

Reading of Literature and Reflection by means of Aesthetical Activities

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Abstract: Based on the hypothesis that reading of fiction followed by aesthetic reflection might be a useful tool towards the development of children's literacy competence in the first years of school, this article constitutes a theoretical basis for such an educational approach. The article is based on a cultural-historical understanding of the work of L.S. Vygotsky and is also inspired by Jerome Bruner's social constructivism.

Children's literature, their drawings and play are seen as cultural tools which, when related to Vygotsky's work (1978a, 1981) allow for the mastery of psychological processes. However, referring to Stetsenko (1999) it is of importance to see the interrelation of three cornerstones in Vygotsky's theoretical universe: social interaction, cultural tools and zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978a, 1978d). These cornerstones and new constructions are a basis for the introduction of an educational approach using literature, dialogue and aesthetic means and processes such as children's storytelling, drawing and play.

Keywords: Vygotsky and Bruner, fiction literature, storytelling, drawing, play

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on reading of literature, children's own storytelling, drawing and play. These dimensions are seen as integrated parts of both the original kindergarten tradition and current levels of early childhood education and care.

However, in many countries, there is an increasing tendency towards to give a lower priority to self-governing aesthetic activities and instead introducing the three Rs from school (*reading, writing and arithmetic*). The reason is obvious. From a politico-economic perspective early education might equalize social and educational inequalities, and thus "making the European Union the most competitive economy in the world and achieving full employment by 2010" (*Treaty of Lisbon*, 2000). For that reason since 2000 the EU member states have invested in pre-primary education as an effective means of establishing the basis for further learning, preventing school drop-out rates, and increasing equity of

outcomes and overall skill levels. The increasing focus on literacy in preschool can be seen in this light.

The introduction of early literacy in preschool is challenging, especially from a Nordic perspective, and it has also been criticized as "schoolification" (OECD, 2006). However, practitioners, parents and researchers from the field of early childhood nowadays generally perceive preschool as a learning environment, and are willing to take in early literacy as long as it fits the original kindergarten tradition. Thus a narrative and aesthetic approach might form the basis of a theoretical foundation for early literacy in preschool.

The aim of the article is to create a theoretical platform and outline some educational principles and ideas directed towards an aesthetic and narrative approach to early literacy.

The used *methodology* is reserved to a literature study combined with the involvement of

knowledge and data from earlier studies. So the findings are first of all drawn from literary studies but they are supplemented with empirical material from a project in which children were encouraged to be storytellers (Broström, 1999a, 2002). They are also supplemented with experiences from experimental studies and developmental projects in the field of preschool and school, where researchers and practitioners together made up a practice using an educational approach in which the reading of literature was followed by aesthetic activities (Broström, 2005a; Broström, Frandsen, Vilhelmsen, 2004, 2008).

This methodology is based on research results into the relation between reading aloud, children's storytelling, use of aesthetic activities, and children's development of language and reading skills.

Thus a research review by Scarborough & Dobrich (1994) enumerated 31 published investigations into the efficacy of reading to preschoolers, and found a relation between reading to them aloud and children's later general reading abilities. Correspondingly, a number of other research results (e.g. Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Silvén, Ahtola & Niemi, 2003) show a link between the role of joint reading by parents and children, and children's language competencies and later development of reading skills.

Findings also indicate that joint reading in preschool has a positive effect on children's storytelling if this includes dialogues on the books and working with the literature via role-play and drawing (Anning, 2003; Pellegrini & Galda, 1998, Silvén et al., 2003). Another study by Pellegrini and Galda (1993) shows, that children's storytelling achieves a higher level of quality when children in small groups reflect on the stories in role-play and drawing activities.

One might conclude that the above findings and the generally positive views on literature and reading aloud expressed by the educators should result in a high occurrence of literature activities in preschool, leisure-time centres/after-school and the first years in school. However, a Danish study (Broström, Frandsen & Vilhelmsen, 2008) carried out in 212 educational school settings with equal representation of after-schools, kindergarten classes and classes with grades 1, 2 and 3, shows a less optimistic picture (see tables 1 and 2). To the question of "How often do you read for the children?" only 37 per

cent responded to the category "Every day", 46 per cent marked the category "Several times a week", and the rest was distributed among the categories "Several times a month", "A few times during the year", "Happens periodically" and "Happens never".

The approach that employed reading followed by aesthetical activities (drawing and play) also got low priority (table 2). About half (49 per cent) of the teachers marked that they "often" give the children the opportunity to *draw and paint* in relation to the text", while only 1 per cent used the category "Always". When it comes to play and drama the category "Seldom" and "Never" were much more in use. Only 18 per cent indicated that they "often" let children do *drama* in relation to the text, and only 10 per cent made use of *play* "often" (and none ticked off the category "Always").

Table 1: Reading of literature

<i>How often do you read to the children?</i>	%
Every day	37
Several times a week	46
Several times a month	7
A few times during the year	1
Periodically	7
Never	1

Table 2: Reading and reflection after reading

<i>Children reflect by means of</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Never</i>
Drawing	1	49	41	7
Playing	0	10	61	28

Teachers do not include literature in literacy teaching on a large scale, and their use of aesthetical activities such as play and drawing is rather limited. This Danish findings is in agreement with research carried out by Anning and Ring (2004), which point out that teachers do not pay much attention to children's drawings. One reason could be the fact that, at least in

Denmark, most of the existing reading systems do not include literature, but only have a narrow focus on decoding (in the form of comprehension). Another reason could be the absence of methods to include aesthetical activities in the process of learning to read. In order to stimulate a conscious and increased use of literature and aesthetic activities as a means of developing early literacy competencies, as noted earlier this article provides a theoretical platform that is based on a culture-historical understanding of Vygotsky's work and also inspired by Jerome Bruner's social constructivism.

BASIC CONCEPTS: THREE CORNERSTONES IN VYGOTSKY'S THEORY

Vygotsky's two books *Mind and society* (1978) and *Thinking and speech* (1997) focus on the relation between learning and development. By analyzing three basic paradigms, which Newman & Holzman (1993, p. 57) call "mistaken paradigms" – the separatist perspective (no relation between learning and development), the identity perspective (learning is development) and the unified process (learning and development as having mutual influence on each other) – Vygotsky establishes a new understanding of the relation between learning and development: Learning and development as a dialectical unity in which learning leads to development. According to Vygotsky: "Learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning" (Vygotsky, 1978d, p. 90).

The thesis that learning leads to development forms the basis of the construction of three concepts, which with reference to Stetsenko (1999) make up the learning landscape of the culture-historical school: 1) adult-child interaction as a source of development of mental processes; 2) cultural tools as mediating factors for the development of higher psychological functions; 3) the concept and theory of a zone of proximal development as the main path for learning and development. The three concepts are embedded in each other and united together via the child's activity. The activity is the crank for their mental development.

