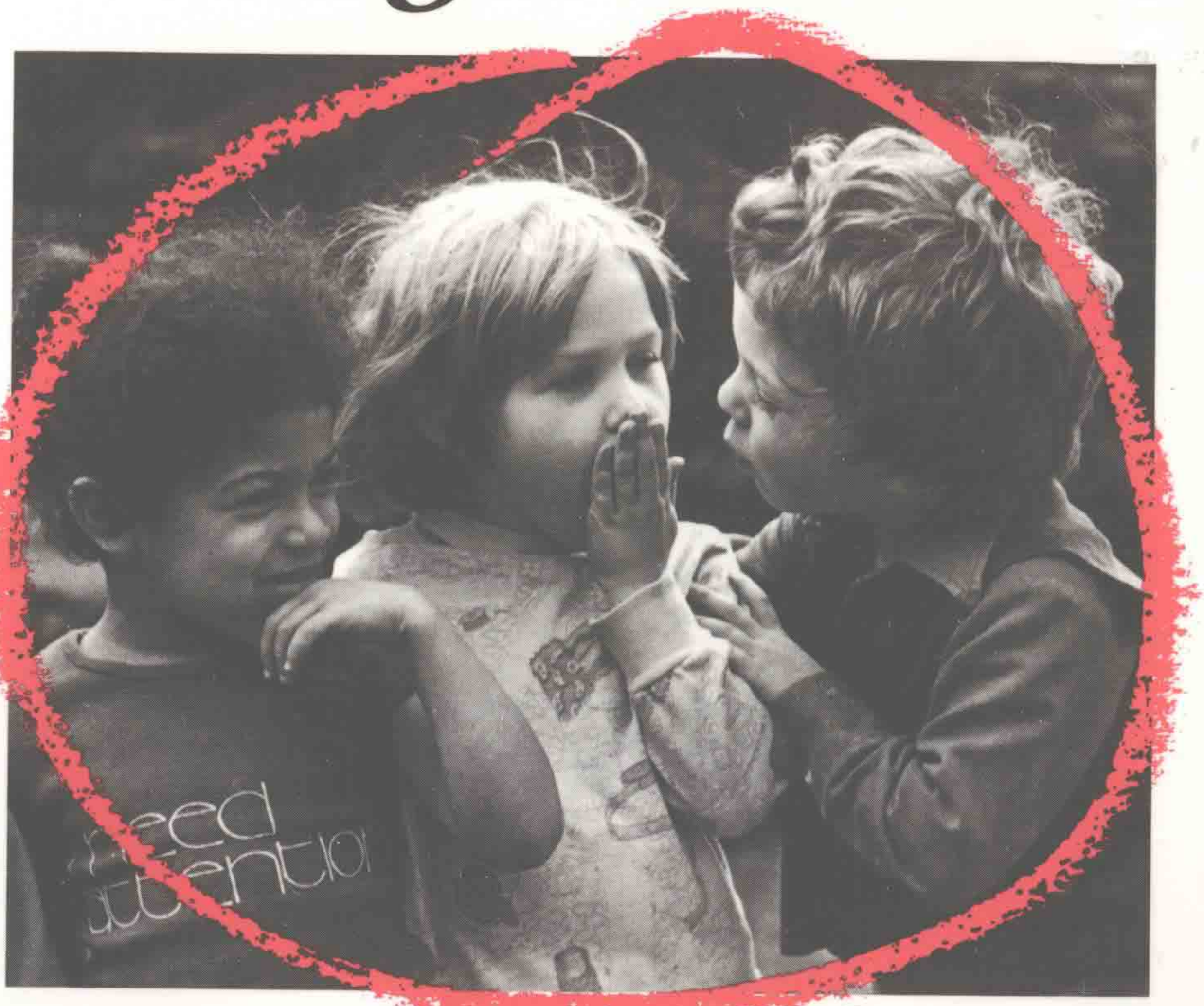
Wally's Stories



Conversations in the Kindergarten

VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

"A vivid and credible picture
of how five-year-olds think."

—D. J. Enright, *Times Literary Supplement*

WALLY'S STORIES

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For Irving, David, Bobby
and my mother
Yetta Meisel Gussin

Foreword

Courtney B. Cazden

This book doesn't need a long foreword. Vivian Paley is such a sensitive observer and writer that her kindergarten children speak delightfully and wisely for themselves. But hers is an unusual classroom, and *Wally's Stories* is about only one part of its life.

The "stories" are of several kinds. Some are made up by Wally and his classmates, some are picture books and fairy tales. All are read, reread, and acted out again and again. Others are five-year-old discussions of very serious topics—like whether stones melt when they are boiled. When you are five, there is much in the world that needs to be accounted for, and these accounts are "stories" to us adults when children prefer their magical explanations to those we call "true."

