The challenges and possibilities of a narrative learning approach in the Finnish early childhood education system

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Abstract

Finnish curriculum guidelines for early education emphasise play and creative activities as significant factors in healthy child development. Constructivist theory loosely frames the guidelines, but the recommended approach lacks precise developmental goals. Since 1996, we have carried out a narrative learning project with vertically integrated multi-age groupings and carefully designed play-based learning environments for children from 4 to 8 years old. Data showed that the children learned to use symbolic tools to conquer their fears, solve problems, and master basic social skills. Findings support the view that the narrative learning approach can yield visible results in concert with the tenet that play promotes positive developmental outcomes, including the development of learning potential.

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National and local curriculum guidelines for preschool and kindergarten in Finland (Stakes, 2004) make it clear that school readiness is an important goal of early childhood education. While curriculum guidelines proclaim the benefits of play for the development of imagination, empathy, and language, as well as physical and social skills, they do not acknowledge a strong connection between play and content-area learning associated with core subjects in the elementary school.

Both research and theory increasingly argue against the kind of dichotomous thinking about play and learning evident in the guidelines (Bamberg, 1997; Bruner, 1992, 1996; Fireman, McVay, & Flanagan, 2003; Roskos & Christie, 2000; Saracho & Spodek, 1998). The guidelines, then, create a conundrum for early childhood practitioners, teacher educators, and researchers.

Our inspiration for developing alternative early childhood pedagogies initially came from participants in teacher-preparation programs who were concerned about extensive use of ‘school-like’ activities in kindergarten classes. Supposedly, these activities facilitate a smooth transition from playful preschool curricula to the more content-focused elementary-grade curricula. Our developmental projects began in 1996 to explore ways to transcend or reconcile disparate views about the function and value of play in early education and, specifically, to examine the value of play in the transition from preschool to school. Our hypothesis was that a specific transitory activity combining an imaginative playworld and realistic problem solving would promote our goal (Hakkarainen, 2002a).

1. Theoretical orientation for the projects

We have worked within the theoretical and pedagogical frameworks of cultural historical approach to child development. Our alternative curriculum can be called ‘play-based curriculum’ in which different forms of play serve as a basis for cognitive learning in preschool and grades 1 and 2 (Van Dijk, 2002; Van Oers, 2003, 2004). In our approach children’s play and imagination are guided through the ‘playworlds method’. By definition playworld is an imaginative activity shared
jointly by children and adults (Lindqvist, 1995). Our projects with vertically integrated groups at transition stage (preschool through primary grades) included a unique feature: embedding realistic problems as an element of the playworld story line (Hakkarainen, 2004).

Our ‘playworld curriculum’ is based on theoretical ideas about the specific nature of learning and development for children between 4 and 8 years old. We assume that ‘narrative construction of reality’ is important, as Brüner (1996) suggested when he introduced his idea about two modes of thinking:

There appear to be two broad ways in which human beings organize and manage their knowledge of the world, indeed structure even their immediate experience: one seems more specialized for treating of physical “things,” the other for treating of people and their plights. These are conventionally known as logical-scientific thinking and narrative thinking (p. 39).

Learning through narratives, play, and make-believe have quite a different character and developmental potential compared to problem solving in task situations. Donaldson (1993) pointed out a paradoxical aspect of learning in play: ‘…why should children begin the apparently pointless activity of treating things as what they are not’ (p. 69). Donaldson defined the function of pretend play as a new evolving mode of the mind, the ‘construct mode’, which has to be supplied by a deliberate constructive act of imagination.

We combine the potential of narrative construct mode with Vygotsky's basic law of cultural development. ‘Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interspsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Narrative construct mode can be an ‘experimental laboratory’ of higher mental functions because in joint pretending social relations are hypothetical possibilities between role characters. Here Vygotsky’s argument that mental functions are identical with social relations is central: ‘…every higher mental function, before becoming internal mental function, previously was a social relation between two people. All mental functions are internalized social relations’ (Vygotsky, 1983, pp. 145–146). Researchers in the present study theorized that social relations between pretend role characters are important and form the basis for real-life social relations and individual higher mental functions later in life.

