



a child's work

the IMPORTANCE of FANTASY PLAY

vivian gussin paley



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SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE BOOK REVIEW

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

White Teacher

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FOR MY FRIEND

Gillian Dowley McNamee



God created Man
because He loves stories.

ELIE WIESEL



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one young children

The first time I heard that “play is the work of children” was in 1949 from Rena Wilson, director of the Newcomb Nursery School in New Orleans. She was describing her “Introduction to Young Children” course at Sophie Newcomb College.

As a newly arrived senior in the college, I was completing the undergraduate studies I had interrupted by getting married and moving to New Orleans. I hadn’t yet decided to become a teacher but it seemed a good idea to learn something about little children, and Miss Wilson promised us a view into the very heart of early childhood.

After the children went home, our class sat on the child-sized chairs in the nursery school, our minds still puzzling over what we had observed there earlier in the day. Miss Wilson had told us, “You are watching the only age group in school that is always busy making up its own work assignments. It looks and sounds like play, yet we properly call this play the work of children. Why? That is what you are here to find out.”

None of us thought the task was easy. As soon as we

began to record one set of events, our subjects were off pretending something else, giving each other information and clues we often could not decipher. But we collected anecdotes, samples of conversation, sketches of block constructions, and drippy paintings and tried to see what the children were learning. What we couldn't capture was the intensity and intentionality that accompanied everything the children said and did—until Miss Wilson gently persuaded us to add our imagination to the mix.

“Pretend *you* are the children who are playing,” she said. “What are you trying to accomplish and what stands in your way? Act out what you’ve seen and fill in the blanks. Remind yourselves of what it was like to be a child.”

In time we discovered that play was indeed work. First there was the business of deciding who to be and who the others must be and what the environment is to look like and when it is time to change the scene. Then there was the even bigger problem of getting others to listen to *you* and accept *your* point of view while keeping the integrity of the make-believe, the commitment of the other players, and perhaps the loyalty of a best friend. Oddly enough, the hardest part of the play for us to reproduce or invent were the fantasies themselves. Ours were never as convincing or interesting as the children's; it took us a great deal of practice to do what was, well, child's play in the nursery.

More than fifty years have passed since Rena Wilson led her children and their teachers plus several generations of college students in the daily celebration of play. What would she make of today's revision of priorities in our nation's early childhood centers and kindergartens,

where lessons have begun to replace play as the centerpiece of community life?

“Is it possible,” she might ask, “that *work* is now the play of children? No, this will never do. We must begin again, to watch and listen to the children. We have forgotten what it is like to be a child.”

We will need to go beyond watching, listening, and remembering, however, if our children are to be revealed as the same original thinkers and actors they were in Rena Wilson’s day. In documenting and dramatizing their language, lore, and literary strivings, my purpose is to examine their curriculum in its natural form, much as they study one another through the medium of their play.

If my narrative travels back and forth between generations, it is because this fantasy play remains amazingly constant. The children you will meet in Nisha Ruparel-Sen’s kindergarten are little different from those I taught in the same school thirty years earlier. They and all the others whose play and stories inform these pages continue to be the most innovative researchers I know in answering Miss Wilson’s question: Why do we call play the work of young children?

Furthermore, why not call play the work of teachers as well? If, as Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, informs us, children rise above their average behavior in play, let us pursue the ways in which their teachers might follow them up the ladder, starting at the first rung, which, as every child knows, is fantasy play.

two

the language of play

There was a time when play was king and early childhood was its domain. Fantasy was practiced leisurely and openly in a language unique to the kingdom. It is still spoken in Mrs. Ruparel-Sen's kindergarten.

"Ahzz! Water, water! Pretend we are walking in Egypt and there's no water but we see a big river."

"Gulp, gulp, gulp, come on, drink it!"

"No, I'm drowning. Help, help! Wait, there's a huge bullfrog jumping. Higher than the World Trade Center! He can't stay alive. There's no bugs to eat there any more. Hey, what's going on!"

"It's exploding! Jump away, hurry. Jump in the river. The bullfrog is on fire. Come on, we gotta swim fast. Get away from the fire. Swim faster! Whew! I saved you!"

The children swimming to safety, away from the exploding bullfrog, have begun a conversation about the World Trade Center tragedy.

