# The Evolving World of Storytelling in Pre-school Education

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**Abstract**

In the last twenty years not only have methodological concepts become more differentiated, but due to psychology and pedagogy the system of methods has become more clearly divided. It is evident that in both kindergartens and schools there is even a greater emphasis on the more deliberate use of already well-known methods and resources, however, it is also essential to be open to new ones and to embrace them. Since playing is a primary activity for preschool children and stories provide a natural medium for them, it has become crucial to reform literary education to reflect this. However, new methods should be adopted into the methodology of mother tounge education with appropriate caution and a determined tempo. The study identifies a third type of the productive storytelling possibilities: the play-based storytelling. In addition, it groups the different storytelling options that are so far uncategorized but already used in kindergartens and identifies their differences. Finally, the study integrates the latest storytelling methods *(interactive storytelling)* into the existing framework of storytelling methods.

**Key words:** kindergarten (pre-school); literary education; productive storytelling; storytelling types; play-based storytelling; modern; relevant

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## Introduction – An Age of Change in Methodology

It is evident from observing the digital development of our modern age and its impact on early childhood that a positive attitude towards innovative methodology in education, even at kindergarten level, is essential. The denial of it or its refusal is pointless. Acquiring and familiarisation with new methods and procedures is now not only part of the educator's self-development, but it is also a premise for effective group learning. The more consciously used already acquired resources and methods are emphasized and encouraged, the more adopting new ones may come to be considered vital. Educators should apply these in a way that is engaging for active young children, who are brought up in a noisy environment full of different stimuli. These children are bombarded with image-based and other type of visual information on a daily basis. How can kindergartens compete with these? How

can they lay the foundation for literacy (reading books) for three to seven-year-olds of the digital generation? Since playing is a primary activity for preschool children and stories provide a natural medium for them, which is also agreed by twenty-first century developmental psychology, education must change to reflect this and it needs to embrace new methods.

For the three to seven age group illustrations and visual support is vital to form concepts, to understand actions and to discover connections within a plot (Nyitrai, 2009). This is the reason why the teacher leading the storytelling activity should use different story-production forms that are relevant and appropriate for the context. However, Gabriella Bauer (1976) and Józsefné Zilahi (1998) state that the teacher should avoid using props to visually aid the story so as not to spoil the story's own inherent imagery, which should be unique for each child as a result of their own individual interpretation. More contemporary studies (Dankóné, 2004) recommend using illustrations during storytelling in order to aid comprehension and to emphasize the playful aspect of this activity (Bereczkiné, 2022). They strongly encourage the use of props, tools and illustrations, including puppets, visual illustrations, paper theatres, symbolic objects of the story, *story skirt, story cushion* and *story apron* as well as interactive storytelling. The latest initiatives in psychological and mother tounge education (Kádár, 2017) also recommend activity-based methods because they enable children to take in the story through their own personal experiences.

The methodology of mother tounge storytelling at pre-school level is in need of change for various reasons. This process has already started in recent years. Resources and methods that have already been tried and tested in practice have created a demand for change in theory-based methodology. Due to the new illustration-based storytelling methods, the framework of the different pre-school storytelling techniques is of a transforming nature (this is the case for both the productive type with the teacher telling the story and the reproductive one when the child is creating the story). Children of our modern age do not only want to be exposed to traditional storytelling supported by visual illustrations, but also to activity-based, experience-oriented narratives. Following the appearance of dramatization and puppet-shows (Giczy,1976; Zilahiné, 1998; Dankóné, 2004), new methods based on these started to form, then due to the complex approach in pre-school education from 2010, their range has been expanding significantly.

It is crucial to re-think the current system of preschool storytelling techniques in the light of the achievements in experiential drama and theatrical pedagogy, as well as in applied puppetry, librarian and folk pedagogy and with regard to the resources offered by arts and crafts activities. Attention must also be given to the expanding range of methods and to the initiatives that are coming from different professional and specialist groups. In the past few years *The Centre for Mother Tongue Methodology* at Eötvös Lóránd University Budapest (ELTE, 2022) has been at the forefront of raising awareness of this need.