Going from this central theoretical tenet, we emphasised development of social relations in the selection of narratives of each playworld. Before the start of a playworld project, participating teachers defined educational goals for each child and the whole group. For example, the goals for one second-grade girl were outlined in the teacher’s written plan: ‘more careful approach to joint tasks, development of own position instead of helping smaller children, more intensive involvement’. The goals for a 4-year-old boy were defined as follows: ‘courage, self-initiative, finding own place in the group, openness’. Whole-group goals included ‘empathy, putting oneself to the position of other people (through role characters), recognizing and showing emotions in safe playworld environment (sorrow, desperation, happiness), imagination and thinking, skills of working with others in different group combinations’.

1.1. Developmental curriculum as a tool

Beginning in 1996, our developmental work in Hyvinkää, Finland focused on the children’s learning potential and the transition from play to school learning. We created new curriculum guidelines by combining and modifying existing official guidelines for daycare (0–5 years), kindergarten (6 years), and elementary grades (7–8 years). The municipality accepted the new guidelines (Hakkarainen, 2002b), enabling us to proceed with our work. The new guidelines described developmental characteristics and transitions of 4–8-year-old children, the target ages for our multi-age classrooms, and introduced educational principles that support developmental transitions. Importantly, the model delayed the start of traditional schoolwork until third grade and replaced the concept of ‘school readiness’ with the concept of ‘learning readiness and potential’. These changes addressed the problem of continuity in the educational system from preschool through the primary grades by creating a longer developmental trajectory and extending the focus of early childhood education beyond preschool and kindergarten into first and second grades.

The new guidelines included a stronger emphasis on social relations and interaction than the national guidelines. They also incorporated Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), conceptualized as the gap between what a child (or any learner) has already attained (actual level of development) and what the child can learn (potential development) through interaction with a more experienced and capable guide, such as a teacher or a peer. Within this theoretical paradigm, children’s natural and spontaneous curiosity is a starting point for early learning; responsibility rests with early childhood educators to create both the need and the motivation for further development.

2. Pedagogical approach

Our pedagogical projects combine key elements of narrative learning and realistic problem solving. Broadly defined, narrative learning involves the use of stories, drama, and imagination as vehicles for playful exploration and study of a variety of themes and topics. We emphasised a narrative learning approach based on the theoretical concept of transitory activity as the intermediate step between unstructured free play in preschool and formal instruction in elementary school (Hakkarainen, 2002a). Therefore, we created learning environments incorporating different narrative forms such as playworlds, adventures, play-based instruction and problem solving.
Our play-based curriculum combined stories or adventures with problem solving relating to such content areas as literacy development, history, science or math. Our playworlds were based on the work of Lindqvist (1995). In this approach, teachers transform a literary text (e.g., story, folk tale, poem) into extended imaginative play episodes involving both adults and children. Ideally, the theme of the text and the play episodes based on the text should be challenging and deal with universal problems of human life. Selected tales or stories ideally appeal to both adults and children. Adults create the playworld through dramatization or other methods and encourage children to enrich the theme in their free play.

2.1. Playworld project 'Rumpelstiltskin'

The present playworld project began at the end of the 2006 fall term and continued through the spring term. Thirty-one children participated in the project. Two had immigrant backgrounds. The 17 girls included 1 4-year old, 7 6-year olds, 4 7-year olds, and 5 8-year olds. The 14 boys included 3 4-year olds, 2 5-year olds, 4 6-year olds and 5 7-year olds. Children spent 60–70% of their time in multi-age groups participating in playworld, free play, or problem-solving activities. During the remaining time, children were in age-segregated groups doing schoolwork or participating in daycare activities with teachers using a child-centred model.

