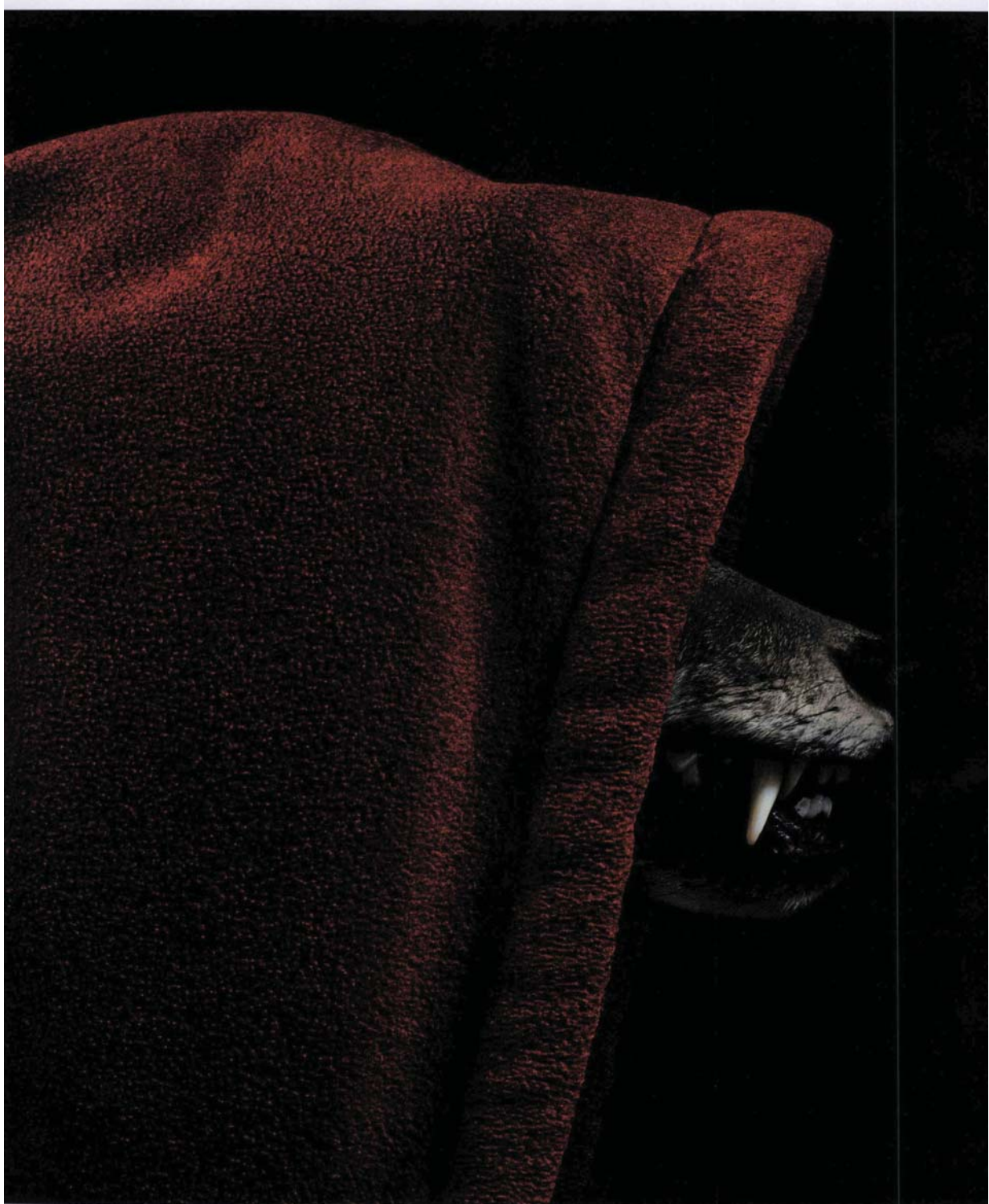


# Oh help! oh no! Where did playtime go?

Once upon a time, in an education system not very far away, there was a dark and stormy debate about the importance of story-based play in EYFS. But while some claim too much focus on make-believe activities fails to prepare children for the transition to Year 1, **Pam Jarvis** argues that preserving opportunities for young learners to act out the tales told to them in nursery and Reception is the best way to achieve a happy ending ▶