The following chapters deal with one particular area of the changing pre-school literary education: the different storytelling techniques used by kindergarten teachers. They utilize the existing systems of methodology as an excellent foundation

through which they aim to expand the concept of storytelling as a method and the range of techniques used to develop it.

# 1. Productive methods for providing literary experience for preschool children

Literary education does not take place in formal learning sessions in kindergartens only. Children's stories, children's poems and narratives are just as present in the children's daily activities as songs, nursery rhymes, balls, scissors and napkins. Random circumstances or events can make a teacher or a child cite a whole poem or just part of it, or quote a passage word by word from a piece of prose.

Planned storytelling can happen in various ways: a) as a motivation-led organized activity or b) as nap-time story, or c) as a random story which is either read from a book or spontaneously told by heart to the children at any time of the day. Sometimes it is the teacher who tells a story, sometimes it is the children who do so. Pre-school storytelling methods are categorized according to the narrator's identity: when the teacher is telling the story it is productive storytelling; when the child is retelling the story, it is reproductive storytelling. Hereafter, the study will focus on the productive storytelling method and will aim to re-think its concept in the methodology framework of previous years. This aspect of the study has been long awaited in the field of pre-school literary education. Following many years of observation, experience, collection of resources and professional consultations we are finally able to definethe third type ofproductive storytelling, the *PLAY-BA-SED STORYTELLING*.

## 1.1 Three groups of the productive storytelling methods Classic/traditional storytelling – speech/verbal narration only (storytelling without illustrations)

Storytelling with illustrations – verbal narration and props/resources:
- visual resources: pictures (leporellos, collages, graphic illustrations, water-colour or pastel and crayon phase diagrams, foliage collage pictures, book illustrations, digital images, slideshow, interactive smart board, puppets - applied puppetry, objects, headdresses, *galanty* show, story cushion, story skirt, story apron, story suitcase, story gloves, story map, paper theatre etc.);
- audio resources: musical instruments, sound effects and plant crop instruments, object sounds, records, CDs and other music media,etc.;
- audio-visual resources: DVD player, smart TV, devices suitable for showing films, cinema, IT equipment.

Play-based storytelling – verbal narration, props and movement:
- dramatic play (situational children stories with narrator, object play, improvisation, applied drama plays);
- interactive storytelling (use of related art techniques during storytelling);
- dramatization (children's story with characters, props, but without a narrator);
- puppet-show (preforming a story with puppets but without a narrator).

The first two methods of productive storytelling are already known due to them being part of the previously-mentioned methodology framework. In pre-school specialist materials the traditional storytelling method with no plot illustration was later followed by the visual illustrations method. This study wishes to supplement the existing framework by further differentiating it according to the sensory organs involved in the story being narrated.

Creating separate categories for audio and audio-visual resources might be questionable as some features are present and mixed in both, nevertheless these resources can still be defined according to their dominant feature (for example, a puppet is clearly a visual prop if it is not voiced, however it can still attract and direct attention). Furthermore, it is not possible to create strict divisions between the different types of illustrative resources, and, in any case, such divisions are not the actual objective of this study. However, it is definitely a task for methodology to acknowledge the presence of modern technology and their gradual replacement of traditional vinyl records and leporellos as well as the existence of other spectacular visual elements. We should also mention these among present day kindergarten activities, as we did with tape recorders and slide projectors before 1990s.

Novelty and device updates are most likely to happen in the world of visual resources. The 1995 National Programme for Pre-school Education introduced the idea of complex approach in planning, which gave educators the possibility not only for collaborations between the different fields of education, but also the chance to engage with other related sciences (Szinger, 2009; Nyitrai, 2009) and arts (Pálfi, 2016; Csányi–Simon–Tsík,2016; Fehér–Szatmáriné, 2019).

## 1.2 The advancement of play-based storytelling

Specialist literature has always treated puppet-shows, dramatization, dramatic play, structured presentations, and dramatized folk plays separately from illustrated storytelling activities within pre-school literary education. It was clear that the environment in which the storytelling took place in those activities was very different. These types of activities were therefore either included in a separate chapter, or in a sub-paragraph within the methodology section, but they were not placed within the productive system.

