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Working with Stories – Narrative as a Meeting Place for Theory, Analysis and Practice

Narrative practices as a site for studying conditions for children's cultural formation

As suggested by Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo and Tambouko, 2010, a paradigmatic change within narrative studies can be encouraged; a change that goes beyond narrative coherence and includes narratives that can be considered fragmented or disorganized. All though some children tell rich and coherent stories, many children are dependent on responsive co-narrators in order to create extended narratives and stories. This fact could be due to varieties and differences in age, ability as well as in language and genre cultures.

In line with these ideas, I will attempt to conceptualize narrative practices for the purpose of studying children's meaning making as cultural shaping within the context of early year's institutions. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1986) *dialogism*, children's cultural shaping, their meaning-making and identity formation processes are seen as tied to locally constructed patterns and discourses of everyday life, to what individuals interpret, understand and take up from artifacts, material resources as well as speech genres in which children participate within as well as outside the institutional borders. Children make use of artifacts made available for them, but the (re)construction and (re)formulation that children engage in is not taken up as "their" identity in some absolute form, but one shaped by what they choose and resist, how they have interpreted identity potentials as also pointed out by Castaneriraa et al (2007).

Meaning making is viewed as an emergent occurrence, integrating aspects of both the immediate and relational conditions as well as the historical social contexts of narratives (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986; Sawyer, 1997; Ødegaard, 2007a, Ødegaard, in press). In narrative practice children negotiate, shape and reshape, challenge, propose and alter meaning within a socio-cultural space. The concept of narrative referred to, as a point of departure for the study, to a form of connected discourse that creates a higher order of meaning. Co-narrative referred to a narrative result when several voices are involved. Co-narration was considered a process of collaboration and negotiation, in which both adults and children were engaged in text production; it was considered a speech genre (Bakhtin 1986). Co-narration is thereby a certain way of producing meaning in collaboration with young people or people with limited ability to talk in coherent narrative constructions.

This paper will take children's narratives and their co-creating of stories to the forefront by presenting empirical data that comes from studies where children's narratives have been collected and provoked in ethnographic and collaborative approaches. I will suggest that children's narratives will be conditioned by both *how* the stories are co-created in relation with peers and supportive adults as teacher's and researchers, and at the same time will be conditioned by *cultural artifacts*, as the variety of narratives that are made available for them in the cultures in which they participate and serve as resources for their meaning-making processes.

First a roughly sketched overview for the purpose of illustrating how everyday narrative practices are intertextually linked to cultural artifacts will be presented. Characters from books and movies keep coming up in narratives, and can reflect and give thoughts to cultural values that circulate in a Norwegian early year's context. A selected example of from a story table activity allows a more elaborated analysis and serve as an example of children taken characters from cultural artifacts and (re)produce a new story; a co-narrative where the researcher is an active participant in processing the story. When children tell stories they belong to a social matrix in which it is important not to be blind for adult's (teacher's) as participant; both as selectors and gatekeepers to what is considered appropriate cultural material to be made available for children; their cultural artifacts, and as relational participants being of another age, size and cultural inscribed authorial role, than children. In institutional practice there will be a "generational order". Relationships between adults and children are not necessarily a stable order, rather ongoing practices including negotiation (Alanen & Mayall, 2001).

Critical questions have been raised towards studies conducted in educational settings applying literary theory question whether literary theory and especially Bakhtinian concepts can be fully compatible into educational practices and whether pedagogy can be truly dialogical (Ongstad, 2004; Shepherd & Emerson¹ in Matusov, 2007). Educational institutions are often considered to be places for reproducing knowledge that national governments and local municipalities consider important. Studying children's narrative meaning-making, consider them being cultural agents that not only reproduce knowledge, rather participate in the cultural shaping of their institutional settings, imply another agenda. Eugene Matusov shows that philological critique of educational scholars is not all-encompassing, although relevant in some cases. Research within the field of educational institutions will be dependent on philological studies. Thinking with Bakhtin, as I do in this paper, will need at least three translations. Bakhtin's texts are in Russian, and a Norwegian scholar, as I am, will be dependent on an English translation. Another translation will be from the literary work into the problematic of early year's institutions. Yet another translation will be the cultural, social, historical and political context belonging to Bakhtin and the one belonging to my concerns and context (Matusov, 2007). Further more there exist several different (but partly overlapping) research traditions on children and narrative discourse. Early research about children's narratives had its interest drawn to education, to understand how the individual child learnt and appropriate narratives within the frames of developmental research and in the context of families. Later cognitive and socio-cultural approaches are dominating within the field of developmental and educational approaches. Also within sociological and cultural approaches we can find examples of narrative inquiries with an interest in children's stories. This can constitutes challenges concerning the attempt to conceptualize narrative practices as a site for studying conditions for children's cultural formation applying an approach informed by Bakhtin.

