

Elements of fairy tales and co-construction of meaning

Kristin Aadland-Atkinson

NLA University College, Norway and Department of Education, University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This article examines the complexity of young children's engagement with fairy tales through the art of storytelling. The focus is specifically on how children co-construct the narrative in and after a storytelling event through means provided by the fairy tale and the storyteller's performance. The study is based on fieldwork with first-grade students aged 6–7 years old in a Norwegian school. The study shows how children seemed to continue constructing meaning after the storytelling event. In this construction process, they revealed individual experiences of the shared event, as well as elements of the story. Some children's memories of the story seem closely related to their engagement in the storytelling event—whether verbal or nonverbal. Our findings support the relationship between narrative and thinking and the importance of engaging with stories and storytelling to learn this way of thinking, and thus, the importance of storytelling in the school curriculum.

Keywords

Storytelling; Narrative mind; Narrative thinking; Performance; Multimodality; Co-construction of meaning.

Introduction

Oral storytelling is an old tradition but has only been perceived as an art form relatively recently. It has its origin in what has been classified as oral cultures (Olson, 2006; Ong, 1988). An oral story serves the purpose of providing knowledge, information, and entertainment and supports meaning-making with a form that makes the story easy to remember. In recent decades, oral storytelling has found its place in Western so-called literary cultures, providing greater access to other sources of knowledge and information. The ability to tell stories has gone from being a skill passed on from generation to generation through observing and practising to something for which credits are awarded at universities and colleges in the Western world, including Norway (Thonsgaard, 1998). Several educated storytellers contribute to teaching and learning in Norwegian primary school contexts with their oral and narrative forms.

Storytelling is situational and multimodal (Greatbatch & Clark, 2010; Lwin, 2010; Swann, 2002; Aadland, 2016). In the storytelling situation, children are involved in interacting with the storyteller and the story, and they can learn to connect their own experiences and curricular learning to the stories. They learn to mutually give meaning to the story, their experiences, and the learning material (Kuyvenhoven, 2009). Kuyvenhoven uses the term “thinking with stories” when children learn to translate their experience and articulate their experience and knowledge into a narrative form.

Cobley (2013) distinguishes between the story that underlies the storytelling situation and the narrative unfolding in the situation. While the story is independent of the situation or medium employed for the telling (literal, oral, film, theatre, etc.), the narrative is the representation of the story. Thus, in a live oral storytelling situation, where the storyteller supports interaction between the storyteller, the story and the listeners, children as listeners can potentially be active participants in constructing the narrative. However, the storytelling situation, including the story itself, is prepared by the storyteller.

This study focuses on this co-construction (Valsiner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) of the narrative in and after a storytelling situation through means provided by the story (Bruner, 1986) and by the storyteller’s performative means (Bauman, 1986). The study is based on a group of first-grade students and their experience with stories and storytelling situations. The story in the storytelling situation is a fairy tale. Fairy tales were originally orally transmitted and are still a common kind of story to tell orally. The storyteller has always been expected to add a personal layer, using voice and gesture (Thonsgaard, 1998). Performative means disappear in the literary versions but are still today central modalities when a storyteller invites the listeners to interact with them and the story (Aadland, 2016). Studies show that young people do not seem to separate the story from the teller when talking about their experiences with stories and storytellers (Aadland-Atkinson, 2020). The close relationship between the storyteller, the story and the child is central to the child’s experience with the story. This relationship is created by the situatedness of the oral situation; however, the storyteller’s performance and ability to involve and enchant the listener is even more important in this regard (Aadland-Atkinson, 2020). When studying the fairy tale in an oral storytelling situation, it is, therefore, necessary to focus on and get an understanding of the means and elements that the storyteller’s performance brings to the story, in this case, a fairy tale.

The present study poses the following research questions:

Which elements and means do the fairy tale and the storyteller bring into an oral storytelling situation? How do these elements and means contribute to the children’s co-construction of the narrative and its meaning?

The Norwegian context of the study

In the Norwegian curricula, oral skills have, since the reform of 2006, been one of the five basic skills to be taught in order to support learning in every subject (the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2012). Both talking and listening are seen as belonging to oral skills, and “oral skills are a precondition for exploring interactions in which knowledge is constructed and shared” (the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2012, p. 6). According to Berge (2022) and Rødnes and Gilje (2018), research before and after the implementation of the basic skills requirement in 2006 suggests that it has remained unclear how the basic skills should be used in school and how they should be assessed through research. Svenkerud, Klette and Hertzberg (2012) study how teachers in Norwegian schools organise the teaching of oral skills, and in short, they find that there is not much teaching dedicated to oral skills as such. Further, it appears that research on oral skills has focused mostly on oral dialogue and oral presentations. Svenkerud et al. (2012), therefore, suggest that the field of oral skills in Norwegian schools needs more research.

Since the end of the 20th century, Norwegian schools have occasionally hired professional oral storytellers on a more or less permanent basis. Some schools also meet storytellers through the Norwegian programme for cultural experiences in school, The Cultural Rucksack (Den kulturelle skolesekken). Aadland-Atkinson (2020) studies the relationship between nonverbal interactional competence and the art of oral storytelling and argues for the importance of the art of storytelling to expand the focus on oral skills.

