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Laying the foundations: Narrative and early learning

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Chapter 1: Laying the foundations: narrative and early learning

Teresa Cremin and Rosie Flewitt

In order to understand the developmental and educational significance of storytelling and story acting we locate this within the body of wider research on narrative. Nearly half a century ago, Moffett (1968:121) claimed that ‘young children must, for a long time, make narrative do for all’; from an early age children use narrative as a way of thinking, to construct stories and explanations. Through imaginary play and storytelling children seek to understand and make sense of their world. These significant forms of symbolic activity make a sustained impact upon children’s social, emotional and language development, and influence their identity formation (see Engel, 1999, 2005; Fox, 1993; McCabe and Bliss, 2003). By considering the nature and role of narrative, its relationship to pretend play and to creativity, and its potential to influence and support children’s early learning and literacy, this chapter seeks to lay the foundations of the book. Narrative is considered in terms of its developmental and cognitive elasticity, which render it instructive and rich across theory, curriculum, and the arts. Through examining research undertaken in homes, preschool settings and early years classrooms, the nature of children’s playful and often self-initiated narrative practices is examined.

Following this conceptual focus, the chapter considers the challenge of retaining a strong place for storytelling and imaginary play in early years and early primary education by considering the contemporary context of literacy curricula with particular reference to the UK and USA.. In these countries where the empirical research upon which this book is based was undertaken, there has been an increased emphasis on standardised testing and school accountability. This highly performative (Ball, 1998) agenda is discussed and the pressure it places on teachers and children to focus on measurable outcomes, often at the expense of creative, playful and child-oriented approaches to literacy learning and teaching, is considered.

Narrative

The centrality of narrative as a critical aspect of human thought and development is widely recognised by scholars from many disciplines. Linguists and psychologists for example assert that narrative is a major ‘organising device’ (Langer, 1953) enabling us to order experience, and that it is ‘a natural way of thinking’ and ‘a fundamental mode of thought’ (Bruner, 1986, 1990) through which we construct meaning and make sense of experience and the world. Hardy’s (1977) well-known assertion that

narrative is a 'primary act of mind transferred to art from life' is further underlined when she states:

we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future (Hardy, 1977:12-13).

Researchers from many disciplines also testify to the prevalence of narrative, with Barthes (1977), a literary theorist, claiming narrative is 'international, transhistorical and transcultural' and anthropologists documenting different oral and literary storytelling traditions and practices (e.g. Heath, 1983). In considering conceptual definitions of narrative, the philosopher Rudrum (2005) notes that the most frequently recurring definition is of narrative as a representation of an event or sequence of events, although Kvernbekk (2003), adopting a broader definition, includes events, characters and plots, causal sequences, a unity through the beginning, middle and end and significance. The significance criterion links to the sociolinguist Labov's (1972) concept of evaluation. In analysing the naturalistic stories of inner-city adolescents, he positions evaluation at the heart of narrative structure and highlights the narrator's affective stance towards events. Researching early education, Wells (1987) claims that making sense, constructing stories and sharing them with others is 'an essential part of being human' (222). The educationalist Rosen (1984) further argues that story plays a profoundly important part in children's cognitive and emotional development and asserts the potency of narrative, claiming it 'is nothing if not a supreme means of rendering otherwise chaotic, shapeless events into a coherent whole saturated with meaning' (Rosen, 1988: 164). In relation to the practice of storytelling in early childhood, the symbolic potential of language and 'its power to create possible and imaginary worlds through words' (Bruner, 1986: 156) is widely recognised as significant.

However narrative as an inherently human endeavour is not tied to purely linguistic forms. Narrative expression frequently transcends the spoken or written word and is embodied, as children and adult narrators communicate their narratives multimodally, using gestures, eye gaze, physical proximity and bodily movements for example as well as language (Ochs and Capps, 1996). Writing from a dance education research perspective, Chappell (2008) speculates that meaning gleaned from embodied narratives emerges and is felt, but is often difficult to put into words. In order to understand the felt and embodied nature of narrative, since feelings may be 'grasped and intuited only in their moment of experiencing' (Gibson quoted in Abbs, 1989:58), Chappell (2008) suggests that there needs to be recognition of the aesthetic and affective qualities at play. Embodied narratives, she submits, use movement, dance and the dynamics of the physical human form to express these difficult meanings. Priddis and Howieson's (2010) work connects to this idea that emotional, felt and aesthetic elements are always at play within narrative, and Bruner (1986) too sees emotions, memory and imagination combined in narrative thinking. Links between the emotions, narrative and the imagination are also explored in the work of the

educational philosopher Egan (1983, 2005) who maintains that the development of imagination occurs through narrative, and that children's pretend play offers an imaginative space (Vygotsky, 1978) in which story enables thinking about the world, about people and relationships.