Social interaction

Again and again in Vygotsky's writings the concept of social interaction appears, and he argues that social interaction between child and adult is the main source for the development of higher mental functions. From Vygotsky's point of view cognitive functions are first seen as an outward appearance between the child and the adult and then step by step become internalized and a part of the child's own mind. This understanding is expressed in the following often-used quotation: "An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one. Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

Accordance to this understanding several educational examples might be set up. Since the human mind originates in and from social interactions in a specific culture, the educator has not only to highlight the social *interaction between teacher/pedagogue and child*, but also in general to ensure the occurrence of social and shared situations in which children construct meaning and individual cognitive development takes place. The interaction between adult and child (as also child-child interaction) is expressed in different ways in socio-cultural educational models of teaching and learning. In the community of praxis and learning in apprenticeship children are given opportunities for learning. Barbara Rogoff (1990, 1993) argues that an important form of interaction is guided participation in culturally organized activities, which results in children's cognitive learning and development. In guided participation adult and child or children have a shared perspective on the activity, and they have a shared role in socio-cultural structural activities (Rogoff, 1993, p. 134). However, the adult takes responsibility and ensures that each child is challenged in an appropriate manner and is introduced to shared developing activities. The idea behind the guiding concept is that the adult leads the child but still in accordance with the child's perspective. If an adult takes too much responsibility there is a risk that the child's own initiative, motive and interest will be overlooked. The claim is to es-

establish a shared and joint interaction, to stress the mutual complementarity; in short to make up an activity and relationship characterized by dialogue and *intersubjectivity*.

The American scholar James Wertsch (1985) illustrates the concept of intersubjectivity in an analysis of an interactive dialogue between a mother and child doing a puzzle together. Although the mother adjusted her communication to the child's capacity to learn at the same time she also challenged the child. Thus intersubjectivity is not only a symmetrical dialogue (Wertsch, 1998; Rogoff, 1990). Inspired by Bakhtin (1981), Wertsch (1985, p. 225) states that intersubjectivity reaches a new quality when the dialogue contains voices in conflict.

The educational need for creating interactions between adults and children characterized by intersubjectivity in order to support the movement from interpsychological to intrapsychological processes can better be understood and realized by examining the work of the Russian psychologist P. I. Galperin (1989a, 1989b). He describes three levels and steps in the transformation from the outer to the inner (from inter to intra). First the child has to concentrate his or her attention on the object, thus the teacher must support the child's sense of perception and practical activity. The quality of this orientation determines the quality of the child's learning. At the next level we see a child's release from the concrete objects, and the use of language plays a prominent role. In play, for example, the child does not need to do the action: it is enough to say "and then we slept all night". From this level the internalization continues, the exterior language fades away and the inner speaking/thinking and other mental operations are established.

Following the educational approach with reading, literature dialogues, children's own storytelling, drawing and when playing children are constantly involved in social interaction, both with the adults and with other children.

Cultural tools – symbols and signs

The second component – cultural tools or signs and symbols – helps the individual to master his or her own mental processes, just as technical tools help to master the work process. Vygotsky (1985, p. 310) mentions a number of examples of cultural tools: language, numbering, algebraic signs, art, writing, drawings and so on. In *Internalization of Higher Psychological Functions* and in *Tool and Symbols in Child Development*

(both in Vygotsky, 1978a) the mediating functions of cultural tools are described. Through the child's meeting with and use of the cultural tools, higher mental functions are mediated, for example thinking and perception (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 54ff).

Related to the aforementioned educational approach the teacher has the opportunity to support children's active work with cultural tools. The reading activity and the literature dialogues are carried out by use of signs and symbols – and also children's drawing processes.

Zone of proximal development

The third cornerstone in Vygotsky's theory is the idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In social interaction with adults and more developed peers the child is able to imitate a variety of actions which go beyond the borders of his or her own capacity (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). In other words the child crosses his or her actual level of development, which is defined as mastering specific mental functions. Going beyond this level the child constructs a zone of proximal development, which is defined not as their developed functions but functions under development. For that reason Vygotsky very poetically uses the word flowers of development, and not fruits of development. The educational interest is focused on the adult's ability to define the distance between activities that the child is able to handle independently and what he or she can manage together with more competent partners. This is what Vygotsky names "zone of proximal development", defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

This well-known quotation suggests an educational approach, in which the children are given opportunities to confront (or to be confronted) with situations and activities that they cannot handle and master alone but only through social interaction, for example by means of guided participation. Such an interaction leads to learning and development, or in Vygotsky's words:

We propose that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakes a variety of internal developmental processes that are

able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with peers". (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90)

Though the idea of ZPD has resulted in many forms of creative education, there is also a risk of simplification and using the idea as a mechanistic instrument (Holzman 1997, p. 60). Holzman warns us by saying this is not at all a zone but a life space, which human beings are involved in, and through which higher mental functions arise and develop. Also Cole and Griffin (1984), Engeström (1987) and Stetsenko (1999) warn against regarding ZPD just as a tool for learning existing knowledge.

Together with the two aforementioned cornerstones ZPD can be seen as a tool for creating educational strategies, which not only support children's acceptance of culture (and with that the development of higher mental functions) but also give children a tool for creating the "new". Engeström (1987) uses the concept of learning by expanding learning processes which result in something new, in unexpected and creative changes. Taking an aesthetic and narrative educational approach and arranging a challenging life space (in close connection with the other two cornerstones) ZPD might give children a possibility to be creative individuals capable of developing quite new dimensions to themselves (content, knowledge and methods) both in their lives and activities.

Aesthetics

To support children's literacy competence, including their reading ability, fictional literature marks a pivotal point. The literature contains an aesthetic dimension, and most children reflect on the stories via aesthetical activities: their own storytelling, drawing and play. Here the concept of aesthetics is defined as an activity based on sense perception and emotions, where children receive and adapt impressions in a creative, interpreting and imaginative way, and their expression makes use of figures of speech, symbolic language and a consciously reflected idiom.

The concept of aesthetics is rooted in antiquity, where the Greek word *aisthesis* stands for sense, feeling and emotions together with knowledge about the beautiful; among others it was developed further by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1750). The aesthetic dimension is strongly established in today's pedagogy, where focuses is no more

directed towards "the beautiful" but more on form, the expression symbolizing emotions and senses.

Aesthetics is closely connected with fantasy and creativity. Vygotsky (1971, 2004) argues that *imagination* or *fantasy* is constructed on the basis of elements from reality put together in new ways. In agreement with Vygotsky's (1978, p. 57) idea of the movement from interpersonal (interpsychological) to intrapersonal (intrapsychological), fantasy becomes an inner process inside the individual. The extent of the fantasy depends on the richness of the child's experiences, because these experiences are the material that makes up the construction of fantasy (Vygotsky, 2004). Thus, fantasy or imagination has a material basis and takes the form of mental constructions inside the individual. Then the individual takes the route back again, from the internal to the external. To conceptualize the process towards a transformation and external expression of the fantasy, for example in a visible aesthetical expression or product, one can use the concept of creativity or Vygotsky's concept of *crystallized imagination* (2004, pp.11–20).

When children express their experiences through individual or collective activity, we can interpret this as a form of aesthetical production. In one way this expression is a reproduction, or in other words an imitation of the world (the heard story, the seen action and so on.). However the child's storytelling, drawing or play is not a mechanical and precise reproduction, but a subjective and emotional reproduction and in many cases the children have added quite new dimensions.