The present study aims to be a further contribution to this argument, by viewing children’s engagement and co-construction in an oral storytelling situation as an oral constructional learning situation. The assumption is that young children’s engagement with stories is complex, and the focus on the storytelling situation serves to scrutinise the role of the fairy tale and that of the storyteller’s performance for the children’s story-listening experience. The study takes place with a group of first-grade students who had regular visits from storytellers throughout one semester. It mainly builds on interviews with some of the children conducted a few hours after the storytelling situation. Data from these interviews are supplemented by observations from the storytelling situations and interviews with the storyteller.

Children learning through storytelling and fairytales

Several studies have shown how orally told narratives change with the situations in which they are told (Bauman, 1986; Greatbatch & Clark, 2010; Lwin, 2010; Swann, 2002). Using gestures, voice and language, the storyteller embodies and enacts the story, using different modalities to invite the children into participation (Aadland, 2016). The listeners might respond verbally or nonverbally to what is said and, in this way, influence the narrative as a representation of the story. This is an example of co-construction.

Looking at recent research on children and fairy tales, there are studies on, for instance, children’s fascination with fairy tales and the significance of fairy tales for children’s learning and development in areas such as normative questions and morals (Hohr, 2000, 2001, 2013). These studies are concerned with the content of fairy tales rather than their oral format and origin, although they acknowledge their oral origin and the changes that have been made to the fairy tales by writing them down, giving them a fixed form and gradually turning them into children’s literature, and further into films. In this sense, fairy tales are established as a form of story that seems to engage many children, independent of mediational tools and means.

Various studies focusing on the storytelling experience for children and adults have been undertaken. Sturm (1999, 2000, 2002) and Kuyvenhoven (2009) both focus on story listening and describe the feeling of losing the sense of time and space when absorbed in a storytelling situation. Sturm uses terms like “story listening trance experience”, “enchanted imagination”, or simply being “lost in a story”. Kuyvenhoven, studying a school class with a storytelling teacher, describes three different levels of listeners’ interaction with the story and the situation. While “talking” and “thinking” both describe different degrees of a state of mind where the story listener still has an awareness of what is going on in the surroundings, “imaginating”—a term she came by from one of the children in the study—describes the feeling of losing time and space: having a feeling of being immersed in the story.

The storyteller aims to “sketch” the images of landscape and characters so that the listeners can “paint” their own mental pictures (Samset, 2010; cf. also Sturm, 2008). Wardetzky and Weigel (2010), studying young story listeners, suggest that it takes time to learn to “see” the images and that perhaps this is more difficult in a time where images are usually offered instantaneously through digital media. Sturm (2000) concludes that a trance experience when listening does not need to be connected to seeing the inner pictures for everyone and that some listeners only hear the words and still enter a trance experience.

Learning as co-construction of meaning: Sociocultural theories of learning

Stories are crucial to understanding oneself and one’s culture. However, Bruner claims that children need to develop narrative skills; competences in constructing and understanding stories (Bruner, 1996/1997). From a sociocultural point of view, learning happens through constructing meaning or knowledge through interaction between the experiencing person as a learner, the child, and a social “other” (more competent). Further, learning is often mediated by language or other tools (Valsiner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). This mediation is seen as a cumulative co-construction with others, and from this activity, development and learning happen (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, all higher mental processes start as social processes (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of co-construction combines the individual orientation of constructivism with the social orientation of the learner (Valsiner, 1996). Thus, collective construction of the narrative in the storytelling situation will lead to individual constructions of meaning or individual versions of the story.

Co-construction in storytelling

Traditional oral stories are the result of a long process of co-construction over generations, where each storyteller has left traces. Each time the story is told the process of co-construction continues, both within the situation of storytelling and in collaboration with the earlier formations represented in the narrative. In this way, oral storytelling is a priori an issue of co-construction over both time and space: through discovering, telling, and retelling stories across time, people from oral traditions have acted as mediating artefacts in the process of co-constructing knowledge, as a cumulative process over time and space. It can, therefore, be said that the fairy tale is the result of oral processes, dialogues, and co-construction over time (Lemke, 2000).

Vygotsky (1967/2004) describes how the creative and imaginative mind connects experiences and observations to a story to make meaning from them. A consequence of this is that stories mainly consist of elements already known to the teller. Further, by listening to storytelling, a listener takes part in new experiences (Benjamin, 1969) or reactivates their own experiences and

memories (Sturm, 2002). When the child turns experienced events into stories, the events can be connected causally—not with an end to prove and explain, but rather to find a believable understanding (Bruner, 1986). Bruner (1986) further argues that there are two modes of thought used in parallel with one other: the narrative and the logical. It is with the narrative mode of thought that the need to tell stories emerges.