Early narratives in the home

Studies of the development of autobiographical memory suggest that narrative begins to be established early in life. In analyzing the pre-sleep monologues of her daughter, (between the ages of twenty one and thirty six months), Nelson (1989) found that she reproduced fragments of talk and narratives which played out both past and future events and routines. Nelson suggests that these narratives enabled her daughter to make inferences, imagine and understand her experiences and that this contributed to her self-regulation and development. Whitehead's (1977) work in early childhood indicates that from very early on, children begin to structure and sequence life experience into simple proto-narratives and later into more complex and layered sequences. Fivush and her colleagues, working from a socio-cultural perspective, have established that in a number of cultures, from approximately two years of age, children learn how to talk about and organise their mental representations of past events and activities often through participating in family conversations (Fivush and Hammond, 1990; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang and Fivush, 2005). As children listen and contribute to the stories their families tell and retell about activities in their shared past, they internalise these as intrapersonal autobiographical memories. This socialising function allows mothers (and other caregivers) to help the young make sense of their world, ensures that their shared stories are aligned with their family's ways of organizing life experience, and helps to build a sense of the family's collective identity (Congleton and Rajaram, 2014). Smidt (2006) observes that 'there is no correct way of making stories; we learn the story grammars, discourses and patterns from our society and culture' (71), and arguably develop our sense of self by storying our lives, for:

...we need stories as we need food, and we need stories most of all in childhood, as we need food then in order to grow (Hollingdale, 1997:70)

Pretend play and narrative

The relationships between narrative and play are multiple and complex. In the words of Paley (1990) 'play . . . [is] story in action, just as storytelling is play put into narrative form' (4). Indeed she further asserts 'that this view of play makes play, along with its alter ego, storytelling and acting, the universal learning medium' (1990:10). Not dissimilarly, Wilson (1998) claims that 'playing with anything to make something is always paralleled in cognition by the creation of a story' (195). In particular, imaginary play enables children to assume roles and engage in 'as-if' thinking and pretending to be someone or something else. In looking across numerous studies of imaginary play and narrative, Nicolopoulou (2005) suggests that these have

established that children's developing story skills help them to own and use a wide variety of symbolic resources to construct possible worlds, and that as they do so, they draw upon the imaginative capacities expressed in and supported by their pretend play (e.g. Baumer, Ferholt and Lecusay, 2005; Dyson, 1993; Engel, 2005; Gupta, 2009; Rowe, 2000). Connecting to the work of Vygotsky (1978), Nicolopoulou (2005) also observes that narrative and play are both forms of socially situated symbolic action and that in children's play the enactment of narrative scenarios is key.

Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, in the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of life-like plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. (Vygotsky, 1978:102)

Many scholars have studied the contribution of pretend play to children's narrative development (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982), to their logical reasoning (Amsel, Triofi, and Campbell, 2005) to their vocabulary (Gupta, 2005) to their literacy (e.g. Mages, 2009; Nicolopoulou, Cortina, Ilgaz, Cates and de Sá, 2015; Pelligrini, 1984; Roskos and Christie, 2000) and to their multilingual abilities (Long, Volk and Gregory, 2007). Both Engel (2005) and Ilgaz and Aksu-Koc (2005) stress that sociodramatic play prompts narrative thinking which is expressed through verbal narration. Engel (2005) gives the example of two children moving cars and making appropriate engine noises as they pretend to drive them. She describes this as pretence not narrative play. However, if one of the children voices narrative actions and undertakes these ('the car is skidding it's going to crash' for example), then Engel (2005) suggests, this can be viewed as narrative play. She argues that such play is a direct 'descendant of pretend play' and demonstrates that when preschoolers use language to weave their symbolic play into a narrative, this enables exploration in an alternative symbolic world, one which stimulates experimentation and speculation. Children's stories, which become quite complex by their fourth year, enable them, Engel (2005) claims, to move easily between 'what is' narratives, (in which their play simulates everyday life), and 'what if' narratives, (in which they play in an imaginary world of fictive possibilities). She suggests that children not only oscillate between these two domains of experience with ease, but also explore the boundaries between them.