Vijay, from India, is newly arrived in Mrs. Ruparel-Sen's class. He has not yet begun to play with other children, but he listens to their fantasy play in the blocks,

murmuring to the toy airplane he circles around himself at the edge of the block area.

"Hey, you wanna bomb us?" asks the blond boy who is rebuilding the tower of blocks that has just exploded. It seems a gracious invitation but Vijay shakes his head, not ready to take direct action. There is another way in this classroom to enter the culture of the community and the world of childhood. He sits down at the story table.

"I have a story," Vijay says softly, surprising his teacher, who sits at a table writing down the stories children dictate to her. This is the first time Vijay has offered to tell a story without her encouragement. His story has no other outlet at school since he did not tell it to the tower builder in the blocks. He might have waited until he got home but perhaps there would be no one there ready to listen. Clearly he could not wait; his story must be told now and the words tumble out.

"This was a plane," he begins. "Then it went to O'Hare and it picked up my grandpa last year. And my grandma was at Madras and then she went to India and we went to the Westin Hotel building. And the plane crashed into O'Hare. And into the Westin tall building. And then they fixed the plane and they had to fix all the people. And they were going home. But they couldn't fix the building. It was on fire."

Mrs. Ruparel-Sen gives Vijay a solemn look. "Who will you be when we act out your story?" she asks. In this class the dictated story is but a half-told tale. To fulfill its destiny it is dramatized on a pretend stage with the help of classmates as actors and audience and the teacher as narrator and director.

"The airplane," Vijay says, rolling his toy back and forth

on the table. He waits a moment, then adds, "Do you know what Vijay means? It means victory."

"Vijay means victory? I'm glad you told me that." Mrs. Ruparel-Sen needs more information. "Will we see the plane being fixed? And the people too?"

"Yes," Vijay says. "How do you say the fixers?"

"Mechanics?" the teacher suggests.

He nods. "And a doctor for the people. And the ambulance. And the firemen too. But not a loud noise."

Mrs. Ruparel-Sen writes down the additional directions. "Victory," she repeats. "When the people go home in your story, it's another victory."

Kostos has been moving a tiny superhero figure next to Vijay's paper. "You need T-Rex in your story?" he asks. "He's a victory too, I'm pretty sure." Vijay shakes his head but the boys stare silently at the doll that has the power of a dinosaur.

Kostos knows Vijay's subject matter. He is from Greece and, like Vijay, has many relatives who fly to America frequently and stay in tall hotels. Kostos is better able to place a fictional character between himself and the crash, perhaps because he has more practice in the doll corner and block areas, where questions and explanations are worked out dramatically every day.

When it is his turn to dictate a story, Kostos picks up his classmate's theme, as though they are having a conversation. "Once a airplane was going too fast with people in it. Then T-Rex came. He jumped up and down and the airplane crashed into him but he is much stronger. Then the people jump out on T-Rex's head. And he shakes the people off into the water because they can swim fast. Then

they fall asleep and their jackets are pillows.”

Props are seldom used in Mrs. Ruparel-Sen’s class when stories are acted out but when the T-Rex story is dramatized, the children performing in it run to get their jackets, which they fold carefully into pillows. It is a moment of theater when words are unnecessary. A conversation has begun about the events of September 11th that will weave through the children’s stories and fantasy play. Grownups may speak often of that terrible time and there will be repeated reports and replays on television, but the children must be able to imagine themselves swimming to safety and using their jackets as pillows.

For the next several days, the children reenact aspects of Vijay’s and Kostos’s stories. Whatever the plot, there is a plane crash and the children bring their jackets. By the following week, Vijay is now the grandfather in the doll corner, with thoughts of plane crashes set aside.

What an astonishing invention is this activity we call fantasy play. Are we really willing to let it disappear from our preschools and kindergartens? “I’m not inclined to encourage fantasy play any more if my teachers can’t handle it,” a preschool director admitted recently. “If the teachers are worried about what’s coming out, especially with the fours and fives, everyone is better off if we stick to lesson plans and projects.”

“Has the play changed that much?” I asked.

“The teachers think so. Maybe it’s the increased tension since 9/11. Children do seem less prepared, more at risk. We’re on safer ground with a somewhat academic curriculum. It’s more dependable.”