¹ In this article Matusov answer to a critic presented by David Shepherd and Caryl Emerson in Twelfth International Bakhtin Conference in Finland, 2005. The critics dealt with applying Bakhtin in educational research.

Overview of the empirical data

The genre, co-narrative, was studied in the project *Narrative meaning-making in preschool* (Ødegaard 2007a). In order to search out more knowledge about children's cultural shaping, narrative practice was studied as a shared activity in an early year setting (age-group one to three year old children). Of interest was at the one hand, how children used co-narratives and identifying what was worth talking about from child-perspective. The hybrid nature of children's stories was apparent. When taking the initiative to tell they made use of characters from popular shows and traditional stories and told about being afraid and being angry. On the other hand it was of interest to study how teacher's made use of the co-narratives genre and a typology of eight varieties was constructed. Teachers invited children into variety of narrative practices, such as for example collective remembrances, informing and instructing the children what to do next, eliciting narratives by questioning the children about their family life etc.

An ongoing study; *Kindergarten as an arena for cultural formation* (Norwegian Research Council 2009-2013), have given the opportunity to try out new approaches and add more narratives to the studies of children's narrative meaning-making and cultural shaping. Together these studies cover the time span from 2003/2004 until present time and ongoing studies². The 2003 studies came from 290 hour of field work, while the 2009/2010 studies consisted of 60 hours of field work (Knudsen & Ødegaard in press). The approaches employed were ethnographic at their base. Field logs were done by the writing as well as by the use of video-camera in all of the studies; however a role of collaborator and active participant was taken onboard in the fieldwork in 2009/2010. Now digital photos were taken also by the child participants. Another difference in approaches was that in the 2003/2004 study I as a researcher observed narratives in daily institutional life. In the 2009/2010 study I provoked storytelling by introducing a story book for writing down children's stories at a story table, as well as inviting children to make photo collages from photos they had already taken.

² Together with Ida M. Knudsen

Year	Research studies about co-narrative meaning-making in kindergarten 2-5 year olds	Child ren's age	Researcher's approach	Sample N-160	Outcome
2003 2004	In everyday talk during mealtimes	2	Video recordings – researcher behind camera	102	Informing co-narrative genre –use; appropriation of cultural modes of speaking. Themes and chronotopes. Informing child perspective, varieties in child-initiated and teacher-initiated co-narratives
2003 2004	In narrative play	2-	Video recordings – researcher behind camera	40	Informing child perspective, conditions for children's influence and participation, conditions for inclusion
2009 2010	In provoked storytelling with drawings and digital photos	3-5	Log, visual data and researcher participating in the narrative processes	18	Informing child perspective and cultural intertextuality

The dialogic nature of children's narratives

In the first analytic stage I roughly divided the narratives into two groups; personal everyday life experiences and narratives with fiction elements, approximately half of the stories were personal narratives about experiences from everyday life in kindergarten and from recalling family life. They are left out in the following analytic overview. This kind of divide is not obvious, because there were narratives combining personal everyday life experiences with fiction or playful elements. In that case the narrative are put the group of narratives with fiction elements and references to toys. A dialogic analysis was then conducted on the group of 82 narratives with elements of fiction and play.