Mimesis

The Vygotskian dialectical materialistic view understands on the one hand the material world as a source for epistemological cognition, and logical thinking, drawing, play and so on as a reflection of the external world, a kind of representation. However, on the other hand, the individual person's own mental processes allow room for his creative activity and thinking. Thus, the reflection is a dynamic and creative representation. Describing such a reproduction or representation of aesthetics in literature one often borrows the Greek word adopted by Aristotle *mimieshai*, which translates into English as *mimicry* (Diamond, 1997). Mimicry has two meanings, namely *imitation* and *mimesis*. In this understanding imitation implies a copy of the

original (which is in contradiction to the Vygotskian understanding), and the concept of mimesis implies a change and a transformation of the original starting point in an interpretative form. In short one might say that in imitation the original model will be recognizable in the expression, but in mimesis the original form may no longer be visible in the new form. The Marxist critic Georg Lukács (1971) made use of the mimesis concept, and so does Jerome Bruner (1990), who describes mimesis as a metaphor that refers to reality, not for making a copy but in order to create new content. Diamond (1997) writes that in artistic representation mimesis represents a sensual, critical receptivity to, and transformation of, the object. In other words we not only see a rational reproduction, but more a sensuous moment of discovery, and a critical movement away from traditional norms and standards.

In line with Diamond one might say that children's role-play or dramatic fantasy play often involves the above characteristic (Broström, 1999b). Thus the Norwegian play researcher Faith Guss (2005) contributes to this "understanding of playing as an aesthetic and critically reflective, cultural activity among children of day-care age" (Guss, 2005, p. 234). This corresponds with Vygotsky's (1978b, 2004) view on play. Here children create an imaginative situation and not only an echo of what they have seen and heard, but a creative transformation of their impressions and with that creation of a new reality (Vygotsky, 2004).

The American Vygotskian researcher Lois Holzman (1997) also understands imitation as a process characterized by dynamic and creative dimensions for which reason she uses the concept *creative imitation*. Referring to a dialogue with a 21-month-old boy she claims that

The babbling baby's rudimentary speech is a creative imitation of the more developed speaker. It is not, Vygotsky warns us, to be understood as the kind of mimicry that some parrots and monkeys do. It is creative, relational revolutionary activity... In imitation in the linguistic zone of proximal development, the child is performing (beyond himself) as a speaker. (Holzman, 1997, p. 62)

Continuing the concept of creative imitation she adds Vygotsky's term *completion* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 251) in order to emphasize that when we speak, we are not only expressing our

thoughts, but the thoughts are completed in the words (as learning leads development).

In children's storytelling, drawing and play we see such a creative imitation resulting in a "completely new content, which is not seen in human experience and does not correspond to existing conditions" (Vygotsky, 2004). Through such exceeding and expanding activities new learning processes often arise, which Engeström (1987, p. 174) calls learning by expanding. Because play, and also storytelling and drawing, contains such intense moments we can use the concept of expanding play (Broström, 1999b).

NARRATIVE

The aesthetical approach contains a narrative dimension. In literature and children's storytelling the narrative is evident, but children's drawings and play can also be seen as narratives. According to Aristotle (1993, p. 23f) a narrative is characterized by a whole or a ground plan with a beginning, a middle and an end, which makes the story to work as a complete experience. In general and for example with reference to Polkinghorne (1988) and Pitcher and Prelinger (1963), the term "narrative" can be used when the described activities and events contain a beginning-middle-end, uses the past tense and are tied up and expressed verbally, as writing or by drawings in meaningful coherence.

Referring to Bruner (1990) "a narrative is constructed by a unique sequence of actions, state of minds and events in which human beings act as persons or actors". Or according to Güllich and Quasthoff (1985):

A narrative refers to a series of real or fictional actions or events that take place in the past relative to the time of narration... The courses of action or events that make up the story contain some kind of transformation or change... The participants involved in the actions or events are animate, usually humans... Narratives are specified by certain formal characteristics.

In other words a number of people are involved in situations that they continuously change, because they interact with each other, creating new dramatic situations, which the actors solve or to which they give a new appearance and in so doing bring the story to an end. Expressed in another way, the term 'narrative' can be used when the following criteria are visible:

- The storyteller uses a model consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end
- The actions or events take place in the past and are carried out by humans
- The actions are intended and are expressed in e.g. drama or other kinds of performance in order to understand or organise the world
- The content describes the development in a plot, and a series of actions are linked (as opposed to actions that are not connected), and a meaning will arise from the basis of the whole story and not only from one sentence.

The above criteria can be extended and expressed in three narrative patterns. Aristotle’s ground plan ‘beginning-middle-end’ is seen as the first narrative pattern, and was inspired by Labov (1969) as described in table 3:

Table 3: Beginning-middle-end

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- Beginning – what is the story about? – explanations
 - Orientation – who, when, what, where?
 - Sequences of actions – what happens?
Context
 - Evaluation – and what happens then?
 - Result – what happens in the end? And then? What do the characters learn? What can the storyteller tell us?
 - End – new beginning.
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Thus a typical story has a beginning, and then some logical sequences of actions are formulated. Stories told by young children are less complex than stories told by older children. Vygotsky and his followers describe how children gain increasing complexity in the storytelling (Vygotsky, 1962; Applebee, 1978). However, in accordance with table 3 in general one might say a narrative is made up of the following elements:

- It takes place in the past.
- It contains some elements which make up a sequence.
- It includes one or more important persons, main characters, agents.
- The persons create intended activities, actions or events.
- The action is expressed inside a frame, a context, a scene.
- The actions are directed towards achieving a goal, something the persons aim at.

- The persons carry out the actions using special tools and instruments, or means.
- The narrative contains elements that contribute to the interpretation of sense and meaning.

When these elements are related to each other and described in the same order as they happen, Bruner (1990) uses the term ‘fabula’. When the events are dramatized and combined in a creative way, Bruner calls this new course of events a ‘plot’. Some sequences of actions, fabula, are the background for a story, and unrest and breaks, in the plot, make an interesting story.

Behind the specific words and sentences in a story, there is a deeper structure which keeps the story together. According to a theory of narrative structuralism, the structure of a story can be described passing through five levels:

Table 4: Balance-chaos-new balance

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- A starting position with balance and peace (there was a cottage in the forest...).
 - Peace is destroyed, a break appears, a problem is formulated (the father fell ill...).
 - A period with chaos and an attempt to solve the problem and re-establish peace and harmony (two of the sons went to the forest in order to...).
 - A phase with re-establishment which removes unrest (the third son killed the troll...).
 - A new balance arises, a final situation in which a new quality emerges (the poor, but brave boy was married with the princess).
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Here some characteristics have importance. First, an overall pattern fits the actions and events together in a dramatic way, namely a *plot*, an intrigue, which makes the story function (Bruner, 1990). This is central to children’s storytelling, play and also in children’s drawings. In role playing the children negotiate with each other about the theme and the roles, they define the situation in which the role is realized, they invent play actions, and often they formulate a plot (Elkonin, 1980). The plot is defined “as the reflection of certain actions, events and interrelationships from surrounding life and activity by children at play” (Markova & Zaporozhnetz, 1983, p. 89). Thus, a narrative has a point to make, typically something new and dramatic, as earlier mentioned “a course of actions or events that makes up the story contains some kind of

transformation or change” (Gulich and Quasthoff, 1985).

The second characteristic is the *chronology* of the story and not the question of reality or fantasy (Bruner, 1990). The order of the sequences in the story is central, again the idea of beginning-middle-end.

As a third characteristic Bruner mentions the quality to *connect the ordinary and usual with the unusual and improbable*, or expressed in another way, the relation between fabula and plot. In the narrative universe the listener is ready to seek for a meaning to explain the break in the usual and accustomed, which Bruner names the rule of situation (Bruner, 1990).

