

# Tell Me a Story

## The Narrative of Active Learning

by

Martyn Rawson

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The traditional debate as to whether human behavior is learned or inherited seems to have found an answer—it is both. The young child is an unwritten page, a “tabula rasa,” or an imperfect being, “weak and helpless, without knowledge or understanding,” as the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) put it. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke outlined the duty of parents: “To inform the mind and govern the actions of their yet ignorant nonage [offspring] till reason shall take its place and ease them of that trouble is what the children want and what the parents are bound to.”<sup>1</sup> In Locke’s view, the task of parent and educator is to fill up the empty page of the child’s mind with everything a responsible adult may reasonably be required to know or be able to do.

Nor is the child, it seems, a being whose entire maturation and development is contained within it, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau discussed in 1762 in *Emile or Concerning Education*. The book opened with, “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they becomes evil.”<sup>2</sup> Yet education is necessary, Rousseau continued; without it “prejudice, authority, necessity, example, all the social conditions into which we are plunged

would stifle nature in him [the child] and put nothing in her place. He would be like a sapling chance sown in the midst of the highway, sent hither and thither and soon crushed. . . . [R]emove this young tree from the highway and shield it from the crushing force of social conventions.”

According to Rousseau, the task of education is not to inculcate morals and social values but to allow nature to bring forth what slumbers in the soul of the individual. Parents should protect the unfolding individual from all impressions emanating from the human environment that might hinder the child’s development, and they should surround the child—but not smother him—with a warm embrace of love. The ideal mother was the devoted figure of Sophie, Emile’s patient, devoted wife. The ideal environment was Rousseau’s idealized bourgeois family, no longer held together, as in the Middle Ages, by economic, dynastic, or feudal bonds, but by love alone.

In our century, the nature of the human being and in particular the nature of child development has continued, like Foucault’s pendulum, to endlessly revolve in a swing of opinion. Recently, discussion has focused on language acquisition, moving between various versions of the nativist and behaviorist positions—that is, behavior is either inborn or learned. Currently, consensus seems to have settled for the hard-wired or innate, genetically pre-programmed theory of language acquisition. The matter is far from resolved, however, since factors such as timing, language environment, encouragement, and social interaction all clearly play important roles. Most recent research points to a combination of inborn predispositions and social circumstances. Above all, language acquisition and general learning both involve far more active participation of the child than was hitherto thought necessary.

### **The Active Individuality**

Perhaps the single most important discovery of modern psychology is the recognition that children are highly active in the process of learning.

Between inborn predispositions and adaptations on the one hand and cultural, environmental influences on the other, there emerges a third factor, the individuality of the child. This individuality is the active agent in the process of learning, active from the beginning.

In early childhood, this individuality expresses itself less through self-consciousness and more through the unconscious will-forces in activity. We see this will-activity in the urge to raise the head and the trunk and in the whole stretching process that culminates in standing upright. It comes to expression in the attention the infant gradually directs to the world around him, and especially in the effort to make contact with the mother and other people in the child's environment. And this happens long before language makes verbal communication possible. It is this core of individuality around which memory forms, and it is, of course, this same core of being that comes to self-consciousness. Anthroposophy calls this individuality the "I" or ego. As Rudolf Steiner put it: "Essentially everything which comes into our consciousness does so through the 'I.' The 'I' is that which connects us to our environment."<sup>3</sup>

Steiner's understanding of development differs then from both nativist and behaviorist approaches in that in his approach the "I" actively individualizes what is inherited and responds in individual and unpredictable ways to what comes towards the child from the cultural and physical environments. In both cases, it is the activity of the "I" that is decisive in relating the being of the child to his body and genetic inheritance and to the circumstances of his upbringing.