Three adults (one elementary-grade teacher, one preschool teacher and one nurse) worked with the group. All of them participated in a special 3-year university extension program, entitled ‘Narrative learning in vertically integrated children's playworld groups’. The present project was part of their studies. We obtained parental permission to videotape playworld sessions for educational and research purposes.

The playworld was based loosely on the folk tale, Rumpelstiltskin by the Brothers Grimm. We decided not to tell the whole story at once, as had been done in earlier playworlds, but rather, to dramatize an elaborated version of the story line from the perspective of each character in subsequent sessions twice a week throughout the 5 months of this project. The first visitor (actually, teacher in role) whom we added to the original tale was the character Margareta, a woman from countryside in the kingdom of Surmundia. She reported rumour in her village about a miller’s daughter who was taken as a wife by the king because of her extraordinary ability to spin straw into gold. Margareta further explained that, as rumour had it, the miller’s daughter had a strange helper (Rumpelstiltskin) who demanded that she give him her first-born child in exchange for his assistance with the spinning.

The next visitor was the miller’s daughter, Tommina, now the Queen of Surmundia, who told the same story from her own point of view. The queen asked the children if they had seen her missing daughter, Princess Alexandra. (We changed the prince in the original story to princess in our playworld.) The queen also provided more information about Rumpelstiltskin: ‘That little guy cannot be so evil because he has helped me many times. Spinning gold from straw was impossible for me until he helped’. The youngest children started to protest, illustrating their conviction that an evil-doing character must be completely evil: ‘Do not believe him. He is completely evil; he just pretended to be good. He wants your daughter’.

The king, dressed in a gold jacket and wearing a gold crown, created a second tension during his visit the following week when he declared that that he loved gold more than anything else on earth. He showed the children the golden thread his wife had spun before their marriage and told them of his biggest worry: ‘Lately my wife has not wanted to spin any of the golden thread that I love so much. Maybe her fingers are sore, or perhaps something else happened’. The children quickly reported that the queen did not know how to spin. They told the king that there was a small creature called Rumpelstiltskin who knew how to make gold from straw. The king replied, ‘I cannot believe this. Is it possible that my wife lied to me? Impossible, I have never heard of such a thing. Are you sure?’

The teacher playing Rumpelstiltskin was prepared to tell the story from his point of view the following week. However, before he could begin, the children showed him the ring and jewels the queen had given them on her previous visit. The teacher then had to improvise: ‘These I have been looking for since I lost my jewel box in my bonfire in the forest. They still may have some magical power’. Then he began boasting about the tricks he has played on people in the greedy king’s castle and asked the children what tricks they had done. Rumpelstiltskin tried to get the information from children about Princess Alexandra’s whereabouts by hinting that he wanted to teach the princess to become his follower.

A dramatic turn occurred after Rumpelstiltskin’s visit when the king’s herald waited for the children at the beginning of the next playworld session. He started to read a letter from the king, but the words in the message had turned upside down. Working together, the children discovered that someone had put a spell on king’s court, turning all 365 rooms upside down and causing everyone in the kingdom to talk backwards. The king asked if the children could visit the court in disguise and help solve a task to restore each room to its normal order. The children decided to enter the kingdom backwards and turn their jackets inside out with the buttons on their backs. At this point, the classroom became the Kingdom of Surmundia, where both children and adults entered by walking backwards.

As described in greater detail later, the children worked together to figure out how to eliminate the spell. In spite of their openly-expressed fears, they were willing to go into the basement of the king’s castle (actually the school basement) to foil the spell.

Because we did not tell the whole story at the beginning of this playworld, its literary themes and messages were revealed slowly, as the characters presented themselves and described other characters and situations. Over time, they animated numerous conflicts, tensions, and dilemmas. For example, good versus evil was most apparent in Rumpelstiltskin, since he prized a human being above material goods, but might have been willing to steal. The powerful king was greedy and threatened harm to his wife, but also managed to inspire some admiration among the children who perceived some good
qualities in him as well. The tension between desire to be helpful and fear was most palpable when the children prepared to enter the castle basement to undo the spell.