Studying a text or a story implies taking different events into account: the “narrated events”—the events around which the story is built—and the “narrative events”—the situation in which the story is told (Bakhtin, 1981). The folklorist Bauman (1986), who studies the oral storytelling situation, examines the oral performance in light of these concepts and notes how the different narrative events change the narrative that occurs in the storytelling situation. Since the same story will never sound the same in different situations, a differentiation between the underlying story and the narrative as a representation is useful when studying how children as listeners participate in the co-construction of the narrative and further the meaning of the narrative (Cobley, 2013). The present study focuses on young children’s co-construction of the narrative and its meaning after the storytelling situation that they were part of, as a continuation of the co-construction that happened in the actual storytelling situation.

The story and its means and elements

The form and structure of the fairy tale have their origin in oral cultures, where means like gestures and facial expressions are part of the communication and are used to facilitate recall and meaning making (Olson, 2006; Ong, 1988). By collecting and writing fairy tales in text, the German Brothers Grimm and the Norwegian Asbjørnsen and Moe, among others, have given these stories a more fixed form, still often quite close to the original oral form, with a simpler structure and less literal variation than what literal stories provide. What is in focus here, however, is the oral storytelling situation, and therefore, a version of the fairy tale that includes the voices of the performing storyteller and the children listening (Bakhtin, 1981; Bauman, 1986). This study is based on an orally transmitted fairy tale from Africa, a culture where the original oral storytelling traditions are still strong.

Scientists from diverging disciplines have dealt with the phenomenon of fairy tales, including their meanings and functions, for children as well as adults. The common starting point is the need to understand and make meaning out of experiences and observations (Bruner, 1986, 1996/1997; Vygotsky, 1967/2004). From a psychoanalytical point of view, elements in fairy tales are used to understand ourselves, consciously or unconsciously. Carl Jung used fairy tales and myths as a starting point for theories about archetypes and the subconscious process of developing different parts and levels of one’s personality (Bettelheim, 1975).

Bruno Bettelheim (1975) uses the term binary opposites when explaining children’s preference for fairy tales during a period of their lives when their understanding is developing from a black-and-white mentality to more nuanced thinking. According to Bettelheim, the receiver of the story receives through these opposites a way to organise and make order out of the chaos when dealing with opposite or contrasting feelings and characteristics of oneself. This makes fairy tales engaging and helps both the storyteller and the listener to remember and make meaning. The educational philosopher Egan (2005) also argues that the use of binary opposites is an element that makes fairy tales engaging to children.

The storyteller and her means and elements

Understanding storytelling as multimodal and performative suggests that the visual and vocal as well as the verbal elements influence the narrative as a representation of the story (Lwin, 2010; Swann, 2002; Aadland, 2016) and are also part of the storytelling situation. A further suggestion is that the oral storyteller's voice is represented in the version of the fairy tale that the children listen to and the version they subsequently retell. This also means that the participating children's voices are represented in the narrative of the storyteller in the situation (Bakhtin, 1981; Bauman, 1986). In all oral discourse, meaning is found in the combination of these components (Olson, 2006; Ong, 1988), and it is, therefore, difficult to transcribe oral storytelling without including notes about gesture and voice. For a professional storyteller, such elements will be well-planned, much like the rhetorical speaker (Andersen, 2000).

The oral storyteller usually learns the story by working with mental images of the events, characters, and landscape in the story rather than by learning the story word for word (Samset, 2010; Sturm, 2008). In this way, the storyteller has more freedom to improvise in the storytelling situation and can use performative means as well as language to enact the story. If the storyteller "listens" to the listeners, the listeners will contribute with feedback to the construction of the narrative as it unfolds in the situation.

Methods and material

The study took place in a Norwegian urban school that has been hiring professional storytellers for several years. The group of children selected for the study reflects the high percentage of immigrant children in the area. The group attending the storytelling situation consisted of all the children in first grade (aged six to seven), in total 54 children. In normal lessons, they are split into two groups, though they were all together for the storytelling sessions. From February to May, storytellers visited the school classes on 12 occasions. The research design consists of video-recorded observations of eight storytelling situations and, in total, seven audio-recorded individual interviews: six children and one storyteller.

The interviews were conducted shortly after the final storytelling session, and the video recording from this last session was also transcribed. The reason for choosing this situation was mainly to get to know the children but also because an upgrade of the recording equipment provided data of better quality. The interviews were mainly related to this last session in order to keep the co-construction of one narrative in focus. All the children were asked to tell what they remembered from the story. The interviews with the children are the primary data for the following analysis, and an interview with the storyteller, as well as a video transcriptionii of the last session, serve as secondary data to provide information about the storyteller's choices and the storytelling situation.

Methodological and ethical considerations

The project was reported to and assessed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Because the informants are minors, written informed consent was obtained from their parents. In addition, the children were given oral information, and the interviewed children were given the possibility to withdraw from the study. The data has been anonymised and fictional names have been given to all the quoted participants.