To get horizontal overview of what cultural artifacts children draw on in narrative practice, I asked: *What kind of central characters do they bring into their fiction narratives? And where do these resources originate?* With these interests as pointers, a sample of narratives from empirical ethnographic data; narrative play, in playful narrative talk in everyday settings and in children telling stories in provoked storytelling sessions, was scrutinized. The narrative inquiry and analysis are informed by Bakhtin's dialogism (Bakhtin,

1986) as well as by contemporary narrative methods and reflections (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Czarniawska, 2004; Hutto, 2008; Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo & Tamobukou, 2010; Polkinghorne, 2005; Rissman, 2008; Rose, 2007; Webster & Mertova, 2007; White, 2009).

The table below consists of an overview of the characters and their heritage; author of the intertext and the cultural context in which it is produced.

Characters	Intertext	Available artifact in kindergarten	Author of intertext	Cultural context
Captain Sabertooth	Captain Sabertooth	Books, CDs, imaginary use of artifact	Terje Formoe	Scandinavian/American
Captain Hook	Peter Pan	Imaginary use of artifact	Originally Sir James Matthew Barrie	European/American
Captain Blackbill	Kaptein Sortebill	Song	Torbjørn Egner	Norwegian(American)
Father Christmas	Traditional	Local kindergarten stories, kindergarten celebration	Multiple origins, folklore,	European/American/Global
Pippi Longstocking	Pippi Longstocking	Books	Astrid Lindgren	Scandinavian
Police	Media, everyday life	Miniature toy, Blue shirt for role play	Multiple	Scandinavian, American
Person i star wars	Star wars film	Imaginary use of	George Lucas	American
Indians	Traditional	Books, Excursion to museum	Multiple	American
Lion	Lion King	Books, miniature toy	Multiple	American and other
Shark	Books of wild animal Various science literature	Books, internet, miniature toy	Multiple	Australian/American
Octopus	Peter Pan Moovie, Science literature	Books	Multiple	American

The overview exposes how children's narrative meaning-making in kindergartens in Norway are related to popular media from the Scandinavian and Anglo-American hemisphere. From the overview we can see that children make meaning with physically powerful characters, Taking a socio-epistemological glance it could be notices that the characters are mostly male and animals often used to symbolize attack or aggression. Two girls references to Astrid Lindgren's story of Pippi Longstocking seem to be an exception when it comes to gender. Let us therefore study at a close hold the example of exception, coming into being during a provoked storytelling session.

Two girls shaping a new Pippi Longstocking story

At the spring festival, the children came to kindergarten dressed in various costumes. While waiting for the meal and peak event, it was time for drawing and storytelling. We sat down at the story table, Maia, Rikke, both 4 years of age and me, a visiting researcher with a provocative narrative approach. At the table were pencils and papers, my story-writing book and a pen. Around us are other children in the kindergarten group, most of them sitting down drawing, some children are playing with Lego bricks in a corner. Last week, when I was there, we followed the same routine. I was inviting them to a storytelling session. We sat down. I wrote down the story verbatim. Now it was time to do it again. Both of them were eager to draw and tell when getting an invitation. Both of the girls were dressed in Pippi Longstocking costumes.

Maia: Pippi Longstocking can see a ship, then she can put people on fire, then they will die.

Pause, while both of them are drawing

Elin: Oh, what happened next?

Maia: Then she sais obs! Afterwards, Pippi should put the fire out.

Pause, while drawing

Elin: Are there more people there?

Maia: Everyone living in Bergen were there, they were very happy when she put the fire out.

Rikke: The ship is called Sleeping Beauty, white and yellow, the children were dead, but they woke up again. Maia and Rikke, they survived, they didn't die. They just ran away from the fire, they didn't burn, their house burnt down. Then they ran to somebody else.

Maia: They ran to Pippi Longstocking. Her house was not on fire. They ran to the house that couldn't burn and that was Maia's house. Her mother and father were at home. They ran from the rain. We had so strong arms, we were Pippi Longstocking. We could save them from the fire.

Being Pippi, being “us”– being bad, being good

Analysing narrative practice as dialogic, challenges the notion that it is individuals that tell rational and coherent stories about themselves to each other. This co-narrative about Pippi Longstocking and the fire was constructed cooperatively by two girls and me. The fact that this was happening at the spring festival day, and that both of the girls were dressed with Pippi Longstocking costumes from a toy shop, carried obvious signs and modes for the girls when being invited to tell a story.