Thus, we can see that in this sense the bearer of individuality, the "I," is central to the processes of both maturation and learning. Associated with the emergence of self-consciousness around the age of three years old, the "I" is also active in the child long before. The "I" is by its nature active—it could be termed the "I-activity." We must reckon not only with the conscious activity of the "I" in the learning child but also with its

unconscious activity. Both before the age of three and after, the “I-activity” is at work within unconscious organic processes as well as in the unconscious levels of the mind, and specifically during sleep. The “I” is active within regenerative processes and above all in the processing of the daily’s sense experiences. This activity of sorting, digesting, and assimilating linguistic and other impressions is as vital for language and cognitive development as it is for psychological orientation. We can understand why Steiner said it is through the “I” that the individual relates to the world.

Until recently it was thought that most early childhood behavior consisted of genetically determined reflexes gradually overlaid with layers of culturally imposed patterns of reaction and response. We now know that, far from being unwritten pages or bundles of reflexes, babies are active in creating learning situations through interaction with those around them. They seek social contact, can maintain it once engaged, and can even end it when they need to.

Research on infants has shown that babies as early as six days old can imitate gestures such as sticking out a tongue without having any consciousness that they have a tongue let alone knowledge of how to control it. They can select sense impressions that have meaning for them—such as the sound of their mother’s voice played on a tape—when they are two weeks old. At three months, they can learn through trial and error to master the voluntary movement of their limbs, such as sharpening the focus of a projected image by varying the strength of suction on a wired-up dummy, or operating a mobile attached by a ribbon to one foot.<sup>4</sup> These facts would remain anecdotal curiosities were it not that their explanation presents us with a challenge and one not merely of academic interest. In understanding these phenomena, we define the nature of human beings, which in turn determines our approach to education, and much else besides. We can put it down to pre-programmed responses, but that philosophical position is demonstrably unsustainable by the evidence of our experience as parents

and educators. What precludes the possibility of total hardwiring is the part played by the child's own activity.

### **The Sociable Baby**

Babies are above all characterized by their sociability. They have a clear preference for faces and face-like shapes, and they can quickly distinguish the human voice from other sounds. It is particularly in social contact and communication that young children show active initiative in engaging their parents and siblings in interactive exchange. They seem to want to communicate and have a compelling effect on others. It is hard to resist speaking to a baby even though we know that she does not yet have the ability to vocalize any response. In no time at all we are using voice, facial expression, and gesture to set up a meaningful exchange.<sup>5</sup> And it is precisely this two-way web of feedback and interaction that is so vital for learning.

What begins with stimulating milk-flow in the mother's breast through suckling, and continues with the search for eye contact, becomes a pervasive powerful and flexible general endeavor to find learning situations.

Hand in hand with the complexities of physiological maturation, such as the brain's rapid growth and later motor control, goes the exploration of soul life. Between the ages of seven and nine months, the baby learns to respond to the mother's feelings. When the mother looks on encouragingly, the child feels able to go on exploring the room. If, however, the mother has a serious expression, the child will stop exploring and return to her. For a child's developing abilities, parental reactions are essential in reinforcing the emerging sense of self. Development in this sense is, as the American psychologist Daniel Stern puts it, "a task which children and parents have to master together."<sup>6</sup>

On the whole, adults seem to be aware of this in that they usually respond to the demands of children in helpful ways—unless they place

them in front of a television screen, which does not respond to the child's searching need for feedback and interaction, as Dr. Sally Ward's research at the Speech, Language and Hearing Center has shown.<sup>7</sup> Adults apparently approach babies and seek eye contact at exactly the appropriate distance—around seven inches—the optimal distance for infant eyes. Likewise most parents seem to know intuitively how to judge the fine line between demanding too much and too little in play with their children.

