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## Storybook beginning

**Curriculum uses children's literature to teach life lessons**

By **Kevin Williams, Camera Staff Writer**  
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Once upon a time, there was a curriculum style called the "Storybook Journey."

Created by a kind, early childhood specialist named Sue McCord in 1980, it is now practiced in the kingdom of Boulder and in other faraway states.

Those teachers who favor this tool use children's literature as a focal point for learning. The themes, lessons and characters in a particular story are brought to life in the classroom through songs, props, cooking, art projects and play-acting.

"A story has such a meaningful and magical way of inviting a child into a setting," says McCord, 65, who lives in Boulder and used to teach at the Children's Learning Center at the University of Colorado. "I like them to marinate, just sit there and soak up all the things in the story that give them chances to explore and play."

From an educational perspective, teachers say they like it because it engages the child as a whole, tending to physical, social, cognitive and emotional needs. And because the classroom revolves around one book for at least three weeks, children at different developmental levels can take the story in at their own pace.

That's particularly helpful when teaching speech-delayed children or kids who speak other languages, says McCord, who now instructs other educators on how to use the "Storybook Journey."

Designed for children as old as 5 years old, it's by no means the only effective way to teach preschoolers, McCord emphasizes, just one method with which she has found success.

At Children's House Preschool, near downtown Boulder, the "Journey" has reached its intended destination.

Four-year-old Ethan Weil lies prone on a plastic mat, his tiny eyes squinting through wire-rim glasses at the "paramedic" tending to his burn wounds. Fellow classmate Christian Wood, 4, bends over him, a plastic stethoscope around his neck and a plastic syringe in his hand.

The two are acting out the latest book that was read to them, "A Chair For My Mother," by Vera B. Williams, which is about a family who lost all their possessions in a fire. In the story, the mom is saving up coins from the diner she works at to buy a new chair for the apartment.

Children's House teachers Elaine and Suzanne McCarthy, who are sisters, allow the kids in the classroom to experiment with the ideas in the book. Ethan and Christian have moved beyond the fire itself to what might happen if 911 was called, Elaine says.

"They're the ones who tell us what they're going to do with the information that we bring," she says.



Jon Hatch

Ethan Henry Weil, 4, below, and Christian Wood, 4, act out a mock fire incident at Children's House Preschool.

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In past weeks, the kids have built fire engines out of everyday household items, made evacuation plans for their homes and cooked things you might find in a diner. Next week, the class will move on to a new book.

Children's House is one of many local centers, including Boulder Day Nursery, Children's Learning Center and Friends 'n Fun Children's Center, using the "Storybook Journey." It's one of the few that incorporates it so fully, McCord says.

Ideally, children will have "real hands-on experience with what they're hearing in a story," she says.

Instead of crossing a plank bridge like a character in Billy Goats Gruff, for example, children could traverse a climbing apparatus or something as simple as a piece of tape on the floor.

Exploring diversity is a key part of the "Journey" as well, whether it be differences in the way people look, where they live or how they think.

McCord throws out the Three Little Pigs as a reference, explaining how all the pigs are different — colors, sizes, the types of houses they live in — and how that's OK.

The diversity component is especially important for Children's House, which has been catering to preschoolers for 33 years. Of the 27 students enrolled, five are from Mexico, one is from Holland, one is from New Zealand and one is from Bosnia.

"Because it's so thematic, you can participate in any of this without having the same language," Elaine says. "You understand what's going on ... it kind of envelopes us all."

True to her words, the preschoolers in her Thursday morning class seem to understand the concepts associated with "A Chair For My Mother."

Their voices rise in excitement as they "call" the fire department or shout out directions on building a fire wall. Elaine and Suzanne stand nearby, guiding the kids ever so slightly in their words and actions.

"The teacher is just critical," McCord says. "Because this is not a journey that says, 'This is how you pack your bags and this is where we're going.' This is one where you watch and observe the children and you move through the journey with them, not for them."

Which is exactly what Sherri Weil was looking for when she searched for a preschool for her speech-delayed son, Ethan.

"(He's) getting the sense that there's adventure in books, drama in books, messages in books," Weil says. "It's living a story with the kids."

She says the repetition, using the same book for weeks, is "definitely complementary to his therapy."

Watching Ethan play after he gives up his role as a bum victim, it appears that, if nothing else, he's having a good time. He now sits at a tiny plastic cash register, ringing up some of his fellow classmates who are "buying" shoes, part of a smaller theme associated with the latest book.

As he sits there, his teachers begin to hum and sing:

"It's pick up time, it's pick up time, we've had a busy day. Share the work and show you care, everything has its place. Use your eyes and use your hands, we need all our space."

Something amazing happens.

The kids become quiet and start putting everything away in its proper order, another class drawing near its end.

Happily ever after is no fairytale in this classroom.