This playworld was designed to demonstrate various aspects of social relations between role characters (El’Konin, 2005). Each character revealed some aspect of tension between different values and positions. The whole story line included a gallery of liars and trickery. The miller lied that his daughter could spin gold from straw. The miller’s daughter did not tell the truth so she could marry the king. The greedy king took the miller’s daughter as his wife because he desired the gold she could spin. The price of Rumplestiltskin’s help was quite high—the possible surrender of the queen’s first-born child.

As the playworld unfolded, the characters gradually revealed the tensions between values. Margareta divulged how high a price had to be paid for Rumplestiltskin’s help. Queen Tommina focused on good and evil in Rumplestiltskin’s character. The king revealed his greediness as a contrast to the queen’s lying. Rumplestiltskin’s visit highlighted the distinction between trickery and helping others. The upside down spell appealed to the children’s desire to help in a fearful situation.

3. Results

We circulated videotapes and field notes from each playworld session among researchers and teachers participating in the project. In 1-month intervals the material was presented to other researchers and discussed in groups.

In the present article, we focused on our analysis of field notes about several aspects of playworld in relation to the project’s goals, including children’s level of involvement, the nature of learning as compared to traditional classrooms, their initiatives, and their use of psychological tools. We used daily interactions and engagement as our unit of analysis, focusing on interaction between adults and children, interaction in children’s peer groups, and children’s reflections. Consistent with our socio-cultural theoretical framework, we examined two especially revealing factors (a) how children used cultural tools (signs, symbols, concepts) in their interactions, and (b) whether children were also able to initiate activities with others using these cultural tools. We expected that the systems of communication in our alternative classrooms, designed as transition spaces between preschool and formal school, would be radically different from those in either preschool or elementary school.

3.1. Children’s involvement in the playworld

One important question for the researchers was whether playworlds would capture and sustain the children’s interest and engagement. If so, it could be argued that playworld methodology might have considerable value in early childhood environments. Our goal was to activate children’s social and emotional sensitivity, imagination, and thinking in a playworld environment. Children’s involvement is an essential prerequisite for attaining such goals. In this 5-month project, virtually all of the children were clearly enthusiastic about participating in the playworld sessions.

Adults encouraged the children’s interest and involvement in many ways, including, importantly, the way they enacted their characters. For instance, the Queen’s perspective captivated the children from the very beginning because the teacher who played this character entered the classroom in dramatic fashion calling for her daughter, ‘Alexandra, Alexandra!’ and asking if her missing child might have come to this classroom to play. The Queen did not hint at a connection between her daughter’s disappearance and Rumplestiltskin. However, the children had already conceived of the small creature as the villain of the tale, so they quickly connected the disappearance of the child with him.

The queen then told the children that Rumplestiltskin had saved her life by spinning the straw into gold. Introducing the idea that good and evil might co-exist in the same person increased children’s involvement in the story as they tried to understand Rumplestiltskin’s true nature. The younger children (4–5 years old) agreed that a villain is essentially bad but can pretend to be good. However, a second-grade girl, Cecilia, used more mature logic to explain his behaviour when she suggested a deeper motive:

Queen: Why did he help me?
Cecilia: Because he wanted so much to have a human child.

The children added a new dimension to Rumplestiltskin’s character in a discussion about his reasons for wanting to have a human child as a reward for his help. The children noted that the little creature did not want gold or other material valuables, but a human being. This stood in stark contrast to the greedy king’s desire for gold. In the following excerpt, two children provide insights on their thinking about why Rumplestiltskin preferred a human child:

Queen: What would he do with a human child?
Tommy: He wants a human child because he does not have one.
Paul: He said that he does not want any valuables as a prize, but a living human being.

