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## **TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF STORIES: DIFFERENT METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN STORY-BASED PRACTICE**

**Resume:** This article is based on the results gained from the research about the perception teachers have about stories. The study was conducted in Sweden and the main purpose was to partially fulfill the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus joint degree “International Master of Early Childhood Education and Care”.

The studies on teachers' perception of stories and the way they are using them are not in abundance. This fact together with the awareness that stories are inseparable part of our life, made it interesting to go deeper into the analysis of teachers' views and approaches to stories. LaFlamme (1975) argues for a more meaningful story time in preschool where children will not be only passive listeners, but active participants. Mottley and Telfer (1997) and Tin, Nonis, Lim, and Honig (2013) studies are referring to teachers' perception of the importance of stories in children's lives and what are teachers' expectation and concerns regarding stories.

The purpose of the study was to gain insights into how the Swedish preschool teachers perceive and discuss about the role of the stories and the methods they use in order to use stores in their practice. The study was conducted as a small-scale interview study and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The study adopted Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory as a framework for discussing teachers' perception of stories and the role stories have in preschool practice.

### **Introduction**

Early childhood is recognized to be a period from birth to the age of eight. For children, this is a period when the world is an open stage for learning, exploration and new experiences. Most of the time children learn by doing, but also through observation and listening (Evans, Mayers & Ilfeld, 2000). Place of stories in this formative stage has its importance. Stories give imaginative space for children to develop holistically, because there is a wide range of possibilities to use stories. The stories can be read, told or dramatized and they can be part of every educational activity. Most frequently, the benefits of storytelling are mentioned when discussing the language development. While hearing, reading or telling a story, children become aware of the structure of the

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sentences and symbolic meaning of the language. In addition, children encounter new words in the stories that enrich their vocabulary (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer & Lowrance, 2004). Children's play is a very important segment of development and it is very common for children to role-play. The stories are usually part of role-play, where the children take the roles of different characters and in that way by "doing" a story, the children develop socialization skills and meet the world that surrounds them (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Hamilton and Weiss (2005) argue that stories are beneficial to children in many ways. Further, they argue that one of the most important quality stories give is a sense of fun in children's activities, regardless of whether there is an educational or just amusing purpose of that activity.

### **Methodological approaches in story-based practice**

Choosing appropriate methodological approach in teaching is equally important as knowing about changes that occur in child development. The teaching process is an interaction between the teacher and the student, in this case, the child. By choosing appropriate approach, teacher enables learning to take place (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). In the early years, it is hard to talk about 'teaching' since the desirable pedagogical model is child centered and play based. Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) argue that for children, play and learning go hand in hand and that sustainable pedagogy that recognizes that, is future oriented. Although not denying that preschool practice should be open enough for play, creativity and exploration, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) point out that effective pedagogy should be also 'instructive' to some extent in order to fulfill developmental goals and objectives.

Good educational practice is influenced by many factors. Social, historical and cultural context, policies, pedagogy, curriculum and teachers' education are some of the conditions that shape preschool practice. Even though curricula usually provide guidelines for teachers, most of the time teachers are the one who decide what pedagogical approaches and educational tools, they will use. An era of technological revolution and innovations in many areas, including education, brings new, modern approaches to teaching practice. Teachers are presented with many new techniques and tools that may improve the practice and make it more interesting for children. Interactive whiteboard, computer tablets and many other devices become useful educational tools. This equipment also facilitates the practice that refers to literacy and numeracy development (Sadik, 2008).

Dowley and McNamee (2005) write about the work of author and teacher, Vivian Gussin Paley. Paley discusses children's play, learning and friendships. Further, she argues that through children's narratives the adults can reach the richness of children's thoughts and depth of their concerns. Paley offers a story based curriculum where the child is perceived as active in developing fantasy and reality world as a context for learning. In her curriculum, Paley offers seven narrative tools that can be used in story presentation. The tools Paley presents are: (1) children's play; (2) dictated and dramatized stories; (3) parents as storytellers in preschools; (4) story that is read over and over again, acted out and expressed through different art forms; (5) a choice of one author whose stories will be read whole year and teacher's perception on how the stories of one author influence

the children; (6) folk tales made up by teachers; and (7) a form of Socratic method, where children are encouraged to talk and discuss about classroom social issues through narratives. According to Dowley and McNamee (2005), these seven tools create a curriculum for language development, play, cognitive, socio-emotional development and arts. Paley storytelling curriculum does not assume that during the day children do not have math, science or art. Paley suggests that all of these knowledge areas can be integrated into children's playful activities, if the adults listen the children more carefully. If the teacher listens and stimulates children's curiosity by asking questions within different educational areas, the teachers and the children will be constantly connected to art, science, literature or some other educational area (Dowley & McNamee, 2005). Paley (1981) states that after introducing to children storytelling and story acting method, they gladly give up play for some story and drama time. However, all together, it was only an extension of play, because while telling and performing the stories, children actually did what they naturally do in playtime and that is make-believe play.