In language learning too, parents assist their children by speaking more slowly and by careful repetition of basic linguistic constructions including grammatical variation when appropriate. Parents often use extremely subtle methods of supporting language development, for example, by creating highly structured and ritual linguistic situations in which language becomes predictable in a familiar context, such as at the supper table, during dressing, or bedtime. This is described by Jerome Bruner as *scaffolding*, a term coined to denote the parent's role in supporting language development.<sup>8</sup> Most parents do not correct mistakes directly, such as adults would do to each other when learning a foreign language, but rather reiterate what the child said by way of confirmation but using the correct form:

Child: "I eated up all my mu-lee."

Parent: "Yes, you ate up all your muesli. Can you eat  
up all your bread too?"

The ideal scaffolding situation, according to Bruner, is when the parent is in tune with the child's developmental level and therefore talks in a way that demands linguistic skills that are always a bit beyond what the child is currently doing, but not beyond his reach.

This corresponds to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's concept of "zones of proximal development."<sup>9</sup> Vygotsky said that there are two

measures of what a child's cognitive ability is in any given situation: what the child can achieve without help and what the child could achieve with the help or instruction of an adult or more competent peer. The distance between these two levels of ability is the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky argued that what the child can do with help at one stage, she will be able to do on her own at a later developmental stage. Social framework and intrapersonal achievement are vital for child development and learning.

As Susan Engel has shown in her comprehensive book *The Stories Children Tell, Making Sense of the Narratives of Childhood*,

The input of the "other"—in many cases, a parent—is central to understanding what the child can do and is learning to do. Family interactions may not only be the context in which children's thinking develops; they may also help shape how the child thinks.<sup>10</sup>

Interaction between parent and child is a part of the process of linguistic and cognitive development, especially if parents are receptive of the child's needs. Nowhere is this more true than in that archetypal human activity, storytelling.

### **The Meaning of the Story**

It was Gordon Wells, in his seminal book *The Meaning Makers*, who identified the importance of storytelling not only for language but also for cognitive development. Based on the Bristol, England, study "Language at Home and at School," a longitudinal project involving children from the earliest acquisition of language through primary school, Wells' research highlighted the importance of stories as a preparation for literacy.

Stories, he concluded, were better than other methods for several reasons. Firstly, in listening to stories, children can "gain an experience of the sustained meaning-building organization of written language, and its characteristic rhythms and structures."<sup>11</sup> Secondly, stories extend the range

of the child's experience beyond her actual life circumstances. Thirdly, stories provide an excellent opportunity for the kind of collaborative talk between adult and child that helps children understand the world and stimulates the child's inner dialogues. This self-talk forms a key stage in the development of independent thinking.

What Wells said concerning written stories also goes for oral stories that are either told from memory or made up spontaneously. I feel the child's perception of the thought processes involved in telling rather than reading a story are more direct. Of course, the written story may have more consciously structured form; it may have high intrinsic artistic merit, but the thought processes involved are more removed. Unprepared reading may cloud the inherent literary structure through inappropriate emphasis on sentence structure. At a more advanced stage of literacy, the child will be able to recreate the vivid story pictures by reading on her own. In the young child, then, the perception of the story-telling activity is a complex one involving the observation of gesture, facial expression, hearing and word recognition, and perception of an individual's thought and imaginative processes at work. All these elements are inseparable from the story content itself.

At an early stage, stories should be told from memory. Parents often notice how relating the most mundane stories, in effect merely recounting the day's events, will be listened to with rapt attention by young children. Children have an intense interest in how adults organize sequential events in narrative form. The child's naïve unreflected attention may perceive cognitive processes in what the adult says. The child can learn—through assimilation and imitation—from perceptions to which older children or adults need no longer pay attention.

A child must learn the symbolic value of language to eventually be able to grasp the abstraction of reading and writing alphabet letters, comprehending qualities symbolized by numbers, and so on throughout

the curriculum. Meaning is communicated by context on the one hand and by imitation on the other. If something has meaning for an adult, the child will assume meaning for that word or symbol. A story gives context; it is imbued with personal meaning by the teller. Thus, hearing stories enables a child to grasp the symbolic value of language before having to cope with the added abstraction of writing.