Recognised as 'the serious and necessary occupation of children' (Dyson, 2009: 122) studies of young children as 'symbol weavers' (Dyson, 1990) reveal the significant role of imaginary play and show how through such play children explore notions of self through oral narrative. For example Kendrick 's (2005) study of a five year old's story, voiced as she played with her doll's house, shows how she engages in exploring who she is and who she might be, effectively authoring her own potential autobiography through play. Through her narrative play she not only explores her sense of self but also 'communicates her understanding of what it means to be a woman in her particular family and culture' (Kendrick, 2005: 22). In another study, eighteen four and five year olds' learning was examined when they told and enacted their own stories (Gupta, 2009). Each child was enabled to tell their stories (which were scribed), create an impromptu 'play' and become personally involved in directing the dramatisation of this with their peers, often with costumes and props and scenery. In the process of exploring options and identifying solutions, the young

learners engaged in peer discussions. Gupta (2009) argues that through their collective participation in this cultural activity, the children had the opportunity to develop cognitively, linguistically, interpersonally, intrapersonally, emotionally and artistically. Whilst recognising that the breadth of learning involved was shaped by the small class size and the innovative teacher, Gupta suggests this particular dramatic play curriculum evidenced Rogoff's (2003) conception of guided participation. In relation to classroom drama, which many scholars argue is closely linked to play (both make use of the imagination, narrative, emotions and dialogue) a meta-analysis of studies by Podlozny, (2000), indicates that drama has a beneficial effect on young children's oral language development and facilitates both their narrative recall and their understanding. Although as Mages (2008) observes it is unclear whether the language gains reported in the meta-analysis, 'were due to drama, to tutoring, to peer interactions, or to a combination of these factors' (130).

Scholars have also investigated how children's improvisations and everyday creativity are encouraged and enhanced when they are able to bring to school ideas and resources from their out-of-school interests and activities, including their everyday practices with new media. Drawing on Pennycook's (2010) conceptualisation of 'relocalization' as a term to describe how texts and text-making practices are creatively transformed as they are repeated and reused in new contexts, Collier (2013) observed in a longitudinal study how a young boy, Kyle, explored his interest in wrestling by watching it online, on television, by playing wrestling games on his PlayStation 2 and by enacting and narrating pretend wrestling matches with miniature wrestlers and Pokémon action figures. Over the course of this two-year study, as Kyle grew from eight to ten years of age, he repeatedly enacted his favourite professional wrestler, using invented props to populate his pretend play, blurring the boundaries between real and imagined practices, and in so doing, creatively relocated the world of professional wrestling into his own life at home and in school. These practices allowed him to display his expertise through his enactments, to gain control and bring a topic of personal interest into his school work. As Collier explains, although expressions of any kind of violence were taboo in Kyle's school, wrestling *per se* was not, and Kyle's teachers acknowledged the importance for him of his interest in this form of popular culture which cut across his physical and digital play activities. Rather than ignoring or dismissing his interest, they recognised the pleasure and learning opportunities that popular culture practices and texts can offer to school learning (Buckingham, 1998).

Pretend play, like narrative play, can be solitary, but is often a collaborative endeavour, a socially shared phenomenon, which Rowe (2000:20) observes 'allows children to walk around in story settings', to touch, feel and pretend 'otherwise'. Research into the everyday narratives of preschool classrooms suggests that these socialisation practices are also collaboratively achieved and support children's integration into the social world of their peers. Kyratzis and Green (1997), in documenting storying during drawing activities, reveal that even when children appear to retell their tales of lived experience these are often joint productions, involving several children. Puroila et al.'s (2011) work studying children's spontaneous narratives affirms this, they show that when 'space' is available for children to narrate together, then their stories, whilst fragmentary, are co-constructed.

In the process, they co-construct their friendships, peer cultures and identities, further demonstrating the centrality of narrative in early learning.