It is Maia that introduces the theme and the character. She chooses Pippi Longstocking as the protagonist of her story. The first line: “Pippi Longstocking can see a ship, then she can put people on fire, then they will die”, set a violent and dramatic scene. This line is also in fact a three line story in an Aristotle's sense, with an introduction with a protagonist, a crucial incident and a consequence as an end. It is me, the researcher that take the lead to extend the story, and to include more than one author; when I utter: “Oh, what happened next?” It is Maia that continues. “Then she sais obs! Afterwards, Pippi should put the fire out”. Maia is first telling about a forceful Pippi that can put people on fire, Pippi is here a bad character. In the next line however, she is a hero, who can rescue people. Maia is here playing out Pippi as a character that at first is being bad, and then being good. Responding to the opportunity to extend her narrative, she also changes her speech plan. To my knowledge fire is not a theme in Astrid Lindgren's stories about Pippi Longsstocking, so Maia is using the Pippi character in a new thematic setting. Later it is me again that conditions an extension of the story with uttering: “Are there more people there?” This utterance gives a direction and make up conditions for what can come next. Maia continues: “Everyone living in Bergen was there, they were very happy when she put the fire out”. Now it seems as Rikke is becoming engaged in the narration process, she continues: “The ship is called Sleeping

Beauty, white and yellow. The children were dead, but they woke up again. Maia and Rikke, they survived, they didn't die. They just ran away from the fire, they didn't burn, their house burnt down. Then they ran to somebody else." She introduces another intertext; the fairytale and Disney film: *Sleeping Beauty*, as the name of the ship. She introduces more to the story; themselves, Maia and Rikke. She is referring to themselves with their given names. They did not die from the fire, they survived. She gives them power; they ran away from the fire. She then tells about a new crises; their house burnt down, again they survived by running to someone else. Maia continues the narrative thread by telling: "They ran to Pippi Longstocking. Her house was not on fire. They ran to the house that couldn't burn and that was Maia's house. Her mother and father were at home. They ran from the rain." Next, she does a change in authoring style; she begins to talk about "us". This indicates a shift from fiction into a "Bildung – narrative": "We had so strong arms, we were Pippi Longstocking. We could save them from the fire." Maia introduces heroic identity markers into the story by doing this shift.

This co-narration can illustrate how to girls, and me as a researcher, shape a narrative together and how this emerging process also embodies subtle, heteroglossic values and powerful identity potentials in the choice of protagonist, as well as in the turn by first putting themselves into the story and second by being Pippi Longstocking. The narrative can be read as an example that informs us about what these two girls explore, finds important to talk about and be. Rikke tell about the two of them, that they died from the fire, but survived.

The theme of survival that can be read from this narrative, have as also been described in other studies of children's play (Löfdahl, 2004; Hjemdahl, 2002, Paley, 1986) and narratives (Ødegaard, 2006). The words and powerful performances that are part of a Pippi aesthetics, have also similarities to studies of children's meaning-making within the frame of multimodality and literacy (Dyson, 1997, Maagerø, 2004). Eva Maagerø describes a five year old boy's multimodal compositions, being an exploration over powerful men; a footballkeeper, the pirate Captain Sabretooth and a strong man. Authority is taken on board by the girls in the last three lines: "We had so strong arms. We were Pippi Longstocking. We could save them from the fire." The costumes were chosen together with their families; they came dressed like Pippi Longstocking this particular day. The clothes were artefacts that made the playful talk and narrative identification easy. As such, the narrative about Pippi and the fire, serves as a microcosmic site for conceptualizing the intertextuality going on in

children's narratives. This example portrays the co-narrative as a space where contradiction and negotiation are played out.

Conceptualizing narrative practices within institutional context

Children make meaning by using cultural artifacts made available for them. When participating in the creation of new and hybrid stories they explore cultural values and identities. How do these studies and the above analyses contribute to new insights about conditions for children's meaning-making and cultural shaping within institutional contexts?