When studying young children, it is important to be aware of the asymmetric relationship between the researcher and the informant (Skreland & Fasting, 2021). Interview data are primary, but by being observed over the semester, the children became accustomed to having the researcher around, and this served as a way to mitigate the effects of the asymmetric relationship. The observations were something between participatory and non-participatory (Fangen, 2010), becoming less participatory in the later sessions. Because the interview was left for the last storytelling situation, the children seemed to recognise the interviewer. This facilitated the conversation as the child knew that the interviewer had been present and had heard the same story.

The children were fascinated by the audio recorder in the interviews as well as by the cameras in the storytelling situation, but they did not seem to mind having them there and seemed to forget the equipment as the interview or the storytelling situation started. A hindsight observation is that using a camera would have also been useful during the interviews, as some of the retellings from the children were accompanied by visual features that the recorder could not capture. To address this, notes were taken during the interviews to capture some of the gestures.

One methodological challenge is connected to the cultural background and the various levels of Norwegian language competency among the interviewees. The storytelling and interviews were in Norwegian. This may have caused different interpretations of the questions. Language barriers could have caused further challenges in the understanding of the initial storytelling situation, the retelling during the interviews and the co-construction in the interview situation. In the interview with the storyteller, she said that with this particular group she was very focused on using all the modalities to prepare for the best possible understanding. In addition to clearly performative means, she also used some physical, illustrating artefacts at the beginning of the storytelling to provide context and overcome language barriers. Furthermore, the storytellers throughout the semester showed an awareness of the mixed backgrounds among the children when choosing stories from different origins, the last time choosing an African tale.

The children

Six children from the group were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009/2015). The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Each interview lasted 15–20 minutes and included the children's recollections of the story they had heard that same day. This study is based on the last storytelling situation, but some of the questions also refer to the children's storytelling experience in general. Some of the children also brought in stories from earlier situations—or even from home—as answers to the interviewer's questions. One girl did not want to retell or talk about the story that was provided, and the material, therefore, consists of five retellings from two boys, Tore and Ibrahim, and three girls: Alik, Tanya and Lene—all pseudonyms. Tore and Lene had an ethnic Norwegian background, while the others had other various language backgrounds.

The story and the storyteller

The fairy tale in this study was given to the storyteller through oral transmission more than 20 years before the storytelling situation took place. She had told the story many times over the years and made adaptations, such as changing the gender of the main characters from boys to girls and adjusting the characteristics of the two.

The story is about an African village which suffers from a lack of rain, causing failed crops, and describes what happens when a mother sends her children out to find food. Two twin sisters are

the eldest, one beautiful and lazy, another “normal” and hardworking. The beautiful, lazy girl sits down, finding herself too important to do any hard work. The normal, hardworking girl, on the other hand, manages through her hard work to get to another world. By heeding instructions and doing as she is told, she procures a magic drum that, when played, gives food to the family and the whole village. Seeing the attention the sister gets, the lazy girl decides to do what her sister did, but better. However, ignoring all instructions and advice, she ends up with a drum that gives her rashes and wounds instead of food.

The storyteller used artefacts to explain some words in the story. In addition, she used her voice and body to enact and illustrate. For example, when the heroine is tasked with picking up small potatoes and leaving the large ones, the storyteller, with a little basket in her hand, bent down and mimicked the picking. She also imitated the small potatoes with a high pitch voice, saying, “Don’t pick me”, and further, she imitated the large potatoes with a deeper voice, saying, “Pick me”, tempting her to go against the task. Further, the storyteller invited the children to interact and participate by, for example, posing questions such as: “Which potatoes should the girl pick?” or inviting them to an activity like playing the drums on their thighs when the heroine plays the drum.

Findings and discussion

The analysis is based on an inductive approach to the interviews with the children. Through several readings of the transcriptions, four categories were identified in the material to show how different elements and means are utilised in the storytelling situation—and how these are reflected in the children’s involvement with the story and co-construction of meaning. Two categories, *opposite characters and binary storyline*, relate mainly to the fairy tale and two other categories, *verbal, vocal, and visual performative means and mental images*, relate to the storyteller.

Opposite characters

In the recording, the storyteller presented the heroine as good and hardworking but with average looks and the sister as selfish and lazy but beautiful and aware of it. In the interview with the storyteller, it became clear that she had made adjustments from the expected binarity between ugly and beautiful to normal and beautiful.

When asked about their memories of the story, the children had different ways of describing the two sisters with reference to their looks. For instance, Alik consequently talked about the heroine presented by the storyteller as normal looking as “the ugly girl” and her sister as “the pretty girl”. None of the others used the term “ugly”, but Lene also related the heroine to a contrast of pretty when referring to her as the one who was “not pretty”.

The other Interviewed children, Tore, Tanya, and Ibrahim, seemed less occupied with the degree of opposites of the characters. They still related to the differences as a way of organising the construction. Tore was closest to the storyteller when he described the two sisters as follows:

(...) one “Oh, I am so pretty!” and one totally normal girl.

Tanya referred to the girls mostly as “the one” or “the first” and “the other”. She went on and described “the other” as “the one who did everything so wrong”. In her descriptions, Tanya seemed more interested in the opposites in terms of action and events, than the opposites of appearances, as is Ibrahim as well.

