

Evaluation Report: Executive Summary of MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting Based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley

*Professor Teresa Cremin
Professor Joan Swann
Dr Rosie Flewitt
Dr Dorothy Faulkner
Ms Natalia Kucirkova*



The Open University

A letter from Vivian Gussin Paley in response the evaluation

Dear Trish,

As I study the Open University evaluation of MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique I am delighted to discover a superbly expanded vision of what began in my own classroom more than 30 years ago.

I've had the pleasure on several occasions to observe you at work in London classrooms as well as in my own Chicago Kindergarten. However in the carefully recorded detail of this new evaluation I am able to appreciate even better the flowering of the MakeBelieve Arts garden of themes, talents and even new insights into the mind of the child and the core of their classroom lives.

Amazingly all roads lead to a most significant characteristic; children quite naturally place their thoughts and actions into story form. Furthermore they are compelled to act out these stories as if on a stage.

Trish, you and your acting company have been bringing the genius of the theatre into every learning opportunity between teacher and child. In helping teachers and children become their own acting companies, the Helicopter Technique creates easily accessible models of linguistic and social cohesion. The evaluation has a name for this: 'We Together.' Is its mantra, and I can't suggest a better one.

We are not surprised by the eager participation and creativity of the children. An activity that uses their own stories as a vehicle for learning makes good sense to children and adults alike. But what the evaluation makes equally clear is the pathway opened to our teachers and parents when they begin to see themselves as scribes, stage directors and co-storytellers.

'We Together' embark upon an open-ended adventure in community building and language acquisition.

'We Together' learn how to listen to one another and take part in each other's stories.

How especially wonderful it must be for those children who have difficulty in expressing themselves to see suddenly that the stage belongs to them as well as to their more fluent classmates.

To you, and the entire MakeBelieve Arts crew I say Congratulations for a job well done. May you lead your helicopter on many more stages. There are countless stories waiting to be told and you have the ability to make it all happen.

With my best wishes for your continued success.

Vivian Gussin Paley

MakeBelieve Arts, a theatre and education company, have for over a decade worked with Vivian Gussin Paley's (1990) Storytelling and Story Acting curriculum, and have developed a programme of professional development based upon this approach. This has come to be known as the Helicopter Technique. In essence, Paley's storytelling and story-acting technique involves children telling their stories to an adult who scribes them verbatim. Later the same day, the tales are acted out with their peers on a taped out stage in the classroom. Despite widespread scholarly recognition of Paley's perceptive accounts of child play, there has been relatively little research investigating her storytelling and story acting technique and arguably few practitioners in the UK are acquainted with it.

In early 2012, MakeBelieve Arts commissioned an evaluation of the Helicopter Technique (funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation) in order to consider the history of their development of the technique and to provide empirical evidence of its value to children and early years practitioners. The tender also involved consideration of possible developments of the approach in order to make it more sustainable in schools and early years settings.

This study of the Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting, undertaken in 2012, aimed to evaluate:

- The impact on children who have taken part in storytelling and story acting sessions.
- The impact on practitioners who have received training from MakeBelieve Arts in this technique.
- The importance of this work in order to provide indicators of:
 - How the model can be further improved and enhanced
 - How it can be made more sustainable in schools and settings



The evaluation process: data collection and analysis

The work combined evaluation with research and, explicitly underpinned by a strong theoretical frame, drew on a range of complementary evidence, including desk research in the form of an examination of the MakeBelieve Arts archive of practitioner evaluations and observational accounts and evaluations written by the MakeBelieve Arts team. In addition, this aspect of the work included interviews with practitioners and local authority advisers many of whom had been working with the approach for many years in conjunction with MakeBelieve Arts, as well as interviews with members of the company's team.

Significantly, the work also involved a classroom based empirical phase, which encompassed observation and documentation of an eight week MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Technique programme in four contrasting early years settings. These comprised reception and nursery classes in schools in two Inner-London boroughs; and a reception class in a school in a semi-rural area in the south of England, with a class from one of its feeder nurseries. This was undertaken in the summer term of 2012, with follow up interviews with the practitioners involved in the autumn term of 2012. The programme encompassed training prior to the work in classrooms, then regular in-class coaching by members of the MakeBelieve Arts team, as well as weeks when the practitioners ran the Helicopter Technique independently.