Teachers are usually counseled to respond to such stories with some version of what might be called "confrontation pedagogy": rub the children's minds in the errors of their thoughts by providing arguments against their inconsistencies and evidence that magic doesn't work. Although that advice seems plausible, there is reason to believe that this approach is more comforting to the adult than helpful to the child.

Language—the aspect of child development I know best—is a case in point. There are times during all children's preschool years when their advancing knowledge of language as

a rule-governed system produces words like *goed* and *holded,* and (in answer to the question, "What are you doing?") utterances like "I doing dancing." At those moments, the child seems impervious to contradiction, and no amount of adult correction has any obvious effect.

As with language, so too in the classroom. Instead of confrontation, it may be more useful for teachers to go beyond their own adult egocentricity and explore the ideas that flow from the children's own premises. That is what Paley has done, with rich gains in language and behavior in this five-year-old community. And that is the part of its life that *Wally's Stories* is about. Between the lines of the revealing, sometimes poignant episodes, one catches glimpses of the teacher's complex role—supporting the children in their imagined worlds and providing firm anchor points to a more stable "reality" as well.

Prologue

Imagine an enormous turnip in a row of ordinary turnips. Grandfather tries but fails to pull it up. Grandmother comes to help, but together they cannot do it. First a grandchild and then a black cat join the others, but the turnip stays firm. Only when a brown mouse adds his effort does it come up.

How can a tiny mouse make such a difference? Common sense insists that the turnip is ready to come up, and the mouse only appears to make the big difference. But in a kindergarten classroom the appearance is as good as the deed.

No—better than the deed. When a magical idea is presented, the common-sense approach is looked at but then discarded. Hear five-year-olds who have just entered kindergarten as they discuss *The Tale of the Turnip.*

Teacher: Why did the turnip come up when the little brown mouse pulled?

Warren: Because the grandfather and grandmother couldn't pull it up.

Teacher: They couldn't. You're right. Then the mouse helped and it came up. Why?

Warren: He was stronger.

Deana: If all of them pulled, the enormous turnip *would* come up.

Wally: That was only the strength they needed.
Eddie: If just some pulled it wouldn't. But they needed all to pull.
Wally: Maybe the mouse lived down there.
Jill: Under the turnip? Is that where he lives at night?
Wally: Maybe he pushed it up when it was coming out.
Jill: Maybe he was stronger than they were.
Eddie: Animals could be stronger than people.
Deana: Maybe the roots got stuck to the bottom of the ground and when the mouse came he could pull the roots up.
Fred: If the cat and mouse pulled theirselves it comes up.
Teacher: Why?
Fred: They're stronger. But if the roots stuck they might need help.
Wally: Maybe someone was inside the dirt and he saw the roots and he pulled it so they couldn't pull the turnip.
Tanya: If the mouse pulled it up by himself it would work.
Wally: What if two people were underneath pulling?
Teacher: How would they happen to be under the ground?
Eddie: They dug a hole.
Tanya: But the mouse has the most power. Right? (*Everyone agrees.*)

The mouse's size is not important. A mouse can push up a huge turnip because the child can see him do it in his mind. The child can also see the other story characters pulling on

the turnip, but he would rather think about the mouse. Fine. Unless you are a teacher determined to teach the concepts that are in *your* mind. How does one approach a lesson on the wheel, for example, when children prefer to believe that it is easier to move an entire basket of wood than to move a small piece?

Teacher: Watch me try to move this heavy basket. Uh . . . this is really heavy. I'm getting out of breath.

Eddie: I can do it easy. (*Straining and tugging, he moves it an inch.*) I can do it easy.

Teacher: You did get red in the face. Does anyone think that looked so easy?

Everyone: Yes.

Teacher: Okay. Look, here's the problem. Can anyone figure out an easy way to move the basket over to the woodbench?

Deana: With my feet. (*She pushes her feet against the basket but it does not move.*) These are the wrong shoes. I can do it easy with my other shoes.

Wally: I can pick it up. (*He winces as he scrapes his nails on the rough wood but lifts part of the basket perhaps half an inch.*) There! That was easy.

Teacher: Wally, could you bring me a piece of wood from the woodbox? (*He runs over and returns with a small piece.*) Was that easy or hard?

Wally: Easy.

Teacher: If *that* was easy, would you say moving the basket is easy or hard?

Wally: Easy. Real easy. I could do it with my head too. You want to see?