According to Paley's storytelling curriculum, the company "MakeBelieve Arts" develops a program known as Helicopter Technique. Cremin, Swan, Flewitt, Faulkner, and Kucirkova, (2012) study was based on the Helicopter Technique and its impact. The main aim was to evaluate the effects this technique has on children and teachers as well as to provide indicators of how this technique can be improved. The technique implies that children initiate telling the story to the teacher. Those stories are scribbled by teachers and later acted by the whole group of children. The results identified benefits of this approach to language and communication development. Teachers reported significant changes in children's confidence and sense of agency. This technique also gave a confidence boost to the teachers who were insecure about storytelling in teaching practice. The program also stimulated teachers to review their pedagogical approaches and use stories for reflective practice too. Griffiths (2010) also reports positive reaction of the teachers who used helicopter technique. The teachers argued that the technique gave them valuable time with children one on one. They found that by telling their own stories children were able to deal with some serious issues in their life. At the same time the teachers were given insights into children's thinking that enables them to be more responsive about certain issues. Helping the children face certain life issues also enhances children's capability to self-regulate their behavior. Berk, Mann and Ogan (2006) and Wright, Diener and Kemp (2013) argue that play-based and story-based activities help self-regulation, especially among anxious children.

Stories can be a very practical educational tool. Different methods that can be applied to stories make them attractive, interesting and innovative for teachers and children. The activities could be child or teacher initiated and still the diverse nature of stories will bring educative and fun components to an activity and that is the goal of many curricula. The stories can be used in different educational activities like math, language development, music and movement, drama, play and drawing (Bodrova, 2008; Pelletier, 2011; Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1999).

Expressive arts like drawing and dancing, and methods like storytelling or story acting can be very stimulating for children. Edwards (1990) suggests another interesting technique of storytelling with flannel board. This technique helps teachers who are not experienced

storytellers because the presence of the figures always makes the activity interesting for children. Children are also free to move around the board and find the place they enjoy the best. The characters on the board allow the children to use their imagination in interpreting and understanding the story. Characters can be made of different materials and children can enjoy making them with the teacher. In order to capture children's attention, except from flannel board figures, it is important to choose a good story with interesting content.

Another method of using stories that Griffiths (2010) suggests, is the 'talking table' technique. Teachers and children have their own special table for storytelling. Children can join the table whenever they want and share stories with peers. Teachers' reported that all kinds of issues come around this table. Sometimes there are just issues from children's imagination, but then the table is a good place for teachers to help children solve conflicts too. One of the teachers found that the time she had around the table, helped her realize language difficulties some children have. Further, she stated that conversations around the table made her more reflective regarding her practice and planning.

The same talking table can be used in different activities. Already motivated to tell their stories, children could express their thoughts through drawings. Griffiths (2010) argues that the drawings can be great material for starting any kind of discussion with children. The teachers can use children's drawings and talk to children about their emotions, according to the colors the children use while drawing. Further, she argues that drawings can be stimulated by stories, but also stories can be aroused out of drawings. Wright (2010) argues that storytelling and drawing are great companions in children's artworks. Drawing and storytelling techniques allow children to alter the drawing or story compositions to their own needs and feelings. In this imaginative passage of time, children can change characters, alter the plot content, adjust the time frame, place and genre and express their ideas and visions.

In their studies, Mottley and Telfer (1998) and Tin et al. (2013) argue that the way stories are perceived and used by teachers depends on their personal experiences and interests. In general, teachers agreed that the stories are important for holistic development of children, though there were differences in the way stories were applied in practice. Some teachers use new technologies to make the activities more interesting for children while others use role-playing, puppets, picture books and picture cards.

### **Teachers as storytellers**

Humans are natural storytellers and language is their strongest tool, while stories present human views on reality and fiction and give meaning to human experiences (Bruner, 1986). Although people are characterized as natural storytellers, the question on the quality of the story interpretation is continuously discussed. Grugeon and Gardner (2000) argue that the technique of telling a story does not come naturally. The natural is only the human drive to tell the story, but the technique is there to be developed. The best way for that is encouragement and practice and it applies to children as well as adults. Some of the advices are that it is important to choose an appropriate story. That is the story the

storyteller has to like and feel comfortable in telling. A good story is the one that can touch the audience and get them involved. It has to have defined characters, a problem and resolution. The storyteller should communicate with the audience, make eye contacts and present the story in a way that the audience can make their own vivid images about the story events (National Storytelling Network, 2012).