Creativity and narrative

Like storytelling, dramatic play proceeds without a script and is a prime example of Sawyer's (2004) 'performance creativity' in which the creative process and the resulting product are co-occurring. There are a number of studies that explore the importance of narrative and play in fostering children's creativity *in* and *through* language (for a review see Cremin and Maybin, 2012). As noted above, scholars have shown that children naturally experiment with language sounds, structures and meanings (e.g. Whitehead, 1977; Nelson, 1989). This kind of spontaneous, often playful, creativity in language arguably contains the seeds of more prestigious poetic, literary and dramatic cultural forms (Cook 2000; Tannen 2007). Children also engage creatively through language using it for the construction of alternative worlds, practising social roles, rational exploration and hypothetical thinking. For example, in studying the oral narratives of four and five year-olds, Fox (1993) reveals the generative nature of narrative and the complex ways in which children draw on their experience of literary stories read and told to them. Whilst she notes that 'the model for the children's stories was very obviously literary', Fox also demonstrates that children combine these with stories about their own lives, since as Rosen (1984: 33) asserts 'any story presupposes the existence of other stories...for both reader and listener (or teller and told) threads of connection exist, threads of many different kinds'. In the stories Fox (1993) collected, children combined real and fantasy events, producing complex narrative structures that motivated their exploration of physical laws and logical thought, as well as their social world.

Through examining pre-school aged children's self-initiated play, the creativity inherent in their narratives has also been documented (Craft, McConnon and Matthews, 2012). In this study, driven by a leading question or narrative, voiced by children and/or teachers, children's play demonstrated individual, collaborative and communal creativity. In related work, also focused on the conception of 'possibility thinking' at the heart of creativity, the foundational nature of narrative was revealed (Cremin, Chappell and Craft, 2013). The concept of 'possibility thinking', developed by Craft (2001) refers to 'what if' and 'as if' thinking in children aged three to eleven. The 2013 paper examined three previously published empirical studies of possibility thinking (Chappell et al., 2008; Craft, Cremin, et al., 2012; Craft, McConnon and Matthews, 2012) and revealed that reciprocal relationships exist between questioning, imagination and narrative (Cremin et al., 2013). Leading questions voiced by practitioners or children appeared to create a possibility space in which children's imaginations and on-going questioning contribute to the development of narratively framed 'sequences' of possibility thinking. Additionally, narrative itself provides the possibility space for children's questioning and imaginative engagement (Cremin et al., 2013). This connects to earlier work by Fox (1990) who asserted that:

...the practice of narrating stories, either invented or retold, helps young

children to come to know what it is to think through problems, argue cases, see both sides of questions, find supporting evidence and make hypotheses, comparisons, definitions and generalizations (Fox, 1990:121)

It is clear that rich creative opportunities are afforded by the space to tell and dramatise stories; in narrating and enacting both ‘what is’ and potential ‘what if’ world narratives, young children’s learning is enabled.

Narrative and early literacy learning

Research into narrative in early learning suggests that early narrative competence proffers a secure foundation for emergent literacy and long-term success in schooling (e.g. McCabe and Bliss, 2003; Tabors, Snow, and Dickinson, 2001). In addition, some studies indicate that early narrative skills are linked to and predictive of reading comprehension in the later primary school years (e.g. Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Griffin et al. 2004). Early literacy activity is often embedded in children’s playful approach to early learning. Their deployment of narrative to organize and make sense of experience not only serves to promote academic learning and enhance their literacy skills, but also supports the development of the skills that are required for success in the twenty-first century – skills such as creativity, risk taking, and coping with uncertainty (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer and Berk, 2012). Additionally, the roles children adopt during early pretend play and their use of cultural symbols and practices prepare the ground for their participation in literacy events (Gillen, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

When retelling and re-enacting stories in the early years, (regardless of whether these are based on traditional oral stories, printed texts or life experiences), play enriches the language children use as they improvise and adopt perspectives (e.g. Rowe, 1998, 2000; Sawyer, 2003). Some scholars such as Gerrig (1993) argue that young children’s ability to inhabit imaginary circumstances during pretend play is ‘a basic aspect of narrative experience that endures through the lifespan’ (195), and that this may later be seen in adults’ engaged and absorbed mental states whilst reading (Harris, 2000). Meek (2002) too suggests that the reading and experience of fiction is somewhat like play, in that it has the capacity to expand children’s imaginations, building the imaginary ‘what if’ world, as well as enabling them to recognize elements of the world of ‘what is’. Indeed the use of ‘life to text’ and ‘text to life’ strategies (Cochran Smith, 1984, cited in Gregory, 1996:81), are now widely accepted as essential aspects of the process of learning to read. It is precisely these strategies which young children stretch when narrating and enacting their own and others’ stories.