Understanding through narrative helps children organize their experiences, describe events, and follow instructions. Most importantly, children who have become used to hearing and expressing themselves in narrative form can more easily understand adults' language. Such children can understand when they hear about things not present in the room and perhaps quite outside their life experience, a classroom factor as teachers tend increasingly to talk about other lands, other times, and other peoples.<sup>12</sup>

In order to direct their own thought processes, children must be able to use symbols and relate them to their own direct experience. As Wells put it,

Stories have a role in education that goes far beyond their contribution to the acquisition of literacy. Constructing stories in the mind—or storying, as it has been called—is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning; as such, it is an activity that pervades all aspects of learning.<sup>13</sup>

Storytelling is probably as old as human culture and certainly as old as language in the form we know it today. The heritage of each culture, including the sum of its knowledge about the world, and its technical achievements as well as its worldview have traditionally been preserved in its oral story traditions. To a large extent cultures define themselves through the sacred stories they tell in ritual circumstances. A fine example of this is the Songlines of the Aborigines, which relate the narrative biography of the landscape and its relationship to the people.

Literate cultures have incorporated their values in sacred texts, which are read at significant moments in the annual cycle. Most such texts are in narrative form and describe the journey of the soul, as in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or record the history of the people.

Modern cultures continue to record what society deems valuable, using books and now electronic technology. However, the principles remain the same. Even scientific facts are told in narrative form; otherwise they would be incomprehensible<sup>14</sup> to most readers. Stories provide a meaningful interpretation of those aspects of human experience seen as fundamental and of abiding concern. What is so essential about narrative? What makes narrative? What is in a story?

### **Narrative Structure**

Jerome Bruner has characterized narrative as follows.

- Narrative must have sequence.
- Narrative must have a plot, a sequence that conveys meaning.
- Narrative must have a high point, a tension that meets some kind of resolution.
- A narrative may be true or not. It is indifferent to facts.
- A narrative distinguishes between the usual and the unusual.
- A narrative directs attention to personal or subjective experience.<sup>15</sup>

Implicit in this characterization is the fact that narrative uses formal, even ritualized forms for describing the world. It also implies a speaker-listener relationship that is dynamic rather than passive. The meaning is enhanced by context—including background information assumed to be known to both storyteller and listener. For that reason a mere list of events does not constitute a narrative because it has not been constructed with a

particular listener in mind, nor has the list been constructed with any particular meaning in mind other than face value. It is often the sequence that imbues the events with a particular meaning, as does what is left out of the account.

According to speech-act theory,<sup>16</sup> telling stories is a kind of doing, an action which has three components: the actual story as it is told, what the speaker intended to achieve with the story, and the effect the story has on the listener. This framework enables us to see how storytelling by and for children can involve active social and conceptual interaction. A story can provide the pretext for establishing, clarifying, or changing relationships. Stories can help form bonds, resolve conflicts, and share experience as well as provoke, annoy, or attract attention. What is told can often be quite secondary to how and to whom.

Stories as speech acts are particularly important for pre-school children in play. Narrative structure can provide a basic plot, which enables the children to take roles in a play situation. If they are playing doctors, one child can be the doctor, the other the mother with the sick child (“and then let’s say the mummy goes to the doctor and the little girl says, ‘I feel really sick,’ I’ll be the little girl and you be the doctor, okay?”). This plot generates sequences of play with dialogue and includes narrative parts (“then she gives the mummy some pills and writes in a book”).

Young children spend a lot of time and energy in collaborative storytelling in which role-playing is highly varied and complex. Through such stories they not only learn to socially interact, they learn to organize their experience and what they know and also learn how to communicate that knowledge to others.