In the last twenty years not only have methodology concepts become more differentiated, but due to psychology (Csíkszentmihályi, 2001; Wekerdy, 2011; Kádár, 2012; Boldizsár, 2017) and pedagogy (M. Nádasi, 2003; Nagyné, 1996;

Ferenczyné, 2010; Bugja, 2016), the framework of methods has become more clearly defined. As a result of this change kindergartens can now include illustrative and play-based methods to promote experience-oriented and experience-based approach in their literary education. Preschool teachers no longer follow the traditional framework of methodology. They themselves witness that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and maintain the attention of 'children of the digital age', let alone transform their spontaneous interest into a conscious one.

In order to ensure that their teaching has a cognitive and mental impact on the children, teachers try to make listening to literature playful, and storytelling and poem recital activities more and more interactive. Although in general, educational objectives at pre-school level have always included these activities, traditional literary education expected children to settle down quietly before storytelling in order to experience the peacefulness and unique atmosphere of this activity. This method tried to avoid excessively noisy and showy styles of narration (Zilahiné, 1998; Dankóné, 2004). It is true that if we consider the mental and age specific needs of these children, we can agree that they also need activities that involve a peaceful and quiet environment.

However, pre-school education in our modern age must endeavour to find out, often by trial, what captures the spontaneous attention of *Generation Z* and *Alpha* (Komár, 2018), and which form of methodology is able to engage them for five, eight, or ten minutes. What educational method can make them be interested in stories or settle them down quietly to enjoy literature or even to read books? Storytelling methods involving play are proving to be increasingly suitable for this objective and, as a result, hopefully, over the three years of kindergarten education, it may just be achievable that children aged five and six can sit quietly and engage in a traditionally narrated story.

What, then, if we allow the story to filter through one of the lens of our educator's glasses, while at the same time, we allow the play and activity-centred approach to come through the other one? What if the two come together and in the light of the experience-oriented approach and through art pedagogy, we view the literary activity as more of a complex activity? What effect can play-based storytelling have on young children?

The study identifies a third type of the productive storytelling possibilities: play-based storytelling. In addition, it groups the different storytelling options that are so far uncategorized but already used in kindergartens and identifies their differences. Finally, the study integrates the latest storytelling methods (interactive storytelling) into the existing framework of storytelling methods. In the case of interactive storytelling methods, the study only aims to establish a relatively wide concept as interactive narrative methods are still forming, it is thus rather difficult to define their distinctive features.

# 2. Productive storytelling methods and their features

## 2.1 Classic narration

When kindergarten teachers use only oral skills (speech) and literary knowledge to narrate a story, they use the classic storytelling method of traditional folktales. Without any props, they solely rely on their own body and voice to capture the children's attention and imagination. The sound of the teacher's voice through various tone changes and the uniquely animated sound of each characters' voice can truly bring the story alive. Facial muscles through miming actions equally contribute to the animation process. The eyes of the narrator attract and direct the attention of the audience. Body language ensures full and continuous involvement with the plot and helps children to engage mentally in the action of the main characters. This is even more effective if the narrators themselvescan visualize what they are describing to the audience and if they are able to empathize with the described situations and the feelings that those involve.

In order to make this happen, it is essential that the narrator has exact knowledge of the story's words/text. Only this can produce a natural sounding and continuous flow of words in which body, face and voice actions can really flourish. A hesitating or stuttering narrative, or just a factual recital of the text can significantly reduce the story's impact. Teachers, even those without professional performance skills should nevertheless acquire the skills to speak clearly and correctly, and be able to memorise texts and use their voice variably. They need to know themselves and they need to be aware of their own reactions in stressful situations. Storytelling or narration is a public performance (be it in front of a group of kindergarten children or a wider audience) where the intellectual and emotional needs of those present must be met.

## 2.2 Narration with illustrations

Narrators use some form of illustrative resources or props in order to engage other sensory organs besides hearing (the ears). Involving visual and acoustic resources helps children follow the storyline and enables them to create an inner visualisation of the story. In addition, they also help maintain the children's focus and thereby improve their memory. Józsefné Zilahi (1998), in her methodology, categorically forbids the use of illustrations for tales, narratives, poems and narrative poems. Ervinné Dankó (2004), on the other hand, argues for a more effective learning experience by emphasizing the importance of illustrations and different methods to provide enjoyable literary experiences for children. Ágnes Nyitrai (2009) accepts the latest pedagogical aspirations for the use of modern technological devices in pre-school education, but she also considers it necessary to broaden the range of existing educational resources, tools and methods for kindergarten teachers.