It is a cornerstone of the knowledge curriculum that we should communicate the great narratives of humankind to children, giving them access to the very best that has been thought and said throughout our history. There is agreement among philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, linguists, biologists and anthropologists (1) that human beings define themselves, others and the world around them through stories. As such, providing access through storytelling to the overarching cultural narratives that underpin our society makes very good sense.

The relevance of "storying", both in terms of introductions provided by adults and in the active role of children in using independent collaborative play to embed ideas in cognition, is crucial background knowledge for teachers. This understanding feeds into the creation of pedagogies that effectively support what children need to know and do at particular stages in their lives.

This is most clearly illustrated in early years practice, undertaken at a stage at which children's understanding of storying is in the early stages of development, through collaborative, active make-believe play activities. Brian Boyd (2) proposed that young children, without explicit training by

adults, engage in such activities to develop the capacity for meta-representation: the ability to grasp ideas through the flexible manipulation of story and its underpinning narrative. In this sense, he is proposing that storying is essentially a "primary skill" (3); the adult provides the basic content and the child further works on it through play.

There is evidence that many Western folk tales, such as those published in popular form by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen in the early 19th century, were passed down orally for 6,000 years before being converted into text (4), while native Australians, whose oral culture still survives, have a credible claim to a folklore that dates back more than 10,000 years (5).

The importance of these cultural narratives to us is demonstrated by the fact that almost every human language on Earth has a concept that equates to "once upon a time" (6). As linguistic apes, human beings have evolved as "storytelling animals" (7); we learn from these tales. They help society to function, progress and ensure that the wheel does not need to be remade by each generation.

They are living, breathing entities, "shifting in response to the needs of the community or listener" (8). Just compare the passive princesses of early Disney with the empowered Anna and Elsa in *Frozen*, for

example. Modern children would probably be highly disturbed by some of the older versions of their favourite stories, where Hansel and Gretel kill the wicked witch by roasting her on her own fire, the Little Mermaid suffers pain and death as a consequence of her attempts to transcend her physical limitations, and Cinderella's stepsisters cut off their toes to fit the glass slipper, which the prince notices only when their shoes fill with blood.

Such narratives form an organic background for children's instruction about life in general within a given culture (9). They are a means of passing on crucial information about the world that an individual needs to know to negotiate their society and, consequently, make a contribution to the community. The education philosopher ED Hirsch emphasises this point, commenting that "nothing is more universal and natural than the explicit communication of communal knowledge" (10).

### Taking issue with the theory

But the resultant theories around the idea are not without issue. Hirsch's take on the role of "cultural literacy" implies passivity in the learner, obscuring the importance of active engagement with such material, particularly with respect to independent "storying" in young children.



He appears to aspire to a two-dimensional simplification of early years practice in his apparent belief that there is a simple choice between transmitting information or leaving children entirely to their own devices. There is no recognition of the intricate relationship between the story and make-believe play.

He says that the new kind of teaching espoused by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey, which avoids rote learning and encourages the natural development of the child, "has its drawbacks". Left to themselves, he adds, "the child will not grow into a thriving creature...a child needs to learn the traditions of the particular human society and culture it is born into" (11).

Hirsch's ideas focus heavily on the development of vocabulary transmission through language exposure and, while this is extremely important, words only have meaning in context. Transmission is the first stage but must be followed by independent processing through collaborative play in order to develop full human understanding.

The anthropology and history of childhood does not suggest passivity in learning at any stage and particularly not in the early years of life. The traditional, pre-20th century lives of children under 7 in the vast majority of human cultures, including that of the Anglo-American West, centred on adults telling

stories and many hours of free play with other children (12).