The fourth typical characteristic of a narrative is the *dramatic quality* which is carried through via a number of elements. These elements make up a scheme that helps construct the narrative (Bruner, 1990):

Table 5: The elements of a narrative

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- There is one or more persons, *main characters*, agents.
 - A *problem*, chaos, contradiction appears.
 - The persons create *activity*, actions.
 - The actions focus on attaining *goals*, something the actors strive for.
 - The actions are expressed within a frame, a given context, a *scene*.
 - The persons carry out actions with the help of certain tools and instruments, *means*.
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The dramatic element plays a particular central role in a narrative. For example a problem, difficulties, disturbance or contradictions can make characters perform an action in order to construct a new balance.

In the next section it will be described how children’s storytelling, play and drawing are seen as narratives, and follow five common narrative characteristics.

NARRATIVE PATTERNS IN CHILDREN’S STORIES, PLAY AND DRAWING

It is characteristic for people to organize their experiences in narratives, to tell stories from everyday life in order to communicate. Young children express narratives through body language, verbal language, drawings and play.

The narrative dimension is explicit when children tell their own *stories*, which can be illustrated with examples from the Nordic research project *The Storyride Project*, in which Nordic children from about 400 pre-schools and schools produced their own stories (Broström, 1999a, 2002). The above mentioned narrative characteristics are expressed below in a story told by Line, a six-year-old girl:

Narrative 1: The Knight who got some friends

Once there was an enormous castle made of copper. There was a king and a queen. And there was a knight, who owned everything that is worth owning, but was without friends. He sent for an old hunter and asked him to set out into the world and find somebody he could make friends with. The hunter crossed a big bridge. Here he met a troll and asked: “Do you know where I can find friends?” “Sure, but first you have to solve three tasks. The first one is, you have to stay under water for two hours, without coming up for air. The second task is to walk through the ghost-castle, called The Old Castle. The third task is to show that you are a real hunter.” As the very first thing the boy tried the first task. He cheated by having an oxygen cylinder in his bag. After doing this task, he walked to the ghost-castle. But at first he bought a gun, shot the ghost, who tried to frighten him, but he was not afraid of ghosts. Then he walked to the village, showed people he had bought a gun, and now they thought he was a hunter. Then he returned to the troll at the bridge. Here he found a mermaid friend and a princess friend. Then he returned in order to have a giant party. Moreover, the hunter returned to the knight in order to hand over his new friends. Then they lived happily for the rest of their days.

In an active way, the storyteller Line uses many of the literary narrative strategies from the fairy tales: a problem has to be solved and a character sets out on a journey through the whole world in search of a solution. Here the troll gives three tasks, which the hunter completes in cunning ways, paving the way for a very happy ending. Line’s fairy tale shows that she has learned to construct a story by using many recognisable narrative conventions. She is a master of a storytelling structure.

Observations of children’s *play* reveal a similar narrative structure. In play one sequence suc-

ceeds the next. In a father-mother play, for example, the children are sleeping. They awake and have breakfast, then a child suggests they should have a picnic and suddenly a witch appears from the forest and everybody become afraid, whereupon a play with the theme of the chase and being chased is established. Such a play contains not only one story, but a series of stories. Similarly the Norwegian philosopher Kjetil Steinsholt (1999) and Michael Bakhtin (1968) compare play with carnival because in both activities many stories are brought together.

Analyses of Danish children's stories and play from the *The Storyride Project* (Broström, 1999a, 2002) shows, that both context and structure in children's stories and role-play are almost identical. Yet one difference is seen. Namely according to the pattern of beginning-middle-end children's play does not have a clear ending like most stories. But according to the question about roles, themes and description of context there are many similarities. In children's play and stories we often see the same themes, for example children decide to play cops and robbers, princess in the castle or dangerous animals in the jungle. Correspondingly, the storyteller and the children in play distribute a number of roles. For example in Line's aforementioned story above (narrative 1) there is a knight, a hunter, a troll, a mermaid friend, and in play there is a robber, police etcetera. They also define a context, the imaginary play situation (Elkonin, 1980). In a police play the children quickly build up a police station by the help of two chairs and a blanket, and then a boy points at a spot saying "here we have the prison". In some stories the context is described, yet in Line's story there is only a hint about the context, The Old Castle.

Children's *drawings* can also be seen as a narrative. Besides the context, the theme, the drawings also contain a narrative pattern according to their movement and development. The drawing tells a story. Something happens in the drawing, a story line is hidden in the drawing. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 56) distinguish between two typical patterns in children's drawings: concept patterns and narrative patterns.

The concept patterns show the characteristics of the drawn objects and phenomena, and how these can be understood. Opposite the narrative patterns show how actions and events are expressed and also identify different processes of change and spatial arrangements and situations;

for example both an airport and a police station and also the police car on its way to the airport.

In their research the Norwegian scholars Ekern and Zacharisen (2006) show that children's drawings are characterized by such narrative patterns (see also Zacharisen, 2003). The drawings contain action and drama, which are both expressed in an isolated drawing as well as in a series of drawings. However, research into children's drawing activity reveals different results. The Norwegian researcher M. H. Hopperstad (2002) only finds few narrative patterns in children's drawings, whereas the Danish pre-school teacher Jytte Andersen (2000) and the Danish researcher K. M. Christensen (2000) both find many drawings with narrative patterns. From Ekern and Zacharisen's (2006) point of view this difference might relate to the fact that Hopperstad's research focuses on children's drawing in planned situations whereas Andersen's approach focuses on children in free situations.

Children often mark the narrative dimension in their drawings with the help of lines and spots. For example a car in action can be illustrated with the help of so-called speed lines, and a drawing of a storm can be illustrated using spots and lines. Ekern and Zacharisen (2006, p. 177) describe how children illustrated a story about a cat that tried to avoid a wolf: they draw tracks in the snow in a curve around the wolf's cave.

Children also illustrate the story line when they draw many events in the same drawings. For example some boys made war drawings, and they completed their paper with lots of war actions: exploding mines, soldiers shooting with guns, aeroplanes dumping bombs and so on. In the end their drawings were a chaotic mess, in which one episode was drawn on top of the next (Broström, 1983).

Although we can find narrative patterns in children's drawings and play, this does not mean that play and drawing as such are constructed by narrative patterns. Some forms of play do not contain a narrative dimension, for example children's play with blocks and modern construction material, so-called constructive play, and also games with rules. Conversely, role playing or social fantasy play often expresses a narrative pattern, but obviously not always. Many corresponding drawings are not constructed as a narrative at all. One might say that some forms of playing and drawing can be considered as particular genres that build upon a narrative structure.

Five common characteristics of stories, play, and drawing

The above brief comments on children's storytelling, play and drawings indicate that all three modes of expressions contain narrative patterns. These can be summarized by the following five common characteristics:

- The narratives have a ground plan: beginning-middle-end (table 3).
- The narratives are structured with the pattern of balance-chaos-new balance (table 4).
- The narratives contain a number of elements: persons (roles), actions, scene (context), goal, means and problems (table 5).
- The narratives contain a number of common themes.
- The narratives are often expressed in the past tense.

1. Beginning-middle-end

An analysis of children's stories from the *Storyride project* (Broström, 1999a, 2002) show that most of the stories were told using the narrative pattern of beginning-middle-end as shown in the above story (narrative 1). However, the narrative pattern is often revealed in a very easy way as expressed in four-year-old Freja's story:

Narrative 2

Once there was a wolf, he lived far away from his Mum, and then the Dad arrived, then they returned to the Mum. Now it is over.