Here, Tommy thought that Rumplestiltskin simply wanted something he did not have, while Paul seemed to recognize the principle that human beings have inherent value beyond material items. Next, the Queen returned to the question of good and evil co-existing in one person.
Queen: I am just wondering what happened. There was something good in him. He cannot be totally evil because he saved my life several times.

Mike: No, he is evil!

Queen: But he helped me.

Mike: Anyway he is bad. He is just pretending to be good, but he is evil in reality.

After discussing moral problems and the tension between good and bad, children moved to solve the actual problem: where could the Queen find her daughter? Children were certain that Rumpelstiltskin was behind the princess’s disappearance. They were not ready to change their minds even when the queen assured them that she had made a deal with the creature that he would not take her child if she correctly guessed his name, which she had succeeded in doing.

Tommy: Now I know, he has left her [the Princess].

Beatrice: He has taken her to the forest.

Cecilia: Hey, hey I know, I know. He has taken the child to the forest.

Beatrice: And left her alone.

Queen: Why on earth?

Anna: He has misled her. Perhaps because you did not give her to him.

Queen: But he did not even ask. He made a deal with me that he would not demand my child if I could guess his name, and I did so.

Even after the Queen’s repeated explanations of her deal with Rumpelstiltskin, however, the children persisted in their view that he had taken the child.

3.2. Learning in playworld compared to learning in Finnish elementary classrooms

Despite declarations in the national curriculum guidelines of a new constructivist approach to learning in Finland, teaching methods in most elementary schools remain decidedly ‘old school’, emphasising assimilation of information in textbooks, converging on correct answers to questions on worksheets, and completing tasks in the one way the teacher deems acceptable. School subjects are taught separately; integration across content areas is rare. The teacher’s duty is to make children interested, to regulate their behaviour, and to support their task-solving activities.

On the other hand, a goal of playworld activities is to make tasks and assignments personally significant. Finding a single correct answer is not enough. Rather, each child must take a position in relation to the problems and values presented through the drama. This process may lead the children to change their thinking and actions. Through their active participation, children in playworlds are challenged to reflect on essential problems of human life and moral values.

The discussion of lying during the king’s classroom visit provides an excellent example. The king reported that Princess Alexandra had been found in the forest just as the children had suggested she might be. The king told the story from his own point of view as a greedy monarch who loved gold. He informed the children that the miller’s daughter would have been killed if she had not been able to spin golden thread and that her ability to spin gold was his only reason for marrying her. The discussion explored why the queen no longer wanted to spin golden thread.

King: I have been thinking about why she has not spun gold any more.

Teacher: Not any more?

King: Maybe she is fed up with that work. She has not wanted to do it.

Teacher: Why?

King: Maybe her fingers got sore.

King [to the children]: What do you think? Why doesn’t the queen spin any more?

Children: We know!

King: I would like to have more gold.

Pekka: It was that guy.

The king initially acted as if he did not understand Pekka’s comment but then he reacted loudly, making provocative statements about the Queen’s lying. Then the children revealed a secret the queen had asked them to keep and readily denounced the queen as a liar.

King: Who did what?

Paula: Rumpelstiltskin did it instead of her!

King: What man are you talking about?

Children: About Rumpelstiltskin.

Paula: He spun golden thread from straw and she gave him this ring and these jewels as a prize.
King: I cannot believe it.
Children: This is true!
King: Could my Tommina [the queen] do this? No, she could not lie to me!
Children: Yes, she lied! Yes!
King: You met her. Could she do something like this?
Children: Yes! Yes!
Paula: Margareta told the same story!

The children showed the king the power amulets they had created in case they needed to fight against magical powers in their playworld. He was very upset about the queen giving her jewels to the children.