Ibrahim used the term “the new one” about the beautiful sister. In his version he depicted her as a main character getting “wounds and rashes”. He focused solely on the end of the story. Only when asked if there were other characters he said:

Yes, but that was the old one (...) She got food.

The focus was on the outcome for the girls rather than on the opposition in characteristics.

The first category, *opposite characters*, is a structural element mainly inherent in the fairy tale. As seen from Bettelheim (1975), fairy tales are organised with one-dimensional and opposing characters, something which might help children in their meaning-making and organising of chaos. Under this category, the focus is on how the storyteller adapts the binary opposites in characters, as she adds her voice to the story, and how the children react to her adaptations. Both Alik and Lene seemed to confirm that binary opposites are helpful for remembering, organising and making meaning of the narrative. The idea that binary opposites help encourage emotional engagement with the story (Egan, 2005) can also explain why these two girls reverted to a stronger binarity than that given by the storyteller. This co-construction of the narrative and its meaning might have happened during the storytelling because it made sense there and then, or it might have happened in the recollection process in the interview.

Ibrahim changed the storyline and constructed a narrative quite distant from the original, not caring about the opposition in characters or any other means given by the story to help him. Ibrahim’s version of the narrative will be further investigated when studying the binarity of the storyline.

Binary storyline

The fairy tale also has a binarity in the storyline, driven forth by the two sisters. The heroine solves the problem, is rewarded, and wins glory while her sister tries to do it better, and because she does not listen to advice, she ends up doing things wrong and being punished. The storyteller had not made major changes to this, but in the telling she acted the part of the beautiful and conceited girl with verbal, vocal, and visual means. In this way she may have demonstrated an attitude to the two girls’ different behaviours. In different ways all the children related to the different courses of events for the two girls.

Tanya said about the normal girl that she

took a drum—and then the woman said she had to take a normal [drum]—had to say “set”.

And then Tanya continued:

The other one only did so wrong... then she got wounds and stuff.

Alik and Tore both described in detail how the normal (in Alik’s version, ugly) girl endures all temptations, follows all seemingly awkward instructions—like peeling potatoes but keeping the peel and getting rid of the potatoes—and takes home a normal drum that feeds the village when played. Alik also described in detail of all the mistakes the pretty girl makes before she takes the largest drum and ends up with:

(...) tears, disease, and lots of blood.

Tore had, prior to retelling this story, retold two other stories and was, at this point, tired of telling stories. He, therefore, asks for permission not to tell this one to the end. Hence, he did not get to the beautiful sister's part of the story.

Ibrahim is, as earlier mentioned, most taken by this "new girl" and her "wounds and spots" without really relating it to having done anything wrong. In this sense, what Ibrahim did was replace the original problem in the story, namely that of a village suffering from hunger, with a new problem: a drum causing wounds and rashes. One might assume that this just means that he did not remember the whole story. His understanding can, however, also be related to how he engaged with the story and the storyteller in the storytelling situation. In the video recording from the storytelling situation, Ibrahim is seen taking an active part, answering questions and participating in activities initiated by the storyteller (singing and playing the drum).

This second category, *binary storyline*, is closely related to the first one but focuses on the binary dramaturgy of the fairy tale: doing the right thing and being rewarded or doing the wrong thing and being punished. This binarity relates to the story itself, although it is associated with the binarity of characters and making order out of chaos (Bettelheim, 1975). The attitude to rules and advice and the moral of the story is revealed here and is experienced and reflected differently by different children. In Ibrahim's engagement and co-construction of the narrative, however, it seems evident that this participation meant more than the binarity in characters and storyline.

Verbal, vocal, and visual performative means

As mentioned above, the study involves a group of children with a large mix of ethnic backgrounds and levels of competency in the Norwegian language. The storyteller herself commented on the fact that with this group, she focused heavily on performative means, such as the visual use of gestures and the vocal use of voice imitation and tone. In addition, her verbal use of directly quoted dialogues is relatively frequent, second to the voice imitation. Her use of *visual, vocal, and verbal* means—and the children's reactions to these—is further analysed by Aadland (2016). The storyteller uses these performative techniques both as an embodiment of what is said and as a means to invite the children into active participation in the storytelling, for example, by drumming and singing.

In the interviews, the children were not asked, "Can you tell the story?" but simply, "What do you remember?". Hence, they were not specifically asked for an artistic version. Nonetheless, Tore especially imitated different voices in the same way as the storyteller did, and this functions as a way of describing different characters. For instance, little potatoes got tiny voices, giant potatoes got deep voices, the older woman got a "squeaky" voice, and so on. Alik did the same but to a lesser degree than Tore.

Visual means like gestures are difficult to capture on audio recording, but notes from the interviews indicate some gesturing, such as Tanya lifting her hands to her ears when describing how the older woman touched her ears. Drumming was another activity that the storyteller used in her telling. The drumming was accompanied by singing a simple melody and the words "ding-ding-ding". In her recounting of the narrative, Tanya said that the girls "did like this" while demonstrating the drumming on her legs. The song and the drumming are also central in Ibrahim's version, as the reason why "the new girl" got wounds and rashes and "the old girl" got food.