After a short opening phrase "Once there was a wolf", the problem is expressed with "he lived far away from his Mum". This could illustrate Freja's own experience of with being away from her parents. But before she went into detail and made up a dramatic climax, she solved this underlying problem by saying "then the Dad arrived, then they returned to the Mum".

A slightly older child, five-year-old Louise (narrative 3), has learned to construct a story with dramatic episodes and a hero as the problem solver:

A similar narrative pattern can be seen in children's *play*. In planning their games they often decide on a plot. For example in a play about a doctor a boy said "then we called the hospital

Narrative 3

Once there was a girl, who lived in a forest, then she met a wolf who brought her home to her wolf cubs. And then next day the wolf ate the little girl, but it was only the Mum who did it; but the girl's mother returned and she could not at all find the girl at all. Then she heard somebody snore. This was the wolf. Then her Mum picked her sick bag and then cut through the wolf's paunch, and then they ran home.

telling them an ambulance was on its way". After this beginning, the children planned a big operation to be performed by doctors and nurses then the patient had to lie down and rest in a sickbed. Thus in play we see the pattern of beginning, middle and end (Broström, 1999b).

In children's *drawings* the narrative pattern of beginning, middle and end also often occurs. As previously stated, drawing primarily expresses what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) call concept pattern which contains characteristics of the drawn objects. However, behind the concept pattern we often see narrative patterns, and especially when we are able to follow the process of drawing. For example in a situation where three boys were sitting around a table drawing a boy, Oscar suggested that they draw cars:

Narrative 4

"I will do the McQueen Lightning" he exclaimed, and then he drew a red car. He looked at the car and said: "McQueen Lightning will have a race against the King", and quickly he drew the King, and in continuation of this he made a lot of flourishes and lines, which more or less covered the two cars. Then he made out: "Yes! Once again McQueen Lightning was the winner".

Oscar's comments about his drawing revealed a narrative. The drawing itself also contained the narrative pattern of beginning, middle and end. However, the pattern appeared in more than one drawing on the same piece of paper. The first drawing consisted of two cars placed side by side in the left half of the paper; then Oscar added lots of speed stripes and smoke, which more or less covered the whole drawing. As his next step, actually his next drawing, he took a heavy pen and in Indian ink drew two new cars on the

right half of the paper. Here the bonnet of the McQueen Lightning touched the edge of the paper showing that it was the winner.

As noted, the boys were not very engaged in drawing the cars nicely, in other words expressing their object patterns. They focused on the action, on the race, and as an observer of the process of drawing it was easy to see the narrative pattern of beginning, middle and end. First Oscar drew the red McQueen car and the middle the two cars, which challenged each other and in the end the winner of the race. Neither Oscar nor the other two boys drew the cars accurately with details. They lived engaged in their fantasy, and as racing drivers they were all involved in the car race while the object pattern was subordinated.

One might ask in this case whether the narrative pattern is clearly expressed in the drawing or whether it emerged only as the child verbalized during the act of drawing. However, another example of a drawing does seem to show a narrative pattern. A group of boys six to seven years of age were drawing their experiences of a winter holidays, and a six-year-old Oscar drew the painting below (narrative 5):

Narrative 5



An observer might conclude that the boy artist was telling a story about a boy or man with a snow cap and an aeroplane. Maybe the observer detected a narrative pattern. He asked the boy to describe his drawing, and the boy explained (narrative 6).

The child's own wording confirmed the observer's interpretation according to the existence of the narrative pattern of beginning-middle-end.

Narrative 6

The boy went to the ski slope,
it was high in the air

He was a little afraid,
but his father waved

Then he raced down
to his father

and next morning
they went back by aeroplane

2. Balance, chaos-new balance

Studies of playing and children's narratives show that these have a shared line of development. The aforementioned ground plan of beginning-middle-end (table 3) has a variation with five levels (table 4), which progress from balance through problems and chaos to a sense of re-establishment and often ending with a new form of balance.

Sutton-Smith (1981) refers to Maranda and Maranda (1971) in setting up a model for describing the plot in children's stories:

- At a first level one power conquers another power, who submits without defiance or defence. This narrative strategy is seen in Louise's above story (narrative 3) about the wolf that brought the girl to a cave. In this story, the girl is conquered (eaten) by the wolf without a struggle, but the child is later rescued by her own mother. This theme is frequently seen in children's role-playing, with such variations as chase and catch, e.g. when the police lock up the thief in prison.
- At level two the subordinate power tries to defend himself or herself, but without success. A familiar example can be seen in children's stories and role-plays when the police catch a thief, who escapes briefly, but is recaptured.
- At level three the subordinate power succeeds in neutralizing the original threat. In such a play or narrative during another episode the captured character successfully escapes.
- At level four the subordinate power succeeds in neutralizing the threat and also manages to change circumstances. An example would be a story or play in which the poor boy kills the monster, saves the princess and becomes king himself.

Children seem especially attracted to level-four themes in their favourite stories, such as *The Beauty and the Beast*, as well as in their story reenactments and story telling. Such a plot is seen in Line's story about the knight who needs friends (narrative 1). The problem is solved, and the hunter finds friends for the knight. In this example a new situation has developed. However, young children are often not able to construct a story that ends with a new situation. The following story told by a six-year-old boy Nilaus is one such example:

Narrative 7

There was a policeman, and he had to catch an egg thief. Then he caught him, but they began fighting. Then the policeman got his truncheon, handcuffed the thief and put him in jail. But the thief found a hole in the prison, and he climbed out. And two policemen were talking and they saw the thief. Then they raced towards the police car, caught him, handcuffed him, and returned him to jail. And they repaired the hole.

In this story Nilaus almost skips the harmonious beginning phase in order to get directly into the problem and plot of the story. The storyteller then solves the problem, and he brings chaos to an end when he returns the thief to jail. The storyteller creates a balance, but not a *new balance*. He does not establish a new situation or new state.

In children's *play* we often observe a similar narrative structure that starts with balance, encounters a problem and continues with a period of chaos. As in some of their stories, so in their play a new situation does not happen very often. It seems as though children do not like to stop their play. They plan a play, describe a starting point, and add a problem and a period with chaos, but very seldom do they arrange a proper ending. A boy's form of chivalry play, Superman or Spiderman is characterized by fighting and a dramatic climax, but only very seldom does it contain an ending that realizes a new situation. For example two warring armies end up at peace sharing their common lands and living in harmony with each other.

The narrative structure with balance, chaos and new balance can usually be detected in children's *drawings*. This structure becomes much

clearer when one follows the process of drawing, where children's voices are helpful in understanding the embedded structure. Since children often combined their drawings with storytelling in the *Storyride Project*, we used the term "drawing stories" (Broström, 1999a, p. 107). Such stories-drawings are often characterized by enumeration, which can be seen below in the story told by Chris, a five-year old boy, at the same time as he made a drawing:

Narrative 8

There was a monster, which was going to catch a girl. Then the prince tried to save the girl. He cut off the monster's arms. The monster died, and they were married, and then they shall live at the castle.

The story begins directly at the level of chaos, the problem is solved, and a new situation emerges. In the corresponding drawing the narrative pattern is expressed: The prince is situated between the monster and the girl ready to cut the arms of the monster (see drawing in Broström, 1999a, p. 55).