This is not so very different from the environment that has been provided for children in modern nursery schools.

If Hirsch entered an early years environment today, or when he developed his ideas during the 1980s, he would find children looking at books and being read to, engaged in construction tasks and, most of all, engaging in active independent play where they take roles drawn from their own experiences, and from contemporary heroes, and blend ancient human narratives into spontaneous imaginative activities that are relevant to the societies in which they live.

Not only are their teachers introducing the cultural knowledge that Hirsch says is important, they are also providing the essential time and space to play with those ideas, embedding the flexibility provided by story and underpinning narrative within their thought patterns.

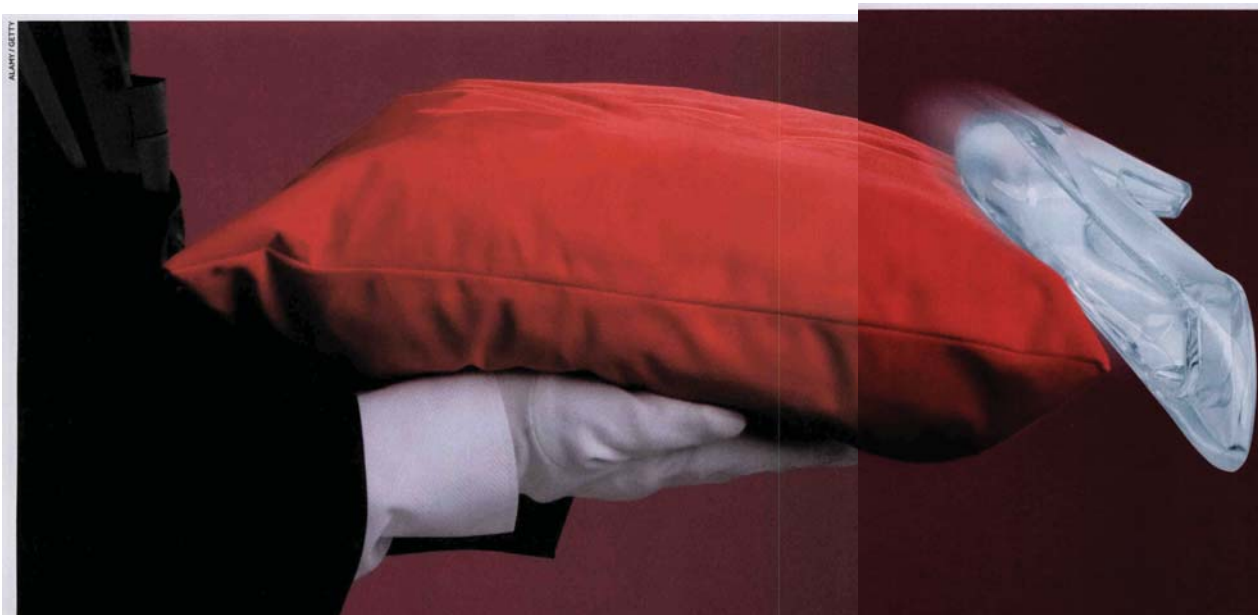
In my own research (13), I observed children engaging in the natural human play style of chasing and catching (which evokes the physical play styles of earlier primate species), but with the addition of cohesive, culturally relevant make-believe narration to make human sense of the activities in which they were engaged.

My child participants were routinely introduced to late 20th-century versions of traditional tales (for example *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and *The Gruffalo*) in the classroom. They then flexibly translated the underpinning narratives – such as fear, heroic activity and salvation – into play, relating not only to the characters they had been introduced to in the specific story but also to contemporary media heroes and events of the time: Beyblade toys, *Robot Wars*, Batman, Disney princesses and even David Beckham.