Grugeon and Gardner (2000) discuss different responses of trainee teachers and teachers, on their first experiences with telling a story. A typical response was that they were anxious and that storytelling was a new thing for them. In a way, reading a story from a book gives a feeling of safety, where the reader does not need to use eye contact and body language. Most of the time, in early childhood, books consider pictures and teachers are prone to read and show the pictures to the children. Even though telling a story brings different dimension to preschool activities, reading from a book and showing the pictures is also beneficial because children use pictures to understand the story better. White (cited in Collins, 1999) discusses the importance of illustrations in the books and the pictures children form in their minds. Further, he argues that when you read a familiar story to a child, the child very often does not look in the book, but outward, picturing the images in his mind.

Stories are a part of preschool curricula even though sometimes it is not clearly stated. No matter what area of child development is discussed, stories can be used as a tool (Daniel, 2007). The phrases "active learning" and "collaborative learning" go hand in hand with stories in curricular guidelines and express the picture of an active child who is engaged and enjoy learning activities. The role of the adult in this case is to give support and encouragement (Rawson, 2002; Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1999). Concepts of zone of proximal development and scaffolding present learning as a process of shared responsibilities. The role of the teacher is to cooperate with children and leads them in the direction of acquiring new knowledge (Bruner, 1986; Kozulin et.al, 2003). As an educational tool, stories could be good material for teachers to scaffold children's learning and development.

When discussing the role teachers have in story- based practice, Rawson (2002) argue that teachers should be sensitive to children's stories as well as for the stories they tell to the children. They need to follow the child and recognize their ability to tell a story. By nurturing the storytelling skills, teachers support language development. Further, he argues that teachers should avoid suppression of children's need to tell stories by correcting them or giving constant instructions. They should organize activities where different storytelling styles will be used and where children will be active listeners.

Another great role of the teacher is to choose the appropriate story and to present the story in an interesting and for children understandable way. Daniel (2007) argues that the story should be carefully chosen. The teacher needs to connect and enjoy the story in order to pass the enthusiasm to children. The moment the children feel that teacher is enthralled with the story, they become more engaged. Further, Daniel discusses the choice of reading and telling the story and while not rejecting the value of reading, he stresses the importance of telling the stories to children. He finds that the book is a physical barrier between teacher and the children. While telling the story, the teachers

can adapt the language to the needs of the children and incorporate their responses into the telling.

To become a good storyteller and to include plenty of ideas and techniques into the practice obviously is not an easy task. Stories and their place in preschool practice as well as the role of the teachers as storytellers are questions that are unfairly sidelined. When discussing them, there are perspectives and concerns that seek for answers. In their research Mottley and Telfer (1997), among other things, discussed with teachers about their concerns regarding storytelling practice. It is interesting that 90% of the interviewees declared that they are concerned about story selection and that they usually pick the story that is interesting for them and for children. The teachers were also concerned with how to become a good storyteller, taking out as the most important feature, the ability of the storyteller to keep the listeners involved. Just a small percentage of the teachers had ideas about watching professional storytellers and actually learning how to be a storyteller as a possible solution for their concern. Mottley and Telfer further argue that the teachers agreed on the importance of storytelling and that the following constructive step should be included of storytelling seminars in teacher education.

### **Perspectives on the Theoretical Framework**

How to “teach” becomes a question with many answers. Choosing an appropriate teaching approach in early childhood practice is a topic of considerable debate. Stremmel (1993) argues that Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory can be a good framework for guiding early childhood practice. Further, he argues that by applying Vygotsky’s theory, a clearer perspective could be achieved regarding learning and teaching processes within the socio-cultural context where children learn and develop. About the importance of the cultural context and learning process Rogoff and Morelli (1989) argues that human development and behavior very much depend on the culture and the context of human activity. For them that is exactly what Vygotsky’s theory highlights, the connection between the development of higher mental processes in human behavior, like memory, perception or reasoning and the products of society and culture, like language or mathematical system.

Rogoff and Morelli (1989) see the application of Vygotsky’s theory as very useful in the teaching practice and learning process. The socio-cultural aspect highlights the importance of the environment where the learning takes place. The learning process is more effective if the teachers and children are perceived as active agents in knowledge formation. In active learning process, Nicolopoulou (2005) sees children’s play as crucial, but also as intertwined with children’s narratives. Further, she argues that play and narratives are symbolic expressions of children’s imagination that is related to children’s experiences in social and cultural context.