A wide range of data collection methods were employed including:

- Desk analysis of documentary evidence from the MakeBelieve Arts Archive, including practitioner feedback and evaluation, observational accounts and in-house evaluations
- Interviews (transcribed) with members of the MakeBelieve Arts team, local authority advisers and practitioners who had run the programme, as well as personal communication with Paley, the originator of the approach
- Observational field notes made at the training sessions and in the classroom sessions
- Semi-structured interviews (transcribed) with the six practitioners from the four settings (pre programme, towards the end of the programme and post programme)
- Informal conversations with the practitioners and trainers
- Feedback forms from all who attended the training sessions
- Videos of classroom practice when trainers and practitioners were engaged in the Helicopter Technique, both together and when practitioners worked independently
- Video stimulated review meetings with the practitioners to prompt reflection-on action
- Children's stories that were scribed in class story books

- Children's reflections gathered through the use of the Our Story app
- Photographs and other documentary evidence of the children's involvement in the technique, for example written Helicopter stories produced by some children during their free play
- Teachers' structured observations of their selected case study children guided by logbooks, in which they recorded a range of information

Evidence from these different sources was used to document the key characteristics of the Helicopter Technique and its impact on children and practitioners in different settings. The archive material was purposively sampled and analysed using the coding scheme developed through scrutinising the interviews and video stimulated review conversations. The qualitative analytical software Atlas-Ti (Muhr, 2004) was employed. The macro-level thematic categories identified were also drawn upon to guide examination of the observational data.

Systematic analysis of the breadth of available evidence from the eight week programme and its attendant follow-up enabled insight into the layers of impact upon both children and practitioners, even within the short time frame of the programme. The analysis also enabled grounded recommendations regarding the development of the model to be made and suggestions regarding sustainability and dissemination in order to influence both policy and practice.



Impact on the children

There was evidence of the significant impact of the Helicopter Technique on the children who took part in storytelling and story acting in the summer term of 2012. A range of elements, benefits, issues and developments were identified:

- The approach provided a motivation and an environment for the development of children's communication. There was evidence of the significant impact of the technique on communication, including literacy as well as aspects of speaking and listening
- Practitioners valued, particularly, the focus on children's spoken language. The approach provided practitioners with evidence of children's progress in language and communication, something that was particularly valued in the case of understanding and evaluating spoken language.
- The approach provided considerable communicative support and encouragement for a child with limited verbal language who used a sign-supported communication system (Signalong)
- The archive material revealed that practitioners and advisers who had worked with the approach perceived it made a rich contribution to children for whom English is a second language, in terms of their more extended use of English, widened vocabulary and oral confidence. In the summer programme, the technique was also used successfully in classes with a high number of bilingual learners. We do not, however, have evidence in the sessions observed as part of this evaluation of the use of children's home language(s) being drawn on to support storytelling or story acting
- The approach impacted significantly upon children's confidence. This was a general benefit for all children. Additionally, practitioners reported sometimes striking changes in some initially quiet children, who, during the course of the programme, grew considerably in confidence. Some practitioners suggested this increase in confidence was also evident in other areas of school and classroom life
- The approach contributed to children's developing sense of agency through its respect for children's voices, the emphasis on children choosing whether and how to tell a story and take part in story acting, and the provision of a secure and supportive space for story
- A striking find was that the approach motivated the children to engage in literacy activities, in taking down other children's stories and producing their own illustrated story books. It also fostered increasing awareness of written language (e.g. in following the transcription of their stories).
- Analysis of children's language use in their story texts revealed that, over the course of this brief initiative, there was no evidence of systematic development in children's narrative and linguistic structures, or in the range of vocabulary involved