Illustrative resources should be used purposefully and consistently, however,

and teachers must avoid repetitiveness. These methods should also support the development of children's thinking, increase their motivation and encourage their interest in stories.

It is practical and useful to group illustrative resources according to which sensory organ gets activated by them (visual, sound or a combined group). By now both audio and audio-visual devices are more advanced than in previous generations. Information technology provides a wide range of possibilities which are also part of children's lives on a daily basis. As a result, fighting against these modern devices and banning them from kindergartens is unnecessary and pointless. Teachers embracing these new gadgets instead of rejecting them will demonstrate a good educational attitude through which parents and children can see positive examples of the use of ICT resources in a meaningful way (Fáyné–Hódi–Kiss, 2016).

The range of visual illustrations by now is abundant, the only limit is the teacher's own interest and the available time. In addition to professional materials, various creative internet groups, arts and crafts websites and professional workshop sites offer new ideas and practical help with making props and illustrations. There are illustrative solutions that also offer methodological guidance, so these have become authentic and fully recognized methods within literary education, for example *story cushion* (Pálfi, 2016) or *paper theatre* (Csányi-Simon-Tsík, 2016).

Methodological views on using puppets in storytelling – especially the difference between applied puppetry and puppet-play – will be discussed in the section about the third type of storytelling.

## 2.3 Play-based narration

In the case of the third productive narrative form the narrators do not only use their voices, props and resources to engage and direct the attention of their young audience, but they involve them in the story through activities. The children can take part in the story either by joining in a song or by using the props. All this allows them to participate actively while listening to the narrator's words. In these cases, we must regard singing and reciting nursery rhymes as movement-based activities, despite the fact that the children are not moving around. However, by the conscious use of their speech and respiratory organs they exercise and adjust their body so they can no longer be regarded as passive listeners of a story.

When the narrator makes the listener change their physical position, the narration becomes a shared play experience; it comes to life. In this case we look at the text from the point of view of playfulness and the activity-oriented principle. In addition to using words and demonstrating them, the narrator can also add costumes, puppets, instruments, song games, songs, props, indicative objects, rhymes, dramatized role plays, rule games, drama play, children's folk tales and so on. The ideal narrative solution is when the story's atmosphere is not affected or even ruined by sentences or private remarks that are not story-related. The narrator can ensure that the storyline does not get disrupted by handling the added elements in such a way that they seem part of the story. This is essential so that

kindergarten aged children remain involved and do not lose the thread of the storyline, and so that the magic of the story does not get broken. With the help of physical movements and through bonding with the props, the children's attitude to the narrated text changes; the actual story they listen to becomes much more exciting and important for them.

**Dramatic play**

Dramatic play is an example of shared narrative experiences in which children have a play around with a story that they already know. In general the story is first told in the story corner or on the story mat of their room where there is not enough or just very limited space for  dramatic play.

**A)** Dramatic play is when the group is playing with some parts of a known story. In this case the story is not told in full.In these plays, tale-like aspects and 'as if' situations are preferred (Gabnai, 2016), where children connect with the original story or its theme through role play, applied drama plays, and they re-enter the fantasy world of the story by improvisations. Objects in the story may come to life and one or even several puppets can help the children solve problems in the story. In dramatic plays the children become conscious of the emotional aspect of the narrated story through playing with the story (Kunné, 2019).

**B)** We also talk about dramatic play when the teacher begins to narrate a well-known story (story repetition) and then hands out headdresses or head puppets, and while she is narrating the story the children move around on the mat either independently or with some minor help from the teacher. In this case the group is working with the full story, the children can swap roles and the story narration may be repeated several times from the beginning to the end. This ensures that each child who wishes to step into a role can have a try. There is a narrator who links the dialogues of the spontaneous situations within the story or narrates the parts that cannot be told through dialogues. Children with natural talent for narration can even assume the role of the narrator, and in this way the teacher can gradually move him/ herself out of the play.