### **We Are the Stories We Tell**

Stories not only help children give meaning to their worlds, improve their listening, verbal, and literacy skills; they also, as Engel has shown

evocatively in her study of children's narrative, help children construct their identities. Children are the stories they tell. Stories not only reconstruct and communicate experience, they are experience. As Engel puts it:

But a central reason it is so important to understand all these whats and hows of storytelling is that the stories play a vital role in shaping children's sense of themselves and their presentation of that self to others.<sup>17</sup>

Engel notes that a developmental line runs through the stories children tell, from the simplest "I did this . . ." kind to the elaborate stories that children of eight or nine years old make up.

Through the stories children tell about themselves in the past or the future ("I'm going to make a sword and chop up that monster . . .") emerges a sense of extended self, which includes both enduring and transient aspects of their personality. The stories map out a region—the child's inner home base and the areas of its surroundings—that the child has explored. The details may be imaginary or real. In fact, in young children the imagination may even be more compelling than objective outer reality. The world of "I want to be" is as important in defining a sense of self as "this is what I am." Of course for an adult to have a sense of self largely defined by imagination could be psychologically risky. The healthy transformation of this would be a set of ideals one strives to realize. Adults may appropriately define themselves by the ideals and sense of truth they bear within them.<sup>18</sup>

In both children and adults, it is the "I" as core of the individual's being that clothes itself in the garments of the extended self. The "I" itself remains invisible—in the sense that a person's self becomes visible to us when we get to know them—though we can recognize it through its activity.

The content of such narratives helps to define and give expression to the child's being. What is vitally important to the child is the child's own perception of that being, the perception of self. Children gain this perception in and through their relationships to the world and to other people. "I went

in the shop with daddy and this big dog was there!” It is essential for the child to tell her story to a listening person who can respond in an affirmative, participatory way. The story will need to be told several times until the encounter with the dog has become a shared and assimilated experience. Throughout this process, the child is able to gain a perception of herself in relation to a specific experience and through the eyes of another.

### **Stories and Drawings**

Just as young children’s drawings<sup>19</sup> unconsciously reveal something of the dynamic process of the inner being of the child coming to terms with and mastering the physical organism, so too in a similar way do stories. Children’s drawings express the sense of bodily well-being, balance, orientation, and co-ordination of the body in space, and this is true whatever the child’s professed intentions may be. In this sense their linear quality expresses the unconscious forces of the will and their use of color is the soul’s response to bodily experience. In a nutshell one could say that the child’s drawing shows to what extent the child feels at home in his body.

Stories, however, reveal another realm of the child’s whole being, less that of the motor-will activity and more of the linguistic-cognitive part of the soul. Stories express how the child understands the circumstances of his life and relationships. It is, of course, artificial to separate the cognitive from the motoric will, especially in the young child. The two realms are closely integrated at that age. It is the feeling realm of the soul, the middle, that is the source of both drawing and storying. Nevertheless, I suggest that the child’s feeling life responds to the bodily-organic sense of his own being through the expression of movement and drawing, whereas storying and speech generally are more conscious and therefore a reflection of the cognitive pole. What is fascinating is when a child first draws a picture, a self-contained activity, and then engages an adult to relate its story. The educator must use both drawing and storying as diagnostic tools.

## **Collaborative Learning**

Through the process of narrative construction, children can reflect on themselves in the present, in relation to themselves in the past or future. This involves dialogue and exchange. The child needs to hear, and often, the adult's own version of events: "Do you remember we went down the garden and peeped into the little birdie's nest?" Following this, the child needs to construct the narrative herself on the basis of the adult's scaffolding. This way the child gains a two-way perspective of himself in and through the story. Actually, it is usually three-way, since there is an adult's version, the child's version, and the collective "we" in the form of a dialogue, with both parent and child taking turns recounting the event, possibly to a third party.

Many psychologists have used storying with adult patients in therapy to recast the story of their lives. In telling the story from a slightly different perspective, patients can change the way they see themselves or their relationships to others. This points to the fact that when we tell a story about ourselves, we become an object that we can relate to or simply contemplate from another point of view. This provides an inner perspective. The way we represent ourselves in stories and the way stories shape us varies as we develop.

