at books during rest time, his stiff, permanently curved fingers made writing and drawing uncomfortable. Rarely did Charlie “sleep” as the others did when instructed to go to Jack's world, or “freeze” as expected when the group showed their costumes. In more energetic moments, Charlie's large plastic glasses were likely to pop right off his nose. Observing Charlie in the world of pretend pushed me to think more deeply about the power of moving imaginatively, as well as literally.

Charlie found a place for his Red Hulk identity in Jack's pretend world when it was time to rescue the Harp. Jack, Jill, and their brothers and sisters decided they needed to be quiet but brave when

Young children's bodies present challenges for teachers when they resist or refuse the confinement that comes with expectations . . . and the lengthy patience it takes for all of the children in a group to share an idea.

they returned to the castle. Charlie said he needed to wear his Red Hulk costume so that he would be strong. The siblings also needed to be prepared with a plan. They gathered imaginary axes from their father’s barn and rested them at the bottom of the beanstalk where they could find them quickly. They decided to tiptoe once they were in the castle and to hum to themselves if they were scared, as several children expressed.

Once costumed as Red Hulk, Charlie remained in character for the entire journey. Now that his body was released to move, he pumped his muscles, stomped his feet, and vocalized grunts of power. Figure 5 is a live-action shot just after the children rescued the harp and made the harrowing trip down the beanstalk with the giant in pursuit. Many children screamed as they raced back to the carpet, gathered in a circle, and scrambled down the beanstalk. They grabbed their waiting axes and chopped down the beanstalk just in time. Charlie’s body, with his back to the camera, is visible at the front of the image. His body’s position, with feet firmly rooted and hands clenched in fists, as well



Figure 5. Charlie used his imagined strength as the Red Hulk to chop down the beanstalk.

as the blur created as he twists, indicates the intensity of the moment, especially when one realizes that Charlie is chopping the beanstalk with his fists rather than an ax.

Charlie engaged just as enthusiastically in other scenes, such as when he played air guitar during a rock’n’roll rendition of “Twinkle, Twinkle” performed for Mr. Beano. Notably, during the party at the end of the story, Charlie taught the giant that

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

Understanding through Movement

These resources will help engage children and teachers in using their bodies to express meaning and understand stories more deeply.

1. memfox.com

Mem Fox, renowned for her award-winning children’s books, is also a wonderful resource for parents and teachers. On her website, look for the page called “For anyone interested: A read-aloud lesson” and take a listen to Mem at her best demonstrating read-aloud techniques that anyone can implement.

2. Landay, E., & Wootton, K. (2012). *A reason to read: Linking literacy and the arts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Educators will find practical and theoretically sound teaching strategies for children of all ages in this book that describes what the authors have learned from years of directing the ArtsLiteracy Project. The Performance Cycle offers strategies for integrating the arts and literacy throughout the curriculum. Attention is given to embodied learning throughout the book.

3. Cahnmann-Taylor, M., & Souto-Manning, M. (2010). *Teachers act up!: Creating multicultural learning communities through theatre*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Building on the rich foundation of theater and arts-based practices in the Theater of the Oppressed, *Teachers Act Up!* offers techniques, games, resources, and, most important, a rationale to help educators value and

being a good friend means, “Helping people when they are in trouble.”

Young children’s bodies present challenges for teachers when they resist or refuse the confinement that comes with expectations like “criss-cross applesauce” and the lengthy patience it takes for all of the children in a group to share an idea. School particularly fails the bodies of children like Charlie with demands to be quiet and still (Boldt, 2001)—even in early childhood spaces that claim to be “developmentally appropriate.” Tensions existed for Charlie’s teachers as they weighed their goal to be consistent with him about controlling the power of his Red Hulk body in everyday social and physical spaces of the classroom against the visible benefits of becoming the Red Hulk more appropriately in the world of pretend.