3. The elements of a narrative: Characters /roles, actions, scene/context, goal, means, problems

In children's storytelling, games and drawings the aforementioned elements are generally visible. Often children's *stories* are driven by a number of defined roles in which the children have a current interest in, e.g. a princess, a monster, or a dangerous crocodile. In the earlier story told by Louise (narrative 3) we encounter a girl, a wolf and the girl's mother, who enact to the story.

The chosen roles determine the actions and the construction of the plot. For example, the appearance of trolls and wild animals often result in a hunt for innocent children. However, the description of a given context can also give rise to the particular roles. This is expressed in narrative number 1: "Once there was an enormous castle made of copper. There was a king and a queen". According to Bruner (1990) the roles of the main characters in a story are most often taken by humans. This is also seen in the *Storyride Project*. However, besides human beings the main characters often take the form of animals, trolls, living trees, speaking fruits and so

on – as well as figures from well-known stories, for example Snow White, Power Rangers, Pippi Longstocking, and Superman.

Children's *play* generally contains all the aforementioned elements. Often the roles determine the story in the play, but an underlying theme determines the roles. In a police play the boys discuss the roles, and they decide who will be the police and who the robbers. During this dialogue the boys reflect on the theme of chasing and being chased, which is a common theme in play (especially boys' play) games. Sutton-Smith (1981) uses the term 'text and context' to describe the story of the play (text) and the scene where the story is enacted (context). When the roles are allotted, the children negotiate about the actions; you might say that they write the script. Here they also include the context of the play, which Elkonin (1980) calls the imaginary play situation. In the police game, for example, the boys said: "And here we have the prison, and here the police have their bikes".

Children during play also make use of many objects, to which they ascribe a subjective and symbolic meaning, according to Vygotsky (1978b). The stick becomes a sword or a horse, the stone a bomb and so on. In general, the form of an object bears a certain likeness to the object it symbolizes, for example the shape of the stone resembles a bomb.

There are also differences between children's stories and games. Children at play are often engaged in more than one story at a time. A Danish observer Lis Bastian (1999) described a play about a princess in which a girl played a queen who stole babies and tormented dogs. Other children played characters who tried to free the babies and dogs, at the same time as two girls played dogs and a third girl arranged a bed for a princess. Although the three groups of children played their own play, they negotiated the three play themes continuously across such a range that they became interconnected.

In children's *drawing* activities the narrative elements are also included. First of all children draw the main characters, for example Superman, the princess and the prince, the cars from the McQueen story (narrative 4): Lightning McQueen and the King. The children not only draw the main characters but also elements from the context of the racing ring, for example the chequered flag.

4. Common themes

A fourth shared characteristic in children's storytelling, play and drawing is the appearance of opposites that according to the Russian folk literature scholar Vladimir Propp (1968) and B. Sutton-Smith (1981) serve to structure a story. According to Propp, Sutton-Smith and also the Norwegian scholar Åse Enerstvedt (1997) the typical themes in children's stories and play, which can also be found in the *Storyride Project* are as follows:

- Power and weakness
- Good versus evil
- Attack and defence
- Chase and being chased
- Care/friendship and enmity
- Happiness and unhappiness

In both their play and storytelling, children often incorporate themes of *power versus weakness* (big versus little, adult versus child). For example, in a role-play, the mother is often characterized by the attributes of correcting and scolding, often towards the baby character. Paired opposites as a literary device can also be seen in the baby character itself as it shifts between powerlessness (being small, asking for care) and powerfulness (being defiant, obstinate, and rebellious, or in some cases showing extraordinary, sometimes supernatural, powers).

Pairs of powerful opposites, either within a single character, such as the baby character described above, or between characters, are often encountered in familiar folk stories. For example in the story of *Cinderella*, her two sisters push Cinderella around and treat her like a dog. Ultimately, though, it is Cinderella who becomes more powerful in all versions of the familiar tale, because she marries Prince Charming. In the young children's stories, power is often expressed through a dangerous animal: a wolf, a crocodile or an eagle.

The themes of the *good versus the wicked*, *attack versus defence*, and *the chase versus being chased* are well expressed in Louise's story (narrative number 3) about the wolf that brings the girl to its cave, where the wolf eats the girl. In the following story about quarrelling monkeys, told by five-year-old Ronnie, we also find these themes. The monkeys quarrel, they fight, the yellow monkey is killed, and the red one throws the white one into the water:

Narrative 9

Once there were many monkeys, and they found a weapon, and they quarrelled about the weapon, and there was one, who was jailed, and they meet some dangerous ones with loose teeth, and they went to the forest. And there were two monkeys, a yellow monkey, and he was killed, and he never lived again. Suddenly he lived up in the air together with another one. And there was a red monkey and he threw the white monkey into the water. And there came a tiger and a monkey shot the tiger (Ronnie, 5.1 years).

Evil is often encountered as a theme in children's storytelling, play and drawings. In play, for example, children arrange their small plastic figures as Pokomon, knights and dangerous animals representing the scene of good versus evil. The evil theme is also expressed in children's drawings. For example, six-year-old Peter from a Danish preschool made a drawing of a monster with five heads, which he described like this: "In the corner there is a spider's web, there are also black clouds. There is another castle. Here lives the power of the dark. The cloud has pointed teeth because it is also evil. This is all about violence then you can see what violence is." Here, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the object pattern is the key element. Peter was absorbed in drawing the dark clouds, the pointed teeth and so on.

Although the aforementioned themes are expressed in both boys' and girls' stories, the girls involved in *The Storyride project* often had some additional favourite themes. Not surprisingly such as *happiness versus unhappiness*, as well as *friendship versus enmity* are more frequent in girls' stories. These themes are typically expressed in situations, in which children or young animals are lost or attacked by dangerous figures, whereupon a hero (Mum, Dad or a helping animal) springs into action.

5. Using the past tense

A story is a series of real or fictive actions and events that have taken place previously (Gulich & Quasthoff, 1985). Logically a story is told in the past tense. Obviously children's use of the past tense depends on their experience with literature, their age and degree of development. In the *Storyride Project* for example 59 percent of

the stories told by children aged five to six were told in the past tense (Broström, 1999a, p. 81).

However, not only stories are told in the past tense. This is also evident in children's planning of *play*: "Then we said, you were the little sister, and I was the bigger sister. Then I went to school and you were in preschool." This sentence is taken from a typical play situation between two girls in a preschool. The two girls negotiate roles, the play situation and possible actions, which are expressed in the past tense. The reason seems to be that in using the past tense the children demonstrate they are in a play world. The inspiration for this "role-play language" probably originated from their experiences with reading books. Most of the stories and fairy tales are written in the past tense, and children make use of that experience when they plan their play. However, they do not always use the past tense. Now and then they stop their play and discuss the next play sequences, and these dialogues are generally phrased in the present tense. For example, a child said: "I do not like to be the little sister anymore". A Danish researcher on child culture Flemming Mouritsen (1996, p. 102) states: "Though the children are not conscious of grammatical rules, the shift in tense is an indication that they know that they move in and out of the play world."

Similarly, more than a decade earlier the Italian author Gianni Rodari (1987, p. 168) had analyzed a play situation in which, in which children aged five and seven enacted a sequence about a tiger in the jungle and later they sailed on the sea. Here he showed how children use the past tense when they talk about their play and comment on what they are doing. For example in their play they made a fire gathered firewood and created a woodpile. This happened in "reality". However in order to demonstrate that they were making the transition to actual play, one boy said: "I threw piece of wood on the fire." This is what Bateson (1972) called a play signal: "This is play."