This is the way the human mind constructs the prevailing culture within its own mechanisms; it is not a passive sponge but an active network of neurons constantly building new connections. Both the developmental psychology of the 20th-century and 21st-century neurobiology indicate that the way human beings build cohesive thought is via a process of environmentally mediated concept construction.

So, while learning in later childhood is likely to involve a more formal working through of material to be learned, children up to the seventh year of life are absolute beginners who need to construct the potential to, as Humpty Dumpty (through Lewis Carroll) archly comments, "become the master" of language and





its highly flexible use in narrative and storying.

### Child's active role 'overlooked'

Hirsch is right that it is important for early education to be communal and structured in a way that imparts "enabling knowledge" (10). But he overlooks the child's active role in this process, which, for as long as human beings have been human, has been to independently and collaboratively explore the ideas with which they have been presented in a free-flowing, independent, disembedded manner, in play.

Through this process, children become adults who do not just regurgitate traditional stories to their own children but use the underpinning narrative to recreate the concepts within them in formats that make sense in contemporary culture.

Human beings have survived as a species by being able to manipulate their environment, which seldom remains static from generation to generation, and have therefore evolved as a

flexible linguistic creature that re-crafts underlying narratives into culturally relevant stories, reflecting a shifting external milieu.

This is particularly important in rapidly technologically developing societies, in which every successive generation constructs the world in subtly different ways to the one that preceded it (14), based on the technology in their everyday environment.

For my generation, this would have been television, but not for my parents. For those born since the early 1990s it would be the internet, and for those born since the early 2000s, it would be networked smartphones and tablets, and so on.

This process is explored in story form through the ever-changing face of the hero over many centuries (15), moving through myriad guises, from Odysseus sailing the Aegean in a wooden ship to Luke Skywalker in his X-wing fighter a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. And, more parochially, in the English playgrounds of the early 2000s, David Beckham scoring that vital goal, just

before the whistle blows, underpinned by a voiceover from an excited sports commentator.

The hero narrative may be perennial, but the story belongs to the person who tells it and the culture and generation in which it is embedded. In the evolved human developmental process, stories are never simply transmitted and absorbed by children but narrated by adults, and subsequently used by young people as a base from which to develop their own storying skills, via collaboratively re-enacting and playing with the underpinning narratives in a similar derivative fashion.

### Misunderstanding of EYFS practice

This is essentially how early years teachers and their pupils have interacted for several generations, for as long as there have been educational nurseries and nursery classes.

But such practice is now being questioned, particularly in England, which is unusual in its placement of 48-month-old children in school reception classes (in most nations,

children do not enter formal schooling until after their sixth or seventh birthday).

This situation is of particular concern when added to a misunderstanding of conventional early years education practice, and of how young children learn, which is currently being propagated in official policy documents, such as Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* (16).

This document criticises tutors in initial teacher education (early years) for minimising the importance of reading, writing and maths for under-fives in favour of "play-based pedagogy and child-initiated learning [which]...prevented effective progression into Year 1". It also comments that some headteachers construct the notion of free play as "rosy and unrealistic", exposing a worrying lack of developmental knowledge (in spite of a wealth of multi-disciplinary research exploring the functions of free play in young children).

A curriculum revision that reduces time for free play could have far-reaching, negative consequences. Play is the natural

developmental vehicle for learning for most naturally evolved creatures and particularly for the human linguistic ape, who uses it to engage in storying through make-believe.

We must, therefore, resist such ill-informed ideas. While there is no disagreement with Hirsch's stated imperative for young children to receive culturally rich input from their early years teachers, they also need the chance to embed such concepts in cognition through play. This would be endangered by a revised EYFS approach that attempted to introduce transmission-based modes of teaching and learning.

The evolution of language and storying in the human being has a history rooted not only in the communication of knowledge but in active co-construction of the capacity to "story" in early childhood. It is only in environments that recognise the value of such play in early learning that this process can effectively unfold. ■

*Dr Pam Jarvis is a reader in childhood, youth and education at Leeds Trinity University*

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