King: I am amazed at the story about Rumpelstiltskin.
Children: Ask Tommina (the second visitor to the classroom)!
Ville: If she does not tell the truth, put her into the jail.
Paula: Rumpelstiltskin asked for her child as a reward for his help, but she guessed his name and he cannot get the child.
King: Unbelievable. My wife has lied to you or she has lied to me.
Paula: We heard the same from the first visitor.
King: What shall I do now? Ask Tommina?
Teacher: What will you do with her?
King: Put her into jail for sure if she has lied to me! Then I’ll return her to her father. But wait a minute I have to think what I can do to the mother of our child.
King: What if I give this task for you? What shall I do?
Children: Yes!
King: Write me a letter telling me what you propose I should do if she lied to me. Good-bye!

Field notes and planning documents showed that the children had taken the king’s visit in an unexpected direction. The teacher was prepared to emphasise the king’s greediness and the king intended to ask the children to help him to find other ways to turn ordinary objects into gold because his wife had stopped spinning. The children’s revelation changed the plan totally and the teachers improvised a new twist by asking the children to solve the moral problem of the queen’s lying.

The next day the children told three classmates who had been absent about the king’s visit, illustrating that they clearly understood the dynamics of their interactions with him in the playworld. ‘We told the king that the queen did not spin the golden thread’, one reported. Another said, ‘The king was greedy because he talked all the time about his gold. He wanted more and more gold’. All of the children agreed the king was greedy, but most said he was also nice.

The situation was complicated because the king successfully presented his egoism and greediness in contrast to the queen’s presentation of herself as a concerned mother who had conspired with Rumpelstiltskin only to protect herself from the king. As the play and discussion continued, the children felt that they betrayed the ‘nice’ queen and demanded to meet her again to have an opportunity to remedy their behaviour. The children now seemed to understand that the question of what to do with the queen was not as simple as it first seemed.

Variations in the children’s thinking and social sensitivity can be seen in the letters five small groups wrote to the king:

Group 1: ‘The king should have a talk with the miller and Tommina to give them a chance to explain why and what they have lied. The miller and Tommina do not admit they should be put to the corner for thinking about what they have done’.

Group 2: ‘The miller’s daughter should be put into the jail because she lied that she can spin gold’.

Group 3: ‘The miller should be put into jail because he was so greedy and mean. He lied to the king that Tommina is able to spin gold. He would become rich and his daughter would become the king’s wife. Rumpelstiltskin also should be put into jail, but for a week only. Into the jail because he wanted Tommina’s child, but only for a week because he helped Tommina. Tommina will be sent to jail if she does not admit that she lied’.

Group 4: ‘The miller should go to jail because he has been greedy and lied to the king that his daughter can spin gold. The king should talk with Tommina and if she does not admit it, she must go to jail for a day’.

Group 5: ‘Tommina’s father should go to jail because lied. He lied to become rich. The king should have a talk with Tommina’.

Only one group took up the task as the king had requested of them. The other groups started to think though the social situation as a whole, acknowledging the greediness of the miller and his responsibility.
3.3. Children’s initiatives

Elementary-grade children typically view adults as authorities and are often afraid to tell them their ideas or opinions (Zuckerman, 2007). Many teachers believe their main responsibility is to control children’s learning activities; but, in exercising this responsibility, they may also eliminate children’s initiatives. Within the Finnish context, children’s initiatives are not valued as an essential part of the learning process. By contrast, in a playworld, adults actively encourage the children to use their initiative, share their opinions, and explore alternative solutions to problems, rather than simply converging on a single pre-determined answer.

The following excerpt describes the children’s reactions to a letter from the king in which he wrote, ‘As my wife cannot spin gold thread, I would like to make a proposal to you. At my court there are too few people. I very badly need new clowns and maidens. Are you smart enough to find out methods by which ordinary objects can be transformed into gold? As a prize, I offer you work at my court. Sincerely yours, King Alfred’.

After repeatedly reading the letter, the children wanted to work in small groups to consider ways to transform objects into gold. The children decided on their own to form mixed-age groups and quickly buckled down to work to figure out how to do something that many, if not most, of them realized from the onset was actually impossible. Each group engaged in interesting discussions. Because the children were not limited to a single correct answer, they all felt free to propose imaginative solutions. The ideas flowed from the children, with help available from the adults when requested.