However, children’s early narrative competence, imaginative capacities and out-of-school interests do not always translate easily into schooled practices. In early years settings in England for example, due to the downward pressure of the primary curriculum and its attendant assessment regime, storytelling and socio-dramatic play

are rarely given the attention they deserve. When the preschoolers that Fox (1993) studied entered formal education, their narrative capacity was unnoticed; one was never invited to tell a story and another was ‘tested on suspicion of “language retardness” during the period when he was recording 29,000 words of narrative at home’ (Fox, 2004: 193). In the US, the seminal work of the anthropologist Heath (1983) described how young children growing up in the highly oral environment of the Trackton community told stories in the same manner and style as their community, creating highly exaggerated and imaginative retellings of real events and making multiple metaphoric connections. Nonetheless, these skills were not transferred into the classroom where children were asked to label discrete features of objects and events; they were not given the space to share the texts of their lives or create imaginary tales and enact them with their peers. Unsurprisingly therefore, unable to draw on their language and cultural practices for learning, they were often perceived to have low literacy levels, and gradually became alienated from school.

Whilst both these studies were undertaken some years ago, there is little evidence that the situation has altered dramatically. Indeed more recent research suggests that despite children’s narrative capacities and wide recognition of the role of narrative in early learning, playful child-initiated and story-based activities are being pushed to one side in favour of structured literacy routines and practices (Dyson and Dewayni, 2013; Genishi and Dyson, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). The challenge of integrating the creative practices of storytelling and enactment into the literacy curriculum, even in the early years of schooling should not be underestimated. These challenges are now examined in the light of recent developments in UK and USA early years literacy curricula, which in turn reflect global trends in early education policy and curricula.

Current trends in early years literacy curricula

Literacy has always been viewed as the cornerstone for learning, as essential for personal development and for the social, cultural and economic growth of communities and nations. For many decades, literacy has been central in national and international policy debates about making high quality education accessible to all, and, along with numeracy, as having the potential to transform individual lives by offering pathways to overcome poverty, unemployment and poor health (Flewitt and Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Literacy levels have been assessed and compared as never before through the development of international comparative ‘leagues tables’ such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the National Center for Education Statistics’ Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). International assessments such as these have been designed explicitly to influence national policy (Rizvi and Lingard, 2013), and have become defining features of the sustained political drive to improve national and global levels of literacy from the earliest years onwards.

Governments have responded variously to the pressures imposed on them by transnational organisations, such as OECD and UNESCO, which hold national systems to account against international benchmarks and indicators. In the UK and the USA, policy-makers have committed to intervening directly in public education systems, and in the case of literacy, to raising literacy levels by applying new principles (Moss, 2009). The chosen principles for systemic reform in England and the USA are based on the premise that 'standards' are an effective tool for improvement - that setting high standards with measurable goals can improve individual outcomes, that standards can be reliably assessed through the administration of national tests, and that improved standards will lead to higher performance in international education league tables. The standards agenda has therefore led to the development and implementation of highly prescriptive literacy curricula, standardised measures for child assessment and a new era of governance where schools and teachers are held to account for annual increases in test scores (see Ball, 2013; Moss, 2009).

Within a global culture of performativity (Ball, 1998), national tests have become the focus for policy-makers concerned with early years and primary education. In the USA, education policy was dominated from 2002-2010 by 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB), which held schools responsible for year-on-year increases in the percentage of children who passed a series of national tests, and rated schools according to their level of success. When flaws in NCLB became apparent, the US government response was to increase the use of high stakes testing (mandated in the Race to the Top law) and to strengthen the standards (Snow, 2014). A significant policy led by the National Governors Association, and championed by the Obama Administration, the 'Common Core State Standards' (CCSS; see <http://www.corestandards.org/>) was instituted. These standards work backwards from the skills that all students may ultimately need to enter university or employment, and set out what students need to learn at every grade level along the way, with profound 'trickle-down' consequences for early education in the USA.