Alik, Tore and Lene all extensively used the verbal element of directly quoting dialogues, while the others mainly introduced dialogues with "then she said that..." When Tore used the

quotation “Oh, I am so pretty” to describe the sister of the heroine, he also added a hand gesture and a voice imitation similar to what the storyteller did. In this way, the different performative elements go together, serving as embodied means for constructing meaning.

In the recording from the storytelling situation, the storyteller can be seen saying that a party is thrown when the heroine returns with a food-bringing drum. The storyteller asked what they do in Africa when they party after a good meal. Ibrahim responded by saying: “They do it again!” and then he verbally and visually took part in the storytelling as a dialogue with the storyteller. Ibrahim might have been encouraged by his own experiences coming from a North African background when he participated. Later, he focused on the final part of the story in his retelling. Perhaps this active participation at the end of the storytelling helped him to construct meaning and thus to remember this last bit of the story.

When recounting the story, some of the children adopted several of the modalities and performative means that the storyteller used. However, when asked what they remembered, the performative means and nonverbal parts of the communication appeared to be important for their recall of the co-constructed narrative. This suggests the importance of the use of different modalities in oral storytelling for engaging the children and for helping them to construct meaning and, hence to remember.

The third category, *verbal, vocal, and visual performative means*, is related to the storyteller. Earlier studies have shown how storytellers use these means to enact the story and invite the children to participate. (Aadland, 2016; Lwin, 2010; Swann, 2002). Here, we see that some of the children adapted these means in their versions of the storytelling and that Ibrahim might have taken advantage of his performative participation in the storytelling situation when later retelling.

Mental images

In the interview with the storyteller, she confirms that her stories are not learned word by word but rather through identifying and working on the different events, characters and scenery. Central to this work is the development of the mental images of characters and landscapes. The characters are not necessarily described in detail but just as much enacted with voice and gesture. For instance, when describing the older woman in the ‘other world’, she says:

At a corner sat an old woman who said: “come here, come here” (waving with her index finger), and she walked over to the woman. And the old woman said (imitating the old woman’s ‘squeaking’ voice): “Why have you come here?”.

In the interviews, the children were asked what happens in their minds when they listen to stories. Only two children, Lene and Tore, had a clear answer to this question, and their answers came immediately. Lene said:

Yes, I see the images in my head.

Tore said:

It starts feeling like I am there.

When asked if he sees anything, he said:

Yes, I see quite a lot. I make pictures—make ... make a film ... myself.

Both Lene and Tore continued with quite detailed descriptions of characters and landscapes which are different from each other and not mentioned by the storyteller. An example is the older woman who, according to Tore, is described as having white or grey hair, wrinkles on her

hands and forehead, and wearing a big shawl. Lene described the same older woman as wrinkly but with greenish skin and wearing a green top and a check-patterned apron over a yellow skirt.

From the interview with Tore, it became clear that he not only engaged with storytelling at school but also had a father who has been telling him many stories—some of which he shared in the interview.

Ibrahim related that he thinks about the fairy tale, and then he dreams about it.

Because when I sleep, I can see it.

Meanwhile, Alik gave a very rich and detailed recounting of the whole story but said she did not see anything. She just remembers the story as it is told.

But sometimes I don't hear [listen?], so well, then... I must ask again.

In the storytelling situation, Alik looked down at her belt most of the time, twisting it with her fingers, now and then looking up, for instance, when the storyteller changed the tone of her voice. Neither Ibrahim nor Alik could give descriptions of characters or landscapes after the fact.

The fourth category, mental images, is related to the storyteller starting with her mental images when developing the story as another way of adding her voice (Bakhtin, 1981) and making the storytelling situation engaging and “trance-like” (Kuyvenhoven, 2009; Sturm, 2002). This category shows how the children related to the mental images and how this might help them to recall and make the experience more vivid. Tore and Lene's responses suggest that the storyteller, through her preparations and performance, has sketched enough to nourish their construction of images in the manner described by both Sturm (2008) and Samset (2010). This again supports their construction of meaning and affects their telling of the narrative. Later, Tore said: “and the mother looked a bit like my mother”, supporting the idea elaborated upon above that imagination and creativity build on known experiences.

The question about what happens in their minds might, for some six to seven-year-olds, be a challenging one. It is, for instance, possible that Alik's detailed retelling indicates that she also has an awareness of the shared images, though she does not articulate them as ‘seen’ images. Since Lene and Tore are the only two of these five children with Norwegian as their mother tongue, they also had an easier starting point for understanding the questions. Tore's extended experience with stories from home might also account for his ability to see or construct the images, as suggested by former research, which states that it takes time to learn to see images (Wardetzky & Weigel, 2010). Possibly, this idea can also be transferred to the co-construction of narrative and meaning in general, namely that it is experience-based and needs to be learned.