The following discussion occurred between the teacher and a group of girls:

Lena: We need brushes.
Teacher: What are you doing with brushes?
Anu: We will paint them gold.
Teacher: Is it the brush which turns everything into gold?
Anu: Yes.
Teacher: I want such a brush. What can it transform into gold?
Lena: Everything! Even hair.
Anu: And a house!
Teacher: What do you need for making such a brush?
Anu: Magic glue, golden paint.

Proposing solutions to an imaginary problem is not directly analogous to learning core subjects in elementary school. However, there are obvious school-related implications for future academic learning when young children take initiative for completing tasks, as they did in this example, by forming multi-age groups, persisting with a task over time, and weighing the merits of alternative solutions. Children’s initiatives were clearly visible in their free play as well. Field notes revealed that first and second graders enacted themes from the tale when they had a chance to play.

3.4. Psychological tools

The most challenging assignment appeared in the king’s letter explaining that Rumpelstiltskin had put a spell on the castle, turning it upside down. He asked the children if they could help free the maidens and knights, who had been arrested and locked in a dark basement. The children had to be careful because Rumpelstiltskin might be watching. Before stepping into the dark castle basement (the school basement), the children decided to prepare shields to protect themselves against spells and evil powers.

The children worked in groups to prepare their shields, cutting a piece of cardboard and attaching a handle to it. The children then decided to add colours and a personal spell written inside the shield to give them extra protection against Rumpelstiltskin’s spells. Several girls agreed that the heart is the strongest symbol against evil powers, so they made red and white heart-shaped shields. Some girls made two human figures representing good and wrote a spell admonishing ‘Monster, monster go away’. The boys’ favourite symbols were a red triangle and the Finnish flag. They believed that the colour on the shield would send a very effective symbolic message against evil powers.

The youngest boys in the group had a different understanding about the use of symbols as cultural tools. These younger boys believed that shield itself had magical powers that would provide direct protection. One boy stated, ‘The shield protects me’.

The children directed their symbolic cultural tools towards their own real-life fears about entering the basement of the king’s castle. Many children commented afterwards that the shields helped them a great deal. One student said that he would hang the shield on the wall at home because it was so helpful for him in fighting Rumpelstiltskin and overcoming the evil forces. After the adventure in the basement, many children took their shields with them everywhere. The teacher

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1 Vygotsky described psychological tools as mediating human social processes and thinking, not only to change the outside world, but also to ‘direct their own (or another) mind and behavior’. ‘Language; various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps, mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs, etc.’ (1981, p. 137) are used as psychological tools.
reported that, unlike some of the other toys in the classroom, all shields were still intact even a year after the playworld ended.

Here again, our work did not focus on academic outcomes from our playworld environments. However, there are obvious future advantages of these experiences using culturally situated symbolic tools to communicate ideas.

4. Discussion

Our analysis of fieldnotes on the children’s behaviours and discussions during playworld animates a concept of narrative-based learning that differs significantly from the definition of learning in traditional education and even from the ‘new ideas’ presented in Finland’s curriculum guidelines, where learning is consistently associated with assimilating knowledge in core content areas. Children’s play is viewed as antithetical to these conceptualizations of learning because it is fun and does not produce concrete, measurable results relating to the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge. In Finland the dichotomous view of play and learning is somewhat tempered by acknowledgement in the curriculum guidelines that play does contribute to the development of imagination and social skills. Interestingly, distinctions between play and learning are not as clearly defined in Finland as they are in some other Nordic countries, such as Norway, for example, where the argument has been that teacher-directed learning is more effective than play in promoting school readiness (Haug, 1996).

Early education curriculum guidelines and local curricula set academic aspects of constructivist theory. According to this interpretation, preschool children should construct pre-defined analytic knowledge in the same way as older children do at school. This interpretation of constructivism denies that learning takes place in narrative learning environments and suggests that the primary value of play is that it enables children to escape from reality.

