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Visiting 'Storyland'

by *Patrice Baldwin*

Young children naturally role play in imagined worlds. They take on the roles of characters in the stories that they have heard and those from programmes and films they have watched. They re-enact familiar stories; they sometimes change them and they also create their own stories. They will take on the roles of familiar characters and can actively create and develop characters too. They often role-play alone but sometimes interact dramatically with imaginary companions and they will use their dolls and other toys, as other characters. They role-play interactively with other children and sometimes with empathetic adults in role. The roots of 'Drama for Learning' and theatre are found in dramatic play.

Most children have been role-playing real life experiences and stories in imagined worlds for years before they start school. They are naturally motivated to role-play, as they find it enjoyable and rewarding. Children's brains want them to process stories and their lived experiences, to literally re-member them, to re-enact and explore them, to practise real skills and learn memorably through imagined experiences.

There will of course be some children who arrive in school with far more knowledge and experience of stories than others. However, going with their teacher and other children to Storyland gives all children a supported opportunity to actively explore and make stories together, to think and problem solve together to talk in role, to meet characters and situations and to create new stories.



What might we find in Storyland?

Even if children have never been with their teacher to Storyland before, most will still have some ideas about what will be there. Before going to Storyland for the first time with their class, teachers need to spend some time asking the children what they expect to find there. No class should arrive in Storyland with no expectations and teachers should not impose their own idea of Storyland on the children. Storyland is collaboratively created and the children will help create it and feel they co-own it. The teacher can add some ideas too and will be going to Storyland with them.

The teacher might say,

Today, we are all going to go to Storyland. I think some of you have been there before. Some of you might never have been before but you will probably have heard a bit about Storyland. I expect that you will all have some ideas about what we might find when we get there.

At this point, the ideas usually start flowing and the teacher encouragingly accepts all ideas. When any child offers a valid suggestion, the teacher should accept it and then just ask for a bit more information, for example:

CHILD: There is a castle in Storyland

TEACHER: Yes, I have heard that too. Do you know anything about the castle?

CHILD: A princess lives there.

TEACHER: Do you know anything about the princess?

CHILD: Yes, she has got lots of lovely dresses and she likes dancing.

The teacher then puts a large sheet of paper and some felt tip pens in the centre of a class circle and invites the children to draw their idea onto the map of Storyland. They or the teacher, can also label it. A map is a visual organiser that can be displayed and then referred to whenever a class is about to go to Storyland or has returned from it.

Talking with the children first about Storyland helps build up some shared expectations about it and will particularly help children who have fewer imaginative

ideas of their own. The children are not going to be constrained by the map. Once they get to Storyland and start exploring it together, they will start letting their imaginations take them beyond what is on the map. They can then be invited to add new things to the map on their return.

The teacher is a co-participant and can also add things to the map, (with specific learning intentions in mind), for example:

- a. A Word Well:** This well gives you different sorts of words, depending on which bucket you use, e.g. rhyming words, adjectives, verbs, and so on.
- b. Phoneme Forest:** Each tree has different leaves that make distinct sounds as they fall. Sometimes leaves land next to each other and make new sounds and sometimes, words.
- c. Story Shells:** Some shells will tell you stories if you hold them to your ear. Or, you can tell stories to shells and they will keep your stories for you, so that you can hear them again later.
- d. Story Stepping Stones:** You can use these stones to get across the river. Every time you step on a story stone though, you have to say aloud the next sentence of your story.

Storyland has three areas

It helps to establish three distinct areas in Storyland, so that the children are clear about which area they are visiting each time.

- **Area 1:** This is where you will arrive in Storyland, if you want to re-enact or explore 'the stories that we already know'. You might even take a copy of a story with you, if you want to be sure to arrive inside that particular story together. In Area 1, you can expect to meet known characters from existing stories and to re-enact and elaborate upon known stories.
- **Area 2:** This is where you can go together, to discover and take part in 'the stories that have not been made YET'. You won't meet any characters you know here but you might meet some new characters and you can creatively improvise new stories together here. This area adds a level of creative challenge and expectation. It helps move children on from just re-enacting the stories they know and meeting and being, the characters that they are already familiar with.
- **Area 3:** Beware! Area 3 is a pitch-black area, (you enter it with your eyes closed). Here, you can only hear sounds from stories, for example: creaking doors, footsteps, clanking keys, and so on. You can link the sounds to make stories, or you might hear words, phrases, story openings and sometimes even whole sentences, coming through the darkness there, for example: 'Suddenly', 'Unfortunately', 'Unexpectedly', 'Finally', 'In a faraway land...' 'Once upon a time...' and so on.



■ Primary Visiting Storyland

Some published children's stories and picture books are about well-known story characters, wandering in and out of other stories. Once the difference between the Storyland areas is clearly understood, the teacher might sometimes allow (or become) a well-known story character who has strayed across the boundaries. However, it helps to start with the boundaries in place first, as this enables teachers to move children's thinking beyond the stories and characters they already know.