- Towards the beginning of the programme there was some evidence of gendered behaviour in children's storytelling (e.g. with stories limited to typical 'boys' or 'girls' themes), and in their participation in acting out (e.g. a boy's unwillingness to take on a female role). During the course of the programme there were some changes, particularly in children's increased confidence and willingness to take on roles with which they might not identify, but which they performed well and seemed to enjoy
- Many children became more assured and skilled performers during the course of the Helicopter programme. The technique has considerable potential for fostering children's creativity – particularly of creativity in performance
- Children's active participation, interest in and ability to talk about their stories, suggests their experiences of story gained through their participation in the Helicopter Technique were positive
- While Helicopter stories tend to be seen as a verbal accomplishment, multimodal analysis illustrated the significance of communication across different modes (e.g. facial expression, gaze, body movement as well as verbal language). This was evident both in children's communication and in adults interacting with children



Impact on the practitioners

The archival work and interviews with practitioners and others involved in the Helicopter Technique over many years suggests that it empowers practitioners as they learn how to listen to children and let them lead; it offers practitioners a way of understanding children's level of language development in both their community languages and English and is a process and way of working that practitioners need to experience at first hand. It was stated by several of the educational experts interviewed that the approach had been sustained over many years in some individual settings and it was clear that some of the London boroughs had also sustained their commitment to supporting the implementation and development of the technique in their schools. It was seen in particular to be sustainable in settings where highly qualified practitioners and senior management can support less well qualified staff in use of the technique; where it is built into long term planning; when practitioners are clear about its purpose and its benefits and when they are clear how it fits with planning for and developing children's learning through the EYFS. With regard to sustainability in relation to the practitioners who took part in the summer term programme, all commented that they intended to sustain their use of the approach into the autumn term and when visited this was seen to be the case, one was seeking additional trainer support.

In addition, there was evidence of the impact of the Helicopter Technique on the practitioners who took part in facilitating the children's storytelling and story acting in the summer term of 2012. A range of elements, benefits and developments were identified:

- The practitioners were motivated to participate and valued the training, particularly the modelling of the technique with children and the chance to participate themselves
- Practitioners' experiences in their classrooms of the approach and the supportive coaching were mostly extremely positive. They were delighted with the way the children embraced it and began to notice and document multiple benefits for the young learners.
- Practitioners gained considerable confidence in using the Helicopter Technique across the eight weeks, taking stories independently and with apparent ease.
- In implementing the approach on their own with increased assurance, several practitioners made or planned to make minor additions to the approach and encountered and overcame various challenges, these mainly related to facilitating the story acting.
- Whilst most of the practitioners voiced their understanding of the underpinning principles of the approach, others were less confident about this and being flexible with the approach.
- Some of the practitioners, working to embed the approach within their own pedagogic practice, had also begun to develop the approach with colleagues. Several practitioners had involved the parents who expressed considerable interest.

- The programme of support and the accompanying research nurtured considerable professional reflection and beneficially increased the time that practitioners set aside for one to one time with children. Practitioners commented that this enabled them to get to know the children better, and that the technique prompted them to stand back and pause and notice and listen more attentively to the children's language and their stories. Some also perceived this raised their expectations of individual learners and increased their attunement to children's language and stories.
- The approach, combined with the Video Stimulated Review caused practitioners to listen to and reflect upon their own language and multimodal communication which they felt had positive consequences in other classroom contexts
- The programme prompted practitioners to review their pedagogy in other class contexts and activities. It reminded some of their values as educators.
- The approach was seen to be extremely well aligned with the underpinning principles of the EYFS, (a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments leading to learning and development) and the Foundation Stage's characteristics for effective learning, (playing and exploring; active learning; creating and thinking critically), as well as the prime areas of learning and development (personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development) and literacy as one of the specific areas of learning and development.

In addition, consideration of the different training models suggests that the optimum model of training is at least a full two hour session, preferably in the school day. The core components of such training were seen to be the demonstration with children of the technique and the opportunity for adults to participate both as audience and as participants in their own storytelling and acting.