Months will pass before we "invent" the wheel. Meanwhile there are other questions: Can Wally become a mother lion? Who stole the lima beans that did not come up? Can a witch be invisible? Is there a black Santa? Does Tanya have the right to disturb the Ella Jenkins record? This is high drama in the kindergarten. The children care enough about these subjects to tell us what they really think. My purpose is to uncover and describe this remarkable point of view.

Wally: People don't feel the same as grown-ups.
Teacher: Do you mean "Children don't"?
Wally: Because grown-ups don't remember when they were little. They're already an old person. Only if you have a picture of you doing that. Then you could remember.
Eddie: But not thinking.
Wally: You never can take a picture of thinking. Of course not.

You can, however, write a book about thinking—by recording the conversations, stories, and playacting that take place as events and problems are encountered. A wide variety of thinking emerges, as morality, science, and society share the stage with fantasy. If magical thinking seems most conspicuous, it is because it is the common footpath from which new trails are explored. I have learned not to resist this magic but to seek it out as a legitimate part of "real" school.

Wally's Stories follows a group of five-year-olds through their kindergarten year. The scene is the classroom, and the teacher is the stage manager (additional stage directions are

in the appendix). The children are scriptwriters and actors who know what kindergartners want to say.

Wally

"He did that on purpose! You knocked my tower down on purpose!" Fred grabs Wally's leg and begins to cry.

Wally pushes Fred away. "I'm a dinosaur. I'm smashing the city."

"You didn't ask me. You have to ask." The tears have stopped.

"Dinosaurs don't ask."

I swoop down, dinosaurlike, and order Wally to the time-out chair. This will give me a ten-minute respite from his fantasies. His quick smile that is a silent laugh and his laugh that is a lion's roar are gone. He stares past me at the window, hunched over on the chair. Wally has come to our school after two and a half years in a day-care center. Nothing in the school report suggests the scope of his imagination. It is a customary "bad boy" report: restless, hyperative, noisy, uncooperative. Tonight the children will give their mothers a similar description: there's a boy Wally who growls like a lion; the teacher yells at him but not at me.

"Are you being bad, Wally?" asks Rose. Rose is from the same day-care center as Wally, and she once told me that he got spanked there every day.

"Were you bad, Wally?" she asks again.
"I was a dinosaur."
"Oh."
Wally cannot understand why I don't admire him when he is a dinosaur. Before he goes home he'll ask me if he was good. He has to tell his mother, and he is never sure. The time-out chair is not connected to his perception of events.

"Was I good today?" he asks. I am tying his shoes at the top of the outside steps.

"You were okay except for the playground."
"What did I do?"
"You knocked down that first-grade boy."
"The black boy? Jason? We were superheroes."
"You were too rough."
"He's still my friend."

Fred is still his friend, too. As Wally changes from dinosaur to superhero to lion, Fred keeps an eye on him. He examines Wally's behavior and then watches my reaction. Wally, however, never watches me. He seldom takes his cues from adults, bringing forth his own script for being a five-year-old. He is never bored, except when he's on the time-out chair, and even then his head dances with images and stories.

"Whoever sits in the time-out chair will die for six years until the magic spell is broken," he says one day after a session on the chair.

"They turn into a chair," Eddie decides, "and then God breaks the spell."

"Not God," corrects Wally. "God is for harder things."
"Fairies could do it," says Lisa. "Not the tooth kind."
"It *is* a fairy," Wally agrees. "The one for magic spells."

The children like Wally's explanations for events better than mine, so I give fewer and fewer interpretations each day

and instead listen to Wally's. The familiar chord he strikes stimulates others to speak with candor, and I am the beneficiary. However, Wally does not always teach me what I want to learn. He is a lightning rod, attracting the teacher's negative sparks, keeping them from landing on others. It is a role that receives little credit.

"You're riding too fast, Wally," I caution.

"Okay."

"Don't crash into the wall."

"Okay."

"Do *not* slam into things, Wally!"

"I didn't see it."

When I begin to play the piano, he leaps over Lisa and Rose to get to the piano first, but before the song is finished he is on the outer edge of the rug, growling.

"Don't make that noise, Wally," I say.

"It's a warning growl."

"Not at piano time."

"I'm guarding the lions," he whispers. "The growl means I hear a suspicious noise." The children stop squirming and watch Wally as he crouches in concentration. Several boys copy his pose and give low growls.

One day at lunch Wally says, "I'm going to be a mother lion when I grow up."

"A mother lion?" I ask. "Can you become a mother lion?"

"Sure. The library has everything. Even magic. When I'm eight I can learn magic. That's how."

"Why a mother lion?"

"Because I would have babies and do the mommy work. They stay home and take care of babies. Daddy lions go to work and have to walk fast."