## **Engel's Five Phases of Narrative**

Engel describes five childhood phases of narrative used by children to develop a sense of the self. The first phase involves children gaining an initial sense of self by participating in the stories their parents tell about them. They learn that they can be both subject and object of events in the world. While still dependent on adults and older siblings, children begin the second phase around the age of three when they develop sufficient personal memory to describe their own past experiences. As Engel puts it, "Parents have become vital partners in describing past experiences to fill

out their children's sense of themselves over time."<sup>20</sup> Parents not only provide support, they influence the process in other important ways:

When children tell stories about their past to and with their parents, not only do the parents' specific contributions help shape the content of those stories, but their role as audience affects what children put into the story. The child may include details that will please a parent, attract his attention, or provoke him. The child's sense of his listener will end up influencing what goes into the story anyhow it gets told. Ultimately, that story will contribute to the child's inner sense of self.<sup>21</sup>

The third phase sees children between four and five expanding their circle of conversation partners to include peers. These kindergarteners increasingly learn through feedback from their playmates during play. Initially three- and four-year-olds tend to talk to each other while playing; by the age of five, they tend to talk more about what they are going to play. Between the ages of six and seven, they spend most of their time telling each other about what they like and dislike and exchanging stories, especially common experiences: "Remember when we made that hideaway." This helps form social bonds and strengthens the sense of identity. Not to share in the memory challenges a child's sense of personalized past.

Engels describes the fourth phase as the increasing ability to hold different ideas in the mind at the same time and the ability to return again at intervals to certain topics and themes. Earlier the child has been far more bound to present experience and the circumstances of the immediate environment. Engel writes:

Whereas two-year-olds use stories to understand the social world contained in their immediate family life, children of seven, eight, and nine years old use collections of stories and

ongoing sagas to penetrate the complexities of the expanded world in which they are now active.

The fifth phase sees storytelling dwindling. There is less at home or school. Engel suggests that what is retained is the repertoire of stories/memories that we use to give friends and new acquaintances a certain picture of ourselves. What does seem clear in my observation of adolescents is that storytelling becomes internalized. Children speak to themselves when they are engaged in some concentrated activity. In order to remember the sequences or stages in a complex process they have not quite mastered, they use self-talk and later internalize this in the form of thought. A similar situation occurs with the identity reinforcement of storytelling. Speech becomes internalized thought, and storytelling withdraws into inner memories, dreams, and reflections (in C. G. Jung's autobiography). Literature, of course, is the other outcome of the storytelling development of childhood. One assumes that Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Ben Okri, and Kate Atkinson all started off as infant storytellers. As Ben Okri writes in *Aphorisms and Fragments*:

It is in the creation of story, the lifting of story into the realms of art, it is in this that the higher realms of creativity reside. . . . It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisible. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell, subtly, in the night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world. <sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

Given the importance of storytelling for child development, points worth remembering include:

1. Certain features of linguistic development appear to be universal. These include the tendency of children by the age of three years to sequence their experience when describing it. They talk about what happened and then what happened next. This is the first prerequisite for narrative. By the age of five years most children have mastered the other prerequisites of narrative, place and time. They can say when and where it happened. When children recall events they usually have an opening, a high point, and an ending.
2. Children adopt the storytelling characteristics of their culture. In all cultures children “learn to tell stories in order to become full participants in their community and to develop relationships with other people, as much as they do to formulate experience for themselves.”<sup>23</sup>
3. Stories are crucial to cognitive development and in the child’s developing relationship to self and the world.
4. Children’s capacity to tell stories becomes increasingly individual.
5. Storytelling may be an inborn predisposition but it requires from the beginning willing, enthusiastic, and skilled partners. Parents and educators need to value children’s stories by responding to them in appropriate ways. We need a phenomenology of stories, and we need to train our observational skills to recognize their qualities.
6. Teachers in kindergarten and elementary school (though this is far more likely in elementary school) need to avoid stifling the storytelling habits of children through formal and informal instruction and correction. School teachers must find ways of encouraging rather than hindering the storytelling process. Wells writes that many school situations limit linguistic development and learning generally because of what he terms the “transmissional” concept of teaching.<sup>24</sup>