The highest level of dramatic play is when the teacher-educator is only a spectator, and only gets involved when the children get stuck in the story (Tancz, 2009). The participating children can say one or two lines from the story or can say their own ideas. This shows their ability to think in character and the ability to memorise words. The quick pace of events and frequent role swaps rule out elaborate scenery (it is either minimal or there is none at all, or the creation of a proper performance area. Dramatic play is, therefore, a shared narrative experience in which the story addresses the children and the narrator is an integral part of the story. Children naturally are not expected to provide a complete storyline or a theatre-like performance with this method.

Play-based narration has been part of pre-school pedagogy for many years and in case of well-known stories it is widely used among teachers because of its strong impact. This kind of narration is not the same as dramatization, however, because

it is mostly prose and the plot is told by the narrator who is an outsider. The presence of the narrator is a key question with regards to this age group. In dramatization there is no narrator, andthe plot - similarly to dramas – unfolds through the pre-scripted dialogues of characters (Nánay, 1999). If the narrator does appear on the stage, they are regarded as 'criers' just like in medieval comedies. There is usually a script-related reason for an educator to include narratives into the dramatization,these narratives are theremostlyto highlight or emphasize certain things, but they do not present, confer or indicate the passing of time.

### Interactive narration

During interactive narration the aim of the narrator is to involve the listener at least to some extent in the story. The actual type of narration depends on what element, or 'profile' is added to it by the storyteller. The main profiles for interactive narration can be music, songs, movement and play, lyrical text, role play, puppets and so on (Fehér-Szatmáriné, 2019). These can also appear in a mixed format according to the narrator's personality, talents and skills.

The level of interactive engagement depends on how much space the narrator provides the listeners with for involvement.The extent to which the narrator allows them to enter the story and to express themselves in a spontaneous way determine how much the narrator needs to improvise in order to follow the listeners' lead.

Video observations have showed that the extent and measure of interactivity is influenced by the number and the type of integrated elements (Fehér, 2020). If there are a lot of rhymes and songs in the story which are complemented by actions such as marching and games, the attention of the children is more focused. They display more enthusiasm towards the story compared to those sessions in which they are required to do rhymes and sing without physical movements.

Moderation is key with regards to the frequency of the integrated elements. The objective is to provide an enjoyable experience during which a story is created for the child. Far too much interactivity may disturb the concentration of young listeners and they may get confused about the story. In literary education playfulness and play should be integral part of the story instead of dominating it. (Fehér–Szatmáriné, 2019).

### Dramatization

Dramatization is in fact a form of acting as props, costumes and scenery for the story are essential and they need to be provided for the children (Bolton, 1979; Gabnai, 2016). Dramatization can only be done with a story that the children are familiar with (Dankóné, 2004). As they are engaged with it for weeks, they almost know its words by heart. Dramatization is a play based on a children's story and it normally requires weeks of rehearsals. Structurally it consists of scenes, its text is dialogue-based written for stage performance in which some children are given specific character roles with set lines to learn in rehearsals. Although it is improvisation free, repetition, on the other hand is key in order to produce a performance in which a cue or a movement prompts the scene and formation changes. The production has a script, a director, audience and a stage, some scenery (depend-

ing on the director's approach), costumes and props. Dramatization is a theatrical event with a play that is based on a children's story and it is performed in front of an organized audience at a specific point in time.

Dramatization should not be mistaken for a structured programme of children's poems, rhymes, songs which are selected and put together according to a specific theme. The children present this collection of various texts to their parents or another target audience (Móka, 2005). Performing a dramatized play and presenting a programme of children's literature mean different things; they have their own rehearsal methods and their own stage adaptation requirements (Körömi-Somfai, 2019).

**Puppet-shows**
Using puppets for narration (Dankóné, 2004) or applied puppetry (Pálfi, 2015) are not the same as having them in puppet-shows. When a puppet is used by a narrator to tell a story, the puppet acts as an illustration tool, therefore it is part of the second type of productive storytelling framework. In these cases, the puppet does not pop out from behind a screen (paravan) and more importantly, it is not an animated character like in puppet-shows, but it is an autonomous prop-like figure without animation.