AN EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE

Based on the hypothesis that reading of fiction combined with aesthetic reflections and expression (children's storytelling, drawing and play) might be a useful tool in developing children's literacy competence in early years (preschool, kindergarten class, grades one and two), a number of developmental research projects were

carried out in preschools and schools (Broström, Frandsen & Vilhelmsen, 2004; Broström, 2005a & 2005b; Broström, 2006).

We constructed an educational approach in which the reading of literature was followed by literature dialogues, drawing and play. A brief glimpse into this work following the seven phases below illustrates a possible way of using an aesthetic and narrative dimension in an early literacy:

1. A teacher reads aloud a short story of high literary quality.
2. Based on the story, the teacher and children can engage in a structured conversation (Chambers, 1994) called a *literature dialogue*.
3. After the dialogue the children *make drawings* to illustrate their understanding of the text.
4. Arranged in formal groups, the children are challenged to turn their literature experiences into *playing*. The teacher has the role of observer role and also participates as 'teacher-in-role'.
5. Sometimes the teacher asks the children to present their version of the story for their classmates and other teachers.
6. After the presentation, the teachers and each play group hold a structured conversation called a *learning dialogue*.
7. During all phases, the teacher and the children engage in *philosophical dialogues* reflecting their ideas.

Selection of books

From an early age children must be exposed to literature, and step by step they will create their own literature competence: They will experience the structure of a story and composition, learn to understand the world through another person's observations, and discover a number of symbols and symbolic expressions. However, defining quality literature and selecting books of quality is not a simple matter to do. This is more or less based on the experiences of a specific listener, and as such they are bound by a context. However, a text of quality must be well composed, contain a special angle and interesting symbols. Furthermore it must be both recognizable and in cause for wonder and surprise. Experts in the field of literature often use a number of criteria: among other qualities a text must:

- give the child the possibility to identify himself or herself with the main character

- present some subordinate character and anti-heroes who both appeal to the child and provide a change of perspective and cause for reflection
- provide the possibility for emotional identification
- challenge the child with something new and strange subjects
- support the child to construct meaning and coherence in his or her own life
- focus on existential themes
- take place within a fictional space
- make use of creative and aesthetic language

These criteria can be used as guidelines, but the teacher must be in a close relationship with the specific children in order to select the right books, which in this specific context can be defined as items of good-quality literature.

In a class in school with children aged five to seven teachers selected five short books in the series *Miss Ignora in the Water Tower*. All five books display strong emotions that all children experience: friendship, anger, happiness, sorrow, shyness, disappointment and love. The books make up a series with a recognizable structure and a permanent gallery of characters. The series differs from traditional series for young children, because the main character develops in the course of the books. Each book contains 21 pages dominated by vigorous and expressive illustrations that support and expand on the text. The pivotal element in the stories is the daily life of a school girl Miss Ignora. The stories are told in simple, rhythmical and unsentimental language, and the children are able to identify themselves with Miss Ignora. The titles of the books reflect Miss Ignora's development:

- Miss Ignora Explodes
- Miss Ignora in the Schoolyard
- Miss Ignora and the Starry Sky
- Miss Ignora Falls in Love
- Miss Ignora and George Influence their World

In the first two books, Miss Ignora and her daily life are presented. When she loses her temper and explodes in front of her teacher, her best friend Nina becomes afraid, and Ignora is sorry. Ignora sometimes speaks with her neighbour, a fishmonger, from whom she also occasionally steals fish, which she feeds to the cats. The second book takes place in the schoolyard, where Miss Ignora is scolded and bullied by a boy, George. In the third book Ignora is alone: her

mother has left her, and her father has died in a traffic accident. However, at night, when she is sitting on top of the water tower, she is able to speak to him. In the fourth book her problems with George are overcome and she develops a friendship with him. The fifth book describes how Ignora and George come to the assistance of a dog in distress, and later they reflect on the theme of being a person who makes a difference in the world.

In many ways, the *Miss Ignora*-series meets the criteria described above.

Reading aloud

A successful session in which a teacher reads aloud has a mutually reinforcing structure, a phase in which teacher and children establish an atmosphere of positive expectations, for example when the teacher lights a candle and shows the children today's book. Then the teacher informs the children about the book in order to raise their interest and curiosity. The teacher reads aloud the title of the book, mentions the author and illustrator. Together they all look at the cover and reflect on what the book is about and what they can expect.

As to how to carry out the reading, some researchers and teachers argue for having a running dialogue throughout the reading (National Institute for Literacy, 2000) in order to retain children's attention. The teacher can ask a question closely connected to the text, for example "What do you think will happen now?" A conversation about the book before, during and after the reading helps children get a better understanding of its content and with that to build a bridge to their life (IRA & NAEYC, 1998).

However, other experts on reading argue that children should be encouraged to listen to the whole story without interruption in order to get an overall impression of it (Chambers, 1994).

Regardless as to whether children should engage in dialogue during the telling of the story or listen without interruptions, the reading must be characterized by a context of peace and security. The reader must be well prepared for reading, and should have practiced with his or her voice to create a balance between form of dramatization and a calm reading. Research on reading aloud (Meek, 1985) shows that it is most effective when the reader uses intonation and changes the voice patterns. To read aloud well is a kind of art, but unfortunately research shows that

many preschool teachers are careless about it (Baldock, 2006).

Literature dialogue

After a reading session in classroom, during which the teachers introduced the first *Miss Ignora* book, they arranged a structured conversation about the stories inspired by Chambers (1994) who proposes that children be asked a number of questions to which each one should reply:

1. Did you find elements in the story that you liked?
2. Did you find something that you disliked?
3. Did you find something that surprised you?
4. Did you find patterns in the story that you recognised which remind you of other stories?

However, this model for conversation proposed by Chambers might be considered rather authoritarian and not in accord with the more symmetrically being together that children and teachers used to practice. Therefore, this approach was softened regardless of the basic idea was maintain.

After reading the first book *Miss Ignora Explodes*, the children were invited to discuss the book in the light of the four questions above. Answering the first question *Did you find elements in the story that you liked?* many of the boys said they thought it "was cool when Miss Ignora exploded", whereas the girls liked it "when Miss Ignora apologised to the teacher" (because of her explosion) and she was "nice to the cats". Answering to the second question *Did you find something that you disliked* many girls mentioned the explosion as a problem. A few of the girls also disliked the fact that Ignora stole from the fishmonger. Some of the boys also expressed reservations about stealing fish and about Miss Ignora's explosion. But a number of other boys said: "There was nothing we disliked".

The children asked a number of moral and philosophic questions which they reflected upon and discussed for a while. This provide ideas for the following aesthetical activities.

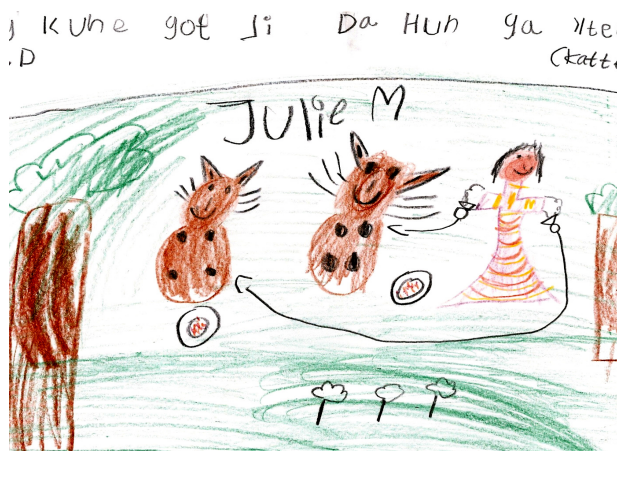
Children make drawings

After the reading session and the dialogue, the children were encouraged to write about and draw their ideas as they related to the debate about what they liked and disliked in the book.