These interpretations run contrary to Vygotsky’s (1987) assertions that learning is not simply an assimilation of facts. He believed that playful learning takes place in a paradoxical form of ‘impossibilities’ and that:

…these impossibilities would be dangerous for the children if they hide genuine and real mutual relations between ideas and objects. But they are not hiding anything, but, on the contrary, reveal, colour and underline. They strengthen (and do not weaken) the perception of reality in children (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 249).

The Rumplestiltskin playworld illustrates how learning tasks in narrative learning environments differ from those in traditional classrooms. Children are personally involved, live emotionally through the events in their shared imaginative environments, and cooperate in problem solving. An example is the preparation and use of shields to gain courage to go to the dark basement.

Interestingly, the goal of the present 5-month project, like many of our previous playworld projects, is to develop learning potential, rather than specific academic outcomes. Therefore, the ultimate results of our work can only be measured many years hence. However, we were able to document aspects of the playworld experience that we would expect to translate into success in elementary school and well beyond. For example, the children were intensely involved in playworld activities over extended periods of time. Their level of interest was further indicated by their frequent introduction of playworld material and themes into their free play. An earlier project in the same classroom also demonstrated how children can effectively transfer what they learn in playworld into their daily lives, as they did when they applied the strict behavioural rules they developed in the imaginary environment to practical situations in the classroom (Hakkarainen, 2006).

In narrative learning environments, the role of adults is radically different from their roles in an ordinary school setting. In our excerpts, children did not communicate with the adult characters in the same way that they usually communicate with their teachers. They knew that their teachers were playing the characters and they even talked about it; but their communication with the adults was not governed by ordinary rules for classroom communication. Rather, the children took initiative, put forward questions, gave advice, reacted emotionally, and participated in problem-solving in character.

The two types of interaction between adults and children that Piaget (1948) proposed are relevant in understanding narrative learning. Everyday interaction is asymmetric, where the adult wields power and often dictates. The adult takes responsibility, makes decisions, sets goals and assignments, offers behavioural models, helps, controls and evaluates the child’s action. The other type of interaction is based on shared responsibility, joint goal setting, and a search for appropriate ways for attaining these goals. This type of interaction is more prevalent in narrative learning environments.

In asymmetric interaction the more knowledgeable adult does not leave space for the development of children’s reflection, and often prevents learning. However, in peer groups and symmetric adult-child relations that occur in narrative learning environments, this problem can be eliminated. Integration of adult guidance with children’s peer group activities creates an ideal foundation for the development of reflection. This approach is consistent with Zuckerman’s (2007) concept of the zone of proximal development, wherein the most important role of the more knowledgeable partner is to promote shared reflection.

5. Conclusion and implications

Underestimation of the value of learning through play and other narrative environments has led to their gradual disappearance from early childhood education curricula and programs worldwide. Even the testimony of neuroscience about the positive effects of play and narrative activities on brain functions has not yet slowed this trend (Bergen & Coscia, 2001; LeDoux, 2003; Panksepp, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).
All documents guiding the Finnish early childhood education system recognize the importance of early years as the basis of lifelong learning and development. Curriculum guidelines call for developing children's potentials, but, paradoxically, simultaneously call for methods that dull their imagination, their zeal for learning, their initiative, and their task persistence. Various new preventative and compensatory approaches in early education are being implemented to grapple with the rapidly growing number of children with special needs in Finland. However, in spite of its potential, demonstrated in the present study and elsewhere, narrative learning is completely ignored in official Finnish documents guiding early education. Instead, national guidelines rely on basic ideas from the liberal education curriculum from the 1960s (Hirst, 1965). Growing challenges and demands upon early childhood education require a radical revision of learning concepts and developmental theory in Finland (Bredikyte & Hakkarainen, 2007).

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