This study asks which elements and means the fairy tale and the storyteller bring to an oral storytelling situation and how these elements and means contribute to children's co-construction of the narrative and its meaning. The analysis identifies elements and means from the fairy tale, *opposite characters*, and *binary storyline*, and from the performing storyteller, *verbal, vocal, and visual performative means*, and *mental images*. Further, it is shown how these means are reflected when the children construct their versions of the narrative and its meaning.

The children presented five different co-constructions of the narrative, and by doing so, they present different meanings. They responded differently to the various means brought to the situation by the fairy tale and the storyteller. Alik and Lene appeared to be more concerned with the *opposite characters* than the others, though all of the children relate to this idea. Some of the other children, such as Ibrahim and Tanya, seemed more concerned with the *binarity in the storyline*

and how the characters contribute to this. Both means are reflected in the children's retellings to various degrees. They support co-construction through organising the relationships between the characters, and between characters and the events happening to them.

Verbal, vocal and visual performative means are reflected in some retellings, especially from Tore and Alik. These two used performative means to describe the characters and the storyline. Thus, the performative means became part of the co-construction of narrative and meaning. In this way, the means given by the fairy tale and by the storyteller are intertwined. When Ibrahim was engaged to take part in the storytelling towards the end of the storytelling situation, he was also invited by the storyteller. Both the storyteller and Ibrahim used performative means in this interaction, supporting his co-construction of the narrative and its meaning. Finally, Tore and Lene were the ones who most clearly saw *mental images* or at least were able to express this process. In addition to both having the advantages of participating in the situation with their maternal language, Tore also had an extended experience of storytelling from home. The literature and data presented suggest that it takes time and experience to see mental images (Wardetzky & Weigel, 2010) and to turn experiences into stories (Bruner, 1996/1997). Perhaps this is the case for co-construction in general.

Conclusion

The study illustrates the complexity of children's engagement with stories, implying that the collective storytelling situation is also an individual experience, in line with the socio-cultural approach. Thus, being part of a communal construction of a narrative in the actual storytelling situation, the child continues the construction of meaning on an individual level and in individual ways.

The categories chosen to describe the co-construction of the narrative and its meaning, and thereby the children's engagement with stories, exemplified with one fairy tale, have served not to show one way to co-construct or engage with the story but to show how complex this co-construction is. None of the children related similarly to the different categories, and there is no pattern suggesting that one way to co-construct is more common than others. Together the categories rather exemplify a variety of co-construction and engagement with stories. While some children related more to the binary opposites in character and storyline connected to the fairy tale, others related more to the performative means and the images given by the storyteller. In the end, the means are intertwined, as the elements and means given by the storyteller are used to describe the elements and means given by the fairy tale.

References

- Aadland-Atkinson, K. (2020). Non-verbal samhandlingskompetanse i munnleg forteljarkunst [Nonverbal interactional competence in the art of oral storytelling]. In L. K. G. Jermstad & U. G. S. Goth (Eds.), *Fra barnehage til voksenliv: Utdanning, didaktikk og verdi* (pp. 101-119). Novus Forlag. <https://doi.org/10.52145/AMGX3675>
- Aadland, K. (2016). The Performative Relation Between Storyteller, Story, and Children, In O. Erstad, Kumpulainen, K.; Mäkitalo, Å.; Schröder, K. Ch.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P. & Johannsdottir, T. (Eds.), *Learning across Contexts in the Knowledge Society* (pp. 61-84). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-414-5_4
- Andersen, Ø. (2000). *I retorikkens hage (3 utg.)* [In the garden of rhetorics]. Universitetsforlaget.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.; M. Holquist, Ed.). University of Texas Press.
- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative* (Vol. 10). Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1969). *Illuminations*. Vintage Books.
- Berge, K. L. (2022). Grunnleggende muntlige ferdigheter i norsk skole. Kritiske perspektiv på den utdanningspolitiske og faglige forankringen [Basic oral skills in Norwegian school. Critical perspectives]. In R. Solheim, H. Otnes & M. O. Riis-Johansen (Eds.), *Samtale, samskrive, samhandle. Nye perspektiver på muntlighet og skriftlighet i samspill* (pp. 211-228). Universitetsforlaget.
- Bettelheim, B. (1975). *The uses of enchantment. The meaning and importance of fairy tales*. Vintage Books, Random House.
- Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1997). *Utdanningskultur og læring* [The culture of education] (B. Christensen, Trans.). Ad notam Gyldendal. (Original work published 1996)
- Cobley, P. (2013). *Narrative. The new critical idiom*. Routledge.
- Egan, K. (2005). *An imaginative approach to teaching*. Jossey-Bass.
- Fangen, K. (2010). *Deltagende observasjon* [Participating observation]. Fagbokforlaget.
- Greatbatch, D. & Clark, T. (2010). The situated production of stories. In N. Llewellyn & J. Hindmarsh (Eds.), *Organisation, interaction and practice: studies of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hohr, H. (2000). Dynamic aspects of fairy tales: social and emotional competence through fairy tales. *Scandinavian journal of educational research*, 44(1), 89-103. <https://doi.org/doi/ref/10.1080/713696665>