Recommendations

On the basis of this evaluation, it is clear the Helicopter Technique of storytelling and story acting is both a rich framework for developing children's early learning and a motivating and valuable pedagogical tool for developing creative teaching. Sawyer (2004; in press) describes such teaching as disciplined improvisation, which has at its basis a framework that is a supportive scaffold. The Helicopter Technique represents just such a scaffold.

It is also clear that the MakeBelieve Arts professional development programme for the Helicopter Technique is well-designed and successful, it positions the trainers as coaches working alongside practitioners and, in a non-hierarchical manner, is a way of working that is endorsed by Cordingley et al. (2003) with regard to effective school-based professional development. The recommendations for enhancing the model and the programme need to be read in this light.

With regard to the Helicopter model, it is recommended that the MakeBelieve Arts team consider:

- Exploring the Helicopter Technique as a tool for identifying the developmental needs of children;
- Clarifying with and for practitioners the significance of accepting children's language;
- Clarifying the role of affirmative feedback in story scribing and story acting;
- Encompassing increased use of children's home languages;
- Reviewing the kinds of session closures used;
- Exploring the potential of using the Our Story iPad app.

With regard to the professional development programme, it is recommended that the MakeBelieve Arts team consider seeking to:

- Involve more support staff and other early years practitioners in the setting across the programme;
- Offer a minimum of a half day's initial training and provide printed training packs;
- Build in at least one mid-programme review meeting with practitioners
- Include video stimulated review as part of the programme;
- Include a meeting with the head teacher/head of centre during the programme;
- Profile the learning gains linked to the EYFS and invite practitioners to case study and document at least two children's development in this regard;
- Make more overt the underpinning principles of the approach;
- Explore opportunities for instruction/exploration outside the approach (e.g. with reference to developing children's narratives explicitly and using

standard grammatical constructions), thus preserving the unique space occupied by the approach;

- Profile the creative potential inherent in the technique.

With regard to making the Helicopter Technique more sustainable in schools and settings, several previous recommendations regarding the model (e.g. exploring the use of the technique as a tool for needs identification) and the professional development programme (e.g. involving support staff, review meetings and meetings with head teachers) would serve to encourage sustainability. It is recommended that MakeBelieve Arts also consider:

- *Profiling the strong alignment of the technique with the principles underpinning the EYFS,* and becoming well versed in the EYFS and the ways in which the approach affords an enabling environment, recognises the uniqueness of each child, and builds positive relationships in order to enhance children's learning and development;
- *Framing the Helicopter Technique as an integrated tool* that in particular enhances children's early language, literacy and communicative development;
- *Seeking opportunities to network,* communicate the work to policy makers, and build strategic alliances with early years organisations; through working with others the value of the approach is likely to become more widely and nationally known;
- *Developing Centres of Excellence and Helicopter Champions* which build on the extended work already begun in Tower Hamlets and other local authorities;
- *Establishing an Advisory Board* for the Helicopter Technique could help widen the contacts of the team and afford new opportunities and support;
- *Working with teacher education institutions* in order to offer sessions explaining and demonstrating the Helicopter Technique. Similarly, contacts could usefully be established with training schools and Schools Direct, in order to share the approach with student teachers and develop advocates for the future;
- *Using video more extensively,* through establishing video stimulated review with practitioners for in-house training and using video data to promote the versatility of the technique as a supplement to actual modelling of the approach.

The recommendations based on the evaluation are offered in order to respond to the project brief and represent specific strategies to enhance the sustainability of the Helicopter Technique. The approach, which respects the uniqueness of each child and affords children the space to tell and later act out their stories, leads to new learning and development, particularly in relation to communication, confidence, personal, social and emotional development and a developing sense of agency and community. It also enables practitioners to enhance their professional learning and serves to enrich practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage. As such it deserves a higher profile and wider recognition of its contribution to the education of the whole child.



MakeBelieve Arts
The Deptford Mission
1 Creek Road, London SE8 3BT
T: 020 8691 3803
E: info@makebelievearts.co.uk
W: www.makebelievearts.co.uk