Matthews (1999) and Malchiodi (1998) point out that through drawings children can ‘narrate’ very complex stories, and Angelides and Michaelidou (2009) argue that (specially marginalized) children can address their experiences through drawings.

Some children made collective drawings in small groups, while others made individual drawings. A typical drawing was an isolated episode from the story, for example when Miss Ignora feeding the cats (narrative 10 with the accompanying text: I liked Miss Ignora feeding the cats), or Miss Ignora’s explosion in front of the teacher (narrative 11 with the accompanying text: I did not like it when she exploded). Besides these individual drawings, which make use of the content pattern (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) there were also examples of drawings, in which more than one episode takes place in the picture, where the narrative pattern became more visible. Children managed to express the narrative dimension with clarity especially in their collective drawings.

Narrative 10: I liked Miss Ignora feeding the cats



When the children had finished their drawings, the teachers displayed the results on two bulletin boards, placing similar ideas side by side. This enabled the children to view their own answers and reflections and compare them with those of their peers. This session led to a new dialogue, and a third question was asked: *Did you find something that surprised you?* Common answers were as follows:

- Why does she not have a mother?
- Why does she reach a point when she explodes?
- Why does she live in that strange house?

Narrative 10: I did not like it when she exploded



- Why does she not ask for help from the fish-monger?
- Why has Miss Ignora’s father die in a traffic accident? “They did use to die in books”, one girl said.

The children’s comments formed the basis for fruitful conversations. Most of the children had reached a high level of attention by the time they replied to and reflected upon the fourth question: *Did you find patterns in the story that you recognised, which remind you of other stories?* Some children were able to compare the stories of Miss Ignora to other well-known children’s books. For example, one boy replied: “Pippi Longstocking, both Pippi and Miss Ignora have no father and mother”. Another boy said: “It reminds me of Superman, and a number of boys and girls also compared the story to Sleeping Beauty.

Play

Continuing the children’s interest in the first three books, the teacher read the last *Miss Ignora* story: *Miss Ignora and George Influence their World*. The plot deals with Ignora and George as they become friends and free a dog which is wedged in a door. Then they talk about how, in doing so, this had influenced their world.

After the reading session the children were encouraged to start their own play events, and they quickly set up different groups to discuss the theme, roles and actions for playing. One group of boys and girls was inspired by the incident involving the stuck dog, and they spent some time planning a game with many details. The characters were Ignora, George, an angry

man, Ignora's friend Nina, a dog and some cats. An extract from the transcript reads:

Miss Ignora said: "Hey, would you like to be my boy friend?"

George answered: "Yes."

Miss Ignora said: "Then we take a promenade in the park." Miss Ignora and George danced around.

George: "Oh, see an old shack, it's ugly," and then he continued: "Something is whining."

Miss Ignora: "Yes, it is from over there, inside."

George looked around and then he said: "Oh, it is a nice little dog."

"Come here," Miss Ignora said and then she kissed the dog on the nose.

Suddenly a man showed up from the old shack. He scolded the children and cried: "Get out, now!"

Miss Ignora said: "Sorry, we will" And then she whispered to George: "What an sour man."

The sour man cried: "This is my place; buzz off, stupid children!"

The two children disappeared quickly, and went away from the place.

Then George said: "Oh, I am so hungry; let us eat."

George and Miss Ignora created established a place to eat. They set up a table and some chairs illustrating a restaurant in which they sat down.

They sat in front of each other and ate their food. Suddenly Miss Ignora burst out: "Oh, I forgot my appointment with Nina."

She left the table and ran over to her best friend Nina who was loudly sniffing. Then she sobbed: "You forgot our appointment."

"Sorry Nina," Miss Ignora said, "I was out eating with George. Sorry, should we not all play together?"

Then they started to play skip. George and Nina swung the skipping rope.

A bit later Nina said: "I do not like this any more." And Miss Ignora agreed.

"Hey," George said, "look at that nice dog."

Miss Ignora said: "It is the sour man's dog. Let's return the dog to him."

George said: "I really do not like to do it, but we have to."

The three children went to the sour man's house and knocked at the door. Then he opened and snapped: "Pooh...it is you again."

Nina timidly said: "We just want to return..." At this point, however, the sour man interrupted her with a curt 'Buzz off!'

He closed the door, and when the three children were alone with the dog, Nina said: "Oh, how he was."

"You are right," Miss Ignora replied, "he was old, big and fat."

While the children talked, the sour man arrived and said: "I just want to apologize because I was so angry. I would like to give you my dog as a present."

With this remark the children decided to return to their house with the dog and eat rolls and drink cocoa.

Through the example of Miss Ignora the teachers challenge the children to become storytellers themselves. Inspired by the Miss Ignora books the children were invited to state their own reflections and to discuss moral and philosophical themes, which they then expressed in narratives, drawings and play. However, concept patterns had probably dominated narrative patterns. Maybe the teachers could have challenged the children to make drawings organized like comic strips which might have provoked a more narrative structure.

The extract from the children's play contains a number of dimensions, which earlier are characterized as narrative elements. The play reveals the structure of beginning-middle-end (table 3): Miss Ignora became a friend with George; the dog was whining: they solved the problem with the dog. The story also moved from harmonious balance through unrest to a new balance (table 4), and most of the narrative elements were also used in the story/play (persons/roles, actions, goals, means, and problems, as described in table 5). The children did not just use a fabula but they actually constructed a plot: the sour man and the smart problem-solving. In the book there was a dog, which was whining, and also an angry man, but the children constructed a completely new plot, so that eventually the man became nice and gave the dog to them. Independent problem-solving was also expressed, namely Miss Ignora's conflict between being together with her best friend Nina on the one hand and with George on the other. Thus their play displayed productive and creative dimensions close to the concept of expanding learning (Engeström, 1987) and expanding play (Broström, 1999b).

Finally in their play the children developed a number of contradictions, as described by Propp (1968). There was the powerful sour man and the weak dog; the good as represented by the intention of Georg's and Miss Ignora to "make a difference" versus the wicked, as in the sour man's treatment of the dog. Thus, the children focused on some specific existential themes, those mentioned in the *Miss Ignora* books and those they created themselves.

The story of Miss Ignora is not a complete example the implements all the aforementioned educational principles and narrative patterns. However, it might illustrate one possible approach.

CONCLUSION

The starting point for this article was the hypothesis that the reading of fiction followed by aesthetic reflection (drawing and play) might be a useful tool towards the development of children's literacy competence in the first years of school. The article constructs a theoretical basis for such an educational approach. This hypothesis has not been explored in detail, but the components have been described and discussed: reflections about the reading of literature together with children's own storytelling, drawing and play as narratives. The idea was to show that the use of narratives, which is part of the original kindergarten tradition and current early childhood education and care, might be an approach towards helping children construct the prerequisites for reading.

It is to be hoped that the different components of this article – Vygotsky's three cornerstones, the concepts of aesthetics and narrative, the analysis of children's storytelling, drawing and play, and finally the example of Miss Ignora – might form the basis of a theoretical foundation for early literacy in preschool.

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