“The power and scope of drama is that it requires holding two worlds in mind simultaneously: children are wittingly involved in pretence and watching themselves at the same time, with awareness that it is not ‘for real’” (Peter, 2003, pp. 23–24). The world of pretend offered Charlie an imagined space in which using his body to make

meaning was welcomed. Such space holds promise for teachers like Christie and children like Charlie because it offers the means to learn to navigate the real world of the classroom more successfully.

The Power and Potential of Drama for Children with “Special Considerations”

The BAP teaching artists were never aware of individual students’ histories. Nor was I. (In fact, I still do not know about any formalized, school-sanctioned labels for Hillary, Iris, and Charlie—appropriate or otherwise.) When Heather and Mera entered a new classroom, they smiled with exuberance, looked children in the eyes, invited them to say their names, and were genuinely thrilled with all the ways they engaged. As a result, children participated variably, often exceeding the types of communication and participation that their teachers observed previous to the Jack residency. It was not uncommon for the classroom teachers to see the children in the photos, videos, or field notes and exclaim, “That is huge! I’ve never seen her/him do that before!”

engage in embodied theater practices that will support their professional development toward mediating socially just, multicultural classrooms.

4. Paley, V. G. (2009). *A child’s work: The importance of fantasy play*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
No one understands the importance of children’s play better than Vivian Paley, the consummate teacher-researcher who documented, thought about, and wrote about the play that occurred regularly in her kindergarten classroom. Look to *A Child’s Work* to begin to understand why play really is a child’s work and how children’s play affects their lives into adulthood.
5. <http://www.scholastic.com/parents/resources/article/creativity-play/importance-pretend-play>
Visit this Scholastic resource to learn why it’s important that children play and pretend. This is a wonderful, straightforward way to share these ideas with families, as well.
6. Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
Karen Wohlwend spent months documenting kindergarteners’ play, particularly as related to reading, writing, language, and design. In her first book (see references for others), she proposed a framework for play as a literacy practice that supports children’s learning and transforms relational identities.

*Children participated
variably, often exceeding
the types of communication
and participation that their
teachers observed previous to
the Jack residency.*

The Jack residency illustrates how process drama, as opposed to adult-directed performance or role play, “can productively disrupt the sense of classroom normality to create spaces where children can be viewed primarily as people using their strength in learning literacy practices, rather than as children with or without disabilities” (Edmiston, 2007, p. 338). In these imagined spaces, Edmiston continues, “all children can have equitable access to communication tools, not as people who too often may be considered ‘other’ than the norm, but as valued equal participants in a world where a person’s strengths, rather than any impairments, come to the fore” (p. 340).

Unfortunately, it just isn’t practical to tell all the stories about other children’s unique circumstances and literate bodies in the world of pretend. I can’t resist, however, expanding on the stories I’ve told about Hillary, Iris, and Charlie, with just a few more examples.

Jiang—a child who arrived at the ELC from China not yet knowing a word of English and who began as an onlooker from the block area. After three weeks, Jiang joined in wholeheartedly by taking an imaginary train into Jack’s world.

Brian—who rarely wanted to say his name and was one of the quietest children. In a final interview, Brian described with flair, “I felt brave when I went to see the giant in the castle because I wore armor and I was brave.”

Robbie—a 4-year-old at BCP who expressed himself with negligible verbal communication. Although his limited oral language meant he couldn’t answer with words, Robbie answered Mera’s question, “What did the giant do?” by stomping his feet and making the sounds of the giant with his whole body, indicating he fully understood the story.

A “developmentally appropriate” position portrays preschoolers as “extremely physical creatures—constantly moving, running, and jumping. They react joyfully to opportunities for dancing, creative movement, physical dramatic play, and being outdoors where they can move without constraint”

(Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, pp. 113–114). But the value of movement is more than developmentally appropriate in early childhood classrooms. The children in this study showed me that actively engaging children’s bodies in process drama, particularly through the communicative mode of movement, created for them an inclusive literate culture. Movement, couched in rituals that supported risk taking and as part of the world of pretend, invited children to *become* the story, as opposed to just listen to one, and when they did, they became someone new.

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