Dyson and Genishi (1994) perceive stories as social, cultural and historical tool. From the socio-cultural perspective, it can be assumed that stories can be used as material or tool in the activities of a social nature. By using stories, children will be directed to each other

and they will learn from each other. The social interactions will bring the awareness of others and direct the children to regulate their behavior too.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted as a small-scale qualitative research. Qualitative research has a very long history. The roots can be discerned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when German philosopher Dilthey used the term 'verstehen', meaning, 'to understand', in order to describe subjective views of different phenomena (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer, 2011).

Qualitative research can be defined as an approach to studies, done in a social world. Data are usually textual or visual materials, that describe the human experiences about themselves or interactions they have with others (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Saldana, 2011).

The research question that guided the study is:

- How do teachers perceive stories in preschool practice?

This question is about to give answers on how teachers perceive stories, what place stories have in their practice and what are the methods they use when they include stories in daily activities with children.

The sampling strategy in this study was non-probability. Since gathering valid information is important for the quality of the study, sampling has to be adequate in order to choose appropriate participants. For this study, the best type of non-probability sampling was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a sampling where the participants are chosen with a specific purpose (Barbour, 2007; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) and Teddlie and Yu (2007) argue that purposive sampling is used in order to gain participants with the certain knowledge of the field that is being researched.

The instrument developed for data collection, in this study, was semi-structured interview. Diccio- Blum and Crabtree (2006) argue that semi-structured interview gives valuable in-depth information about participants' views about certain matters. The interviews took approximately thirty to forty minutes and they were all conducted in the preschools where the teachers work. All eight interviews were audio recorded, which gave space to the interviewer to concentrate on the questions and the course of the interview as suggested by Kvale (1996).

The method used for data analysis is meaning analysis (Kvale, 1996). The interview transcripts were carefully read and coded. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that codes are used for naming the research phenomenon through close examination of data. The next step was meaning condensation through which I have summarized natural meaning units into short and clear themes. Meaning interpretation was the last step of the data analysis. I have interpreted the meanings of the examined phenomenon in accordance with the initial meanings coming from the interviews.

## Findings

After the data was analyzed, the key concepts emerged indicating how teachers perceive the stories in preschool practice. The results also indicate how the stories are used in the practice according to the statements of the teachers.

### *Stories as Educational Tool*

When discussing about stories, teachers agree that there are many different occasions and reasons for employing stories in their practice. The curriculum does not impose the use of stories, but the stories do become useful when teachers present some topics to the children. The results show that teachers perceive stories as a part of the curriculum and as a very useful educational tool.

Swedish Curriculum for the preschool (2010), provides guidelines for the teachers so that they fulfill certain developmental and learning goals with children. The curriculum covers different areas like language development, mathematics, creative expression and science. One of the teachers explains that, no matter which educational area she wants to cover, the preschool where she works have a big library. Among many other materials, the library possesses a large number of books that she likes to use in her practice. Since the preschool is located in the area with many immigrants, she usually uses stories about multicultural differences what is also one of the aims in Swedish preschool curriculum. Further, she explains that the books help her discuss with children about the reality that surrounds them and to explain to the children about the importance of the acceptance of the cultural differences.

Stories have their educational and informative components. Teachers agree that stories can be perceived as a motivating tool in the learning process and as a correlative link between other activities. The examples teachers give show how stories are connected to other activities like language, music or motor development and how the story can be a base for a teacher directed activity, where different goals are achieved.

*For example, we did a story where a family with two children went to a zoo. I made up a story and I asked the children what they want to be in a story. Children could meet all kinds of animals there. So the animals could do some trick. Children who acted the animals could jump from one bench to another or practice balance and that is if we are talking about motor skills. In the park, there was an orchestra and some children played instruments that are also good for motor skills and musical development. The children were very excited, especially the younger one who was butterflies and flowers. We played in front of the parent and for children it was important to be in a play because they wanted to act for their parents. Children are also becoming more confident. (Teacher D)*

In the quotation above, the teacher gives the example of an activity where the story, she came up with, served as a basis for a drama activity where all the children had their roles. Before the teacher and children engaged in a dramatization of the story, the teacher



introduced the story to the children and in agreement with them, designated the roles. The story made it possible for the teacher to connect language development, physical and musical education as well as learning about the nature and the society. The teacher argues that this kind of story dramatization is very beneficial for shy children. Performing in front of the audience builds children's confidence