Deana has been listening. "People can't turn into animals."

"That's true," Wally says.

"You changed your mind, Wally?" I ask.

"It *is* true, what she said. But I'm going to use magic."

"Oh, I didn't hear him say that." Deana leans forward. "If he uses magic he might. Maybe. It's very hard to do."

Fred joins in. "I might become a daddy crocodile. Every time a person tries to kill them they can swat at their guns."

"Fred," I ask, "do you believe Wally can become a mother lion?"

"No. Only if he practices very hard."

Eddie and Lisa are in the doll corner when I bring up the subject. "Wally has decided to become a lion when he grows up." They look up and laugh hesitantly. "He intends to learn magic," I add.

"Oh, that way," says Eddie. "It depends how hard he studies. That's the hardest thing to do."

"It's impossible," Lisa argues. "You can't turn into a lion. That's too big. Maybe a mouse or a cat." She pauses. "But he can dress up to look like a lion."

I turn to Earl. "Do you suppose a boy could become a mother?"

"He can put on a dress and a wig," Earl answers.

"And a mask," says Lisa.

"How about a lion? Can Wally become a lion?"

"No," answers Earl. "He has to be a huge man with sideburns."

"What if he uses magic?"

"Oh, I thought you meant ordinary. He could do it with magic," says Earl.

"But it *would* be very hard," says Lisa.

The next day I ask Andy, "Do you think it's interesting to be a father?"

"Sure. If a robber comes, the father punches him in the nose."

"Wally wants to become a lion, Andy. What do you think?"

Andy is quiet for a moment. "He can't. Unless he becomes an actress. Or he can wish for it, and if God wants you to become that then you can do it. Wait. I'm not too sure about lions. I know he could become a smaller thing. But he could dress up like a lion."

"Would he *be* a lion if he dressed up like a lion?"

"I mean just until he learns to do that trick."

Wally frowns and squirms beside me on the playground bench. A hot flush gives his brown skin a reddish tone. His black curly hair is coated with sand, sweat, and dirt.

"You get into fights out here every day," I say. "You keep making me punish you."

"I don't care," he shrugs.

"I know you care. You'd rather be running around."

"I don't care."

Later he dictates a story.

> Once upon a time there was a little lion and he lived alone because his mother and father was dead and one day he went hunting and he saw two lions and they were his mother and father so he took his blanket to their den because it was bigger.

"But weren't the mother and father dead?" I ask. He has a quick answer. "They came alive again because he only thought they were dead. They really went out shopping and he didn't recognize them because they were wearing different clothes."

"Can I be the father in your story?" Fred asks. We usually acted out stories as soon as they were written and books as soon as they were read.

"Okay," says Wally. "Fred will be the father, Rose is the mother, I'm the little brother, and Eddie is the magician."

"There's no magician in your story," I remind Wally, who doesn't read yet.

"Yes, there is. I just didn't tell you about him."

A few days later a first-grade teacher complains about Wally.

"This is embarrassing," I tell Wally and the whole class. "I don't know what else to do about you, Wally."

"Just keep reminding him," says Lisa.

"But I continually warn him," I tell her.

"Remind him nicely."

"Lisa, he made you cry today."

"Keep telling Wally not to be rough," she says.

Eddie agrees. "Say to him, 'Be good, Wally, will you?' "

I turn to Wally. "Your classmates don't want you to be punished."

He smiles shyly. "That's because we're friends."

Stories

"Once there was a man and a mother and two sisters and a brother."

We are acting out Wally's newest story. He dictates three or four a week, never repeating a plot.

Story dictation had been a minor activity in my previous

kindergartens, even though books and dramatics had been high-priority activities. Few children chose to tell a story if they could do something else instead. For years I accepted the "fact" that no more than four or five children out of twenty-five enjoyed dictating stories, and most often they were girls.

I had asked last year's class about this.

Teacher: Why do girls choose story dictating more than boys?
Sam: Boys like to do Star Wars things—stuff like that. Girls like writing and listening to the teacher.
Robbie: Boys like blocks and woodwork and superheroes.
Tom: And guns and cars and tough things.
Sandy: I was making a motorcycle. That's why I didn't come.
Della: They think it's dull, sitting and coloring and telling things. Boys are rougher.
Teacher: But boys like to listen to stories and act them out. Then why not dictate stories?
Robbie: It's very hard to explain. I'm storing up energy because I have a cold. So I don't want to use up my energy writing stories.

The first time I asked Wally if he wanted to write a story he looked suprised. "You didn't teach me how to write yet," he said.

"You just tell *me* the story, Wally. I'll write the words."

"What should I tell about?"

"You like dinosaurs. You could tell about dinosaurs."