- Hohr, H. (2001). Lurvehætte og hennes søstre. Hvordan kommuniserer eventyr med barn? [Lurvehette and her sisters. How do fairy tales communicate with children?]. *Barn*(2), 14. <https://tidsskriftetbarn.no/index.php/barn/article/view/4338/6981>
- Hohr, H. (2013). Normativity in Fairy Tales: Scope, Range and Modes of Communication. *Scandinavian journal of educational research*, 57(6), 600-611. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2013.782892>
- Kuyvenhoven, J. (2009). *In the presence of each other: a pedagogy of storytelling*. University of Toronto Press.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju*. [Interview: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing] (T. M. Anderssen, Trans.). Gyldendal Akademisk. (Original work published 2009).
- Lemke, J. L. (2000). Across the scales of time: Artifacts, activities, and meanings in ecosocial systems. *Mind, culture, and activity*, 7(4), 273-290. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327884MCA0704_03
- Lwin, S. M. (2010). Capturing the dynamics of narrative development in an oral storytelling performance: A multimodal perspective. *Language and Literature*, 19(4), 357-377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947010373029>
- Olson, D. R. (2006). Oral discourse in a world of literacy. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(2), 136-143. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40171695>
- Ong, W. J. (1988). *Orality and literacy*. Routledge.
- Rødnes, K. A. & Gilje, Ø. (2018). Ti år med grunnleggende ferdigheter—hva vet vi, og hvor går vi? [Ten years of basic skills—what do we know, and where do we go?]. *Norsk pedagogisk tidsskrift*, 102(3), 201-213. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-2987-2018-03-02>
- Samset, H. (2010). *Bibelfortellerboka: kino i hodet til barn og unge* [The Bible storytelling book: cinema in the mind of children and youth]. Verbum.
- Skreland, L. L. & Fasting, M. L. (2021). Forskerkroppen [The research body]. In M. L. Fasting, L. L. Skreland & J. Kampmann (Eds.), *Å forske blant barn. Kvalitative metoder*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Sturm, B. W. (1999). The Enchanted Imagination: Storytelling's Power to Entrance Listeners. *School Library Media Research*, 2(6). https://wearesocial.com/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/09/SLMR_EnchantedImagination_V2.pdf
- Sturm, B. W. (2000). The “Storylistening” Trance Experience. *Journal of American Folklore*, 287-304. <https://doi.org/10.2307/542104>

- Sturm, B. W. (2002). Lost in a Story: Modeling Storytelling and Storylistening. In I. M. Blayer & M. Sánchez (Eds.), *Storytelling: interdisciplinary & intercultural perspectives*. Peter Lang. <http://books.google.no/books?id=ZTq1AAAAIAAJ>
- Sturm, B. W. (2008). The Process of Sharing Stories with Young People. *Knowledge Quest*, 36(5), 12-18. <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=a307999b-acfc-46ce-8d89-1ec78541f862%40redis>
- Svenkerud, S., Klette, K. & Hertzberg, F. (2012). Opplæring i muntlige ferdigheter [Training oral skills]. *Nordic studies in education*, 32(1), 35-49. <https://www.idunn.no/doi/full/10.18261/ISSN1891-5949-2012-01-03>
- Swann, J. (2002). A Man Amongst Men: The Intersection of Verbal, Visual, and Vocal Elements in an Oral Narrative. In I. M. Blayer & M. Sánchez (Eds.), *Storytelling: interdisciplinary & intercultural perspectives*. Peter Lang. <http://books.google.no/books?id=ZTq1AAAAIAAJ>
- The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2012). *Framework for basic skills [English translation]* https://www.udir.no/contentassets/fd2d6bfbf2364e1c98b73e030119bd38/framework_for_basic_skills.pdf
- Thonsgaard, K. (1998). *Drommenes torv. Om muntlig fortællekunst* [The square of dreams. About the art of oral storytelling]. Klim.
- Valsiner, J. (1996). Co-constructionism and development: A socio-historic tradition. *Anuario de Psicología (Barcelona)*(69), 63-82. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/39050003.pdf>
- Van der Veer, R. & Valsiner, J. (1988). Lev Vygotsky and Pierre Janet: On the origin of the concept of sociogenesis. *Developmental Review*, 8(1), 52-65. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297\(88\)90011-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(88)90011-1)
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (2004). Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology*, 42(1), 7-97. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1927/imagination.pdf> (Original work published 1967)
- Wardetzky, K., & Weigel, C. (2010). *Sprachlos?: Erzählen im interkulturellen Kontext. Erfahrungen aus einer Grundschule* [Without a language. Storytelling in multicultural contexts. Experiences from a primary school]. Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: a sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Harvard University Press.

Author

Kristin Aadland-Atkinson is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Teacher Education at NLA University College in Norway. She is currently working on a PhD in Science of Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Oslo. Her research interests are oral storytelling, oral skills, interaction, communication, and the construction of meaning.

Correspondence: kriatk@nla.no

ⁱ The Knowledge Promotion Reform of 2006 (KP06).

ⁱⁱ The video data serve as primary data for the analysis in the analysis of the referred article from Aadland (2016)