If the teacher wants the children to create and experience original stories, then it helps to let the children know that they will be arriving, 'Where the new stories are being made', that is, Area 2. If the teacher wants the children to explore a known story, for example, *Hansel and Gretel*, then the teacher will take the class to, 'Where the stories have already been made', i.e. Area 1. If the teacher wants to explore a picture book through drama, then they can say that they take the book with them to Storyland, they will end up inside that story.

How do we travel to Storyland?

The teacher stands with the children in a circle and then asks the children whether any of them know how to get to Storyland, for example:

TEACHER: 'I know there are three things that we all need to do together, to get us all to Storyland. I can't remember what the three things are. Does anyone know what we need to do? I do know we have to have our eyes closed when we arrive.'

The teacher listens to the children's suggestions and then links two of three of them together, to create a short ritual, for example:

TEACHER: We turn around three times, jump in the air, close our eyes and say, 'Take me to Storyland'.

The teacher practises the ritual with the children once and then they all do it again. 'for real', so they can arrive. The children all need to keep their eyes closed when they arrive, until the teacher calls out, 'We've arrived!' They can then open their eyes and they will have arrived together!

What happens after we arrive?

As soon as they open their eyes, the teacher needs to immediately draw their attention to something that they are expecting to see there, for example, 'Look! There's the castle where the princess lives. I wonder whether she would be willing to meet us today?' The teacher then asks the to face outwards from the circle and talk with the child next to them about what they both can see. Doing this, deepens their engagement with the shared, imagined setting.

Eavesdropping: Pairs of children will have been talking together about what they can see and eavesdropping (overheard conversations) provides a way of sharing some snippets of everyone's dialogue. The teacher explains that everyone should remain still and silent now, until the teacher passes by. When the teacher passes by any pair, they carry on talking about what they can see until the teacher has passed by. Once the teacher has passed by, they freeze again.

Improvisation in role (with a partner): The teacher then tells them that they can go off and explore Storyland with their partner. However, if they hear a particular sound (maybe rhythmic hand clapping), then it will be the signal for them to come back to stand in the circle.

Controlled movement: The air in Storyland is very unusual. The children need to know that they can only move slowly through it! They can't run or rush through Storyland. So, when they hear your signal to return to the circle, they will need to return in slow motion.

Let them go off and explore Storyland with their partner. After a few minutes, use the signal to bring them slowly back to the circle. Then, ask if there is anything particularly interesting or important that anyone wants everyone else to know about. This gives everyone a brief opportunity to share something from their imagined experiences so far. Maybe they have met some characters in Storyland or come across something unexpected or maybe there is something they need to warn others about. By sharing their ideas and experiences so far, they will be feeding each other's imaginations and opening up further possibilities for their classmates in Storyland.

Now, let them go off again and explore further for a few minutes, before calling them back a second time. You might now 'up the stakes' by introducing a problem for them to deal with. Maybe someone in Storyland needs their help. You could engage with them now through Teacher in Role and become that character with a problem. The character you decide to play and/or the problem you ask them to solve, might have originated in one of their improvisations or you might introduce an idea of your own now. These are some Teacher in Role examples you might find useful.



The teacher might become, for example:

- An elderly resident of Storyland who is now partially sighted and wants the children to describe to her, what Storyland looks like nowadays;
- An inept engineer in Storyland who needs their help and instructions, to mend the rickety bridge;
- A suspicious resident who does not want or trust visitors and asks them to explain why they have come and what they have been up to;
- A café owner who has customers with various requirements and who needs their help to create suitable menus for various customers, (see the Teachers' TV programme in which KS1 children go to Storyland, to help the teacher who is in role as Chef Jeff.

How will we get back from Storyland?

Eventually, it will be time to leave Storyland. The teacher can ask the children if they know how to get back from Storyland (maybe with the teacher pretending that he/she can't remember). Again, a short ritual can be put together, using the children's suggestions. Often they naturally suggest that they repeat or reverse the ritual that brought them to Storyland.

After the lesson

Once they return from Storyland, the children could:

- Recount their Storyland adventure to someone who was not their partner;
- Draw some scenes from their visit, (chronologically sequenced) to make a Storyboard;
- Send individual or joint letters, notes and messages to characters they met in Storyland. The teacher can then write any replies;
- Add further information to the class map of Storyland. ■



Patrice Baldwin was Chair of National Drama for more than a decade (until 2014) and was President of the International Drama Theatre and Education Association (2010-13). She has been a keynote speaker and workshop leader at conferences in more than 30 countries. Patrice was a Primary Headteacher, local authority School Improvement Partner, Curriculum Arts Adviser, Ofsted Inspector, BBC Education Drama series consultant and scriptwriter and is a published author of many books on Drama for Learning. She also created and internationally directed, 'Drama for Learning and Creativity' (D4LC), a flagship research-based initiative that successfully used drama to achieve school improvement.

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