It is not possible., simply by telling, to cause students to come to have the knowledge that is in the mind of the teacher. Knowledge cannot be transmitted. It has to be constructed afresh by each individual knower on the basis of what is already known and by means of strategies developed over the whole of that individual's life, both inside and outside of the classroom.<sup>25</sup>

Bearing this in mind and taking account of the need for an interactive learning relationship, a number of factors limit learning opportunities. These include too much frontal teaching, in which the teacher does most of the talking, and groups which are too large for individual children to have the opportunity of interactive conversation of the kind needed to develop skills and further understanding. Also, too little allowance is made for individual children's abilities and experiences. Learning becomes passive when there is too much emphasis on the teacher's lesson plan and too little emphasis on where the individual child is—that is, building lessons on what the children know in a given situation. Wells stresses the necessity of active involvement of children in their own learning. He points out that too many teachers fall back on the “being talked at” style by which they were educated. What Wells terms collaborative teaching methods activates the child's own learning activity. In anthroposophical terms, one speaks of engaging the child's “I” or ego.

The engagement of the “I” is at risk where outcomes are too rigidly defined in the curriculum and teaching methods are used that deliver these outcomes as “efficiently” as possible. Rather, in education, the journey is always its own reward.

This method of teaching does not imply that the teacher become redundant or relinquish responsibility for guiding learning situations, far from it. In fact a collaborative partnership between child and teacher is a great art, requiring considerable professional expertise. In a Waldorf school, most teachers would see partnership with the young child as being with

the “I” of the child, the child’s higher being. The teacher, of course, converses with the child but the collaboration as such consists in recognizing what the “I” of the child is communicating. As the child becomes more mature, that dialogue increasingly needs to become direct and verbal.

7. Engel identifies two ways teachers neglect or stifle the developmental potential of storytelling: an overemphasis on correctness and logic at the expense of the child’s impulse to convey personal meaning and not taking what children have to tell us seriously, seeing the child’s inventions as childish.
8. The role of the listener is an active, creative one. This means not only encouragement but appropriate responses. Storytelling is a collaborative process. In order to collaborate we have to enter into the story. It is no good asking questions outside of the framework of the story or introducing your own, different story.
9. Children need to experience a variety of styles of storytelling using different genres. Engel gives revealing advice: “We tend to reserve great stories and poems until we think children are old enough to appreciate them. Instead, assume that if they start hearing beautiful language, well-constructed narratives, and different genres early in life, they will acquire a vocabulary of narrative in the same way that they seem so easily to acquire a vocabulary of words.” This accords with basic practice in Waldorf schools.
10. Allow children to read, hear, and write stories about the things that concern them. This includes things from which we usually try to shield children. It is better that they retell the story of some television crime series than repress the experience. The beauty of stories is that we can change them in the retelling and, in so doing, we can change our relationship to them. It may sound trite but it is good to talk and even better to listen!

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**Footnotes:**

- 1 Locke, J., *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter VI, para 56 and 58, pp32–33, 1952.
- 2 Rousseau, J., *Emile*, Everyman edition, p5, 1974.
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- 5 Wells, G., *The Meaning Makers*, pp34–35, 1987.
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- 7 Article in *The Guardian*, Wednesday, January 10, 1996.
- 8 Bruner, J., *Child’s Talk*, New York: Norton, 1983.
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- 22 Okri, Ben. “Birds of Heaven,” numbers 51 and 58, 1996.
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- 24 Wells, G., pp116–119.
- 25 Ibid., p129.