It is also possible to communicate directly with the puppet, regardless of the story's plot. In these cases, the narrator usually speaks directly to the puppet, mostly to facilitate engagement with the children. If the narrator is presenting a story using puppets, their intention is to highlight some key sentences of the story through the puppets' voice. In this case the puppet- assisted narration happens among the children while they are listening to the story. Puppets can be sock/glove and finger puppets, wooden spoon puppets, flat figures, string puppets, home-made puppets (plastic bottles, pens, crops, fruits and vegetables, branches …) rod puppets, marionettes, cylinder and cone shaped puppets, paper puppets, rag puppets, pompom puppets and so on (Domány, 2001). Due to the abundant options regarding their type and their material, the list of potential puppet forms is endless.

According to the professional methodology literature (Dankóné, 2004), puppet-shows include a setting and scenery, scenes, the dialogues and the puppets, so this method is definitely part of the third type of productive storytelling framework. A puppet-show is usually the first theatre-like experience for most children, but it is within the walls of the kindergarten. It usually happens with frontal presentation, as the performance with the puppets takes place either behind a screen or in front of a *leporello* screen – or in case of shadow puppetry, by light. The full story is told through the dialogues of the characters; the plot is acted out by the puppets and it is very dramatic. Puppet-shows are theatre performances so they involve preparations, rehearsals, scenery and props. If a kindergarten teacher is doing a puppet-show alone, s/he will voice all the characters, while in other cases, s/he may present it with the help other teachers. The special story atmosphere is ensured by the theatre-like design and the scenery (Szentirmai, 2013). After the show it is recommended to provide children the chance to meet and try the puppets.

With regards to puppet-shows and dramatization one could question whether these should be regarded as reproductive narrative styles as during these it is the

children, not the teacher, who perform the previously rehearsed story. The children present the story on their own to their group through dialogues instead of listening to their teacher's narration. Based on the above, I agree with the point of view that children's performances which are made for an audience can be regarded more as story productions rather than productive narrative methods. Puppet-shows and dramatization will turn into play-based narration if the characters address the people watching the performanceas a way to involve them, for example, puppets talk to members of the audience, get them to sing or invite them onto the stage or play area (this is the point where pre-school literary education meets with theatre pedagogy, more specifically, interactive theatre). In pre-schools, teachers use this version for children's performances in very few cases. Normally only puppet-shows and dramatization which are performed by the teacher include lines that directly address the audience. However, based on the points above, puppet-shows and dramatization can also be regarded as productive narrative forms.

## Summary

The previous parts of the study summarized the technical possibilities of the teacher-narrated storytelling methods that are currently used in kindergartens. By examining them, we can say that they all have an impact on children's imagination, thinking, speaking skills and mental state, which are clearly the objectives.

　　The method chosen to tell a story is a way to transfer the text-world of the story into the heart, soul and thoughts of pre-school children – or other age-groups - and to ensure that the story becomes an inner experience for them. The carefully selected storytelling methods or techniques are only tools, because the real communication channel (mouthpiece) between the story and the children is the narrating teacher and the intelligence of their interpretation.

　　There is a definite need for all three productive narrative methods in kindergartens. Educators should use each, because children require different things including the action-packed story narration, the sight of the eye-catching *story skirt*, or just the chance to listen in peace to a traditionally narrated story. It is not possible to rank these narrative forms or to determine which is better or more effective. They all serve different educational objectives; each works in its own way and has a unique impact. In pre-school group sessions they all have a place, however, the frequency of their use and the type selection will depend on the teacher.

　　Pre-school education specialist literature emphasizes that the selection of literary materials for each year group should match the children's developmental needs, follow the themes of annual festivals and holidays, plusany pre-set topics and the guidelines of pre-school education programmes. However, we must also emphasize that teachers should in each case select a story that they really like and enjoy narrating. It is vital that they are able to memorize it and recall it with ease, so that they, in fact, have a feeling of success during the story's narration. Finally, it is also essential that the educator opts for astorytelling method that is most suited to the purpose of communication and to the story itself.

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