Similar systems of testing national standards have dominated education in the UK, particularly since the 1990s through the introduction of Standard Assessment Tasks for seven-, eleven- and fourteen year-olds in England. Following a series of critical reports and a fiasco over flaws in their marking, the tests for fourteen year-olds in England were abandoned in 2008. However tests for younger children have increased, with the introduction of a national Phonics Screening Check for 5 and 6 year-olds in 2012 (Flewitt and Roberts-Holmes, 2015), and a new national 'Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation' test for 7 year-olds in 2016. Whilst the heavily critiqued plans for 'Baseline Assessment' of all 4 and 5 year-olds at the point of school entry from Autumn 2016 (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2016) have been dropped, the profession expects an alternative assessment regime to be forthcoming.

These national tests carry high stakes not only for individual children, their teachers and schools but also for politicians, whose very political futures are dependent on providing a wavering electorate and competitive international markets with evidence of national success. Consequently over the past two decades, standardised test results

with quantifiable outcomes have become the narrow benchmark against which the quality of early education is rated. As Mansell (2007) points out, whereas in the public mind 'raising standards' may have become synonymous with improving the quality of education, in schools 'raising standards' has the more tightly defined meaning of raising test scores which are then measured against a set of narrow indicators that have been decided by policy-makers rather than educators.

Although 'raising standards' is by no means synonymous with 'improving quality', the political drive to raise literacy standards can yield positive gains. The question is, at what educational, professional and financial cost? The breadth of the curriculum on offer is inevitably affected, and children's access to rich and playful literacy learning opportunities has been diminished. Alexander (2011) argues that in England:

The tests impoverished the curriculum; the national strategies and professional standards impoverished pedagogy in both conception and practice ... in many primary schools a professional culture of excitement, inventiveness and healthy scepticism was supplanted by one of dependency, compliance and even fear; and the approach may in some cases have depressed both standards of learning and the quality of teaching. (273)

His observations also pertain to early years education contexts, where the downward pressure of assessment and the dubious concept of reading readiness combine to constrict the literacy curriculum and reduce opportunities for play, for storytelling and other creative early practices underpinned by narrative (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012). In the USA, Wohlwend and Pepler (2015) argue that:

Play is losing to rigor in American classrooms as more and more structured reading and math replaces traditional playtime, thanks in large part to pressure to meet the Common Core State Standards. Young children, in particular, are losing out because this increasing standardization of the curriculum restricts the variety of ways they could and should be learning. (22)

For young children and their educators, the outcomes of education performativity policies have intruded with ever greater insistence into the ways that classroom learning is framed. Rather than being encouraged by curriculum requirements to plan for educational experiences that engage children's interest and enthusiasm, and build on the narrative practices that they bring to school, teachers are statutorily obliged to observe measurable outcomes that are demonstrated through the successful completion (or not) of simple tasks. Many of these tasks involve routinised learning, and often have no identifiable purpose other than the achievement of a quantifiable measure which is subsequently used for school and teacher accountability rather than for planning child learning. Arguably, this fosters 'a professional mindset characterised more by compliance and conformity than curiosity and creativity' (Cremin, 2016:19) and shifts the professional role of teachers to being technocrats first and foremost and educators if and when they can find the time.

Conclusion

In early learning, narrative matters. From birth onwards young children make extensive use of imaginary play and storytelling in order to understand and make sense of their world. Over the past 25 years, a considerable body of research by sociolinguists and child psychologists has established the developmental significance of storytelling and imaginary play during early childhood. These activities benefit social, emotional and language development as well as children's understanding of their identities and their worlds. Educationalists too recognise the power of story and imaginary play and the value of both to young children's learning and literacy development.

Yet in many pre-school classrooms, particularly in England and the USA, the narrative-driven world of the young who rely upon telling their own narratives and using imaginary play to make sense of their world, is all too often sidelined by the test-driven world of politicians. National mandates and state policies that are underpinned by narrow conceptualisations of literacy and learning position formalised literacy instruction and measurable outcomes frontstage - in the footlights. Almost inevitably therefore playful story-based approaches to early learning and literacy tend to be relegated backstage - in the shadows. It is in response to this contradictory and challenging context, that this book was written. Drawing on new research into Vivian Gussin Paley's (1990) storytelling and story-acting approach, it provides evidence from the USA and the UK that not only offers hope and possibility in this constraining context, but bears testament to the value of making spaces for children's stories and for nurturing and valuing these through Paley's (1990) storytelling and story-acting curriculum.

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