Through analysis of children's narrative practice we are informed of what kind of intertextuality they live by in some Norwegian early year's settings. *Survival* is a crucial life theme in the adult world, as we can see in literature, drama and films. When it comes to the youngest children, growing up in caring environments, we are used to think of them as occupied with "here and now", living the happiness of childhood. These studies draw patterns of children's make use of powerful characters when engaging in narrative meaning-making. In the texts made available for children there are only Pippi Longstocking that the girls in the data use as artifacts for powerful characters in their stories. Bakhtin's philosophical contribution; dialogism, gives important insight to understand the dynamics of narrative practice in early years institutions. These practices are to be understood as heteroglossic. Michael Holquist put it like this:

"At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological –that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve" (Hollquist, 1981: 428).

Even if Bakhtin, neither empirically dealt with early years studies, nor was concerned with children's narratives, his dialogic approach are productive in the studies of children's narrative meaning-making practices. Such an approach allows studies of both form and content, narratives can be seen as generating themes and consider meaning-making in contexts. In this scope, meaning-making practices are seen as becoming and emerging in dynamic social interaction. A subject can speak by using existing artifacts. In a dialogic

perspective, informed by Bakhtin, every text will include many voices, hidden discourses, politics, ideologies and values. Any utterance will be saturated by meanings coming from earlier users. “The word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981:293). In this theoretical framework, children’s narratives are not considered coming from the inner soul, rather emerging from a dialogic process (Ødegaard, 2007a; Ødegaard, in press).

Consequently narratives are viewed as a speech and act genre, through which young children participate in cultural activities. At the same time as they use narrative genre to shape inner meaning, they are exposed to narratives and thereby participate in a web of structural and relational conditions (Bruner, 1990; Hirschkop and Shepherd, 2001; Hutto, 2008; Junefelt, 2009, Ødegaard, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). Children are, implicitly as well as explicitly, exposed to cultural like books, films, toys, as for example spin off products from films made for children as audience, all of which are possible to study in the micro cosmos of co-narrative practice in an early years setting. Such are the stuff children take up when creating their own stories. Texts made available for children are re-circulated in their modes of action and speech, as cultural formative practices.

Thinking with Bakhtin, children’s narratives are viewed as hybrids; “a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and inter relationships” (Bakhtin, 1981:263). In dialogism, meaning-making is considered a shared activity. Genres and words in use arise from the social practices in a given community as also pointed out by Mika Lähtenmäki (2004). A more specific analysis of the hybrid nature of children’s narratives can be allowed by taking on board the concept intertextuality (Kristeva, 1967). Intertextuality describes the practice of making connections between texts, as pointed out by Bakhtin.

According to Catherine Kohler Riessman, dialogic analysis is concerned about how narratives are co-produced in a complex choreography, in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader, history and culture (Riesman 2008: 105). Characteristic for this kind of analysis is that the researcher is active present in the text and that the context is considered to be important. With reference to Erving Goffman, Riessman adds importance to the performative act, when analyzing identity. Bodily forms of communications come into play. Such a consideration is convenient when looking for /characters that children take up when telling and playing stories. Hence, the term narrative here refers to a general way of knowing and communicating experiences, organizing a plot temporally and spatially, or

connecting utterances and act into meaning. Narrative practice is considered a process of collaborative meaning-making. Being studied in the context of early year's institutions narrative practice is considered, in one form or another as co-narratives. Narrative practice embraces the term story and storytelling. The story concept will more specifically refer to provoked stories as in "storytable activities" in kindergarten.

Children's oral stories; co-narratives as well as narrative practice in fiction play, drawings and digital collages give rich opportunities for studying narrative practice as a site for cultural practice. Children's use of texts; stories, fairytales, films, etc, that are made available for them, are studied within the framework of ethnography and analysis of narratives.

The attempt to conceptualize children's narratives for the purpose of studying conditions for children's meaning making and cultural shaping is in this paper laid out as operating in a web of structural, contextual relationships. The interest is obvious *not* developmental, rather the interest is studying children's narratives as cultural practice. Conditions like cultural artifacts; books, theater, personal stories, legends and videogames are made available by teachers (and researchers) ideologies and practice and will constitute and shape institutional practice. I have suggested that co-narrative practice will be conditioned by both *how* the stories are co-created in relation with peers and supportive, and at the same time by *cultural artifacts* that serve as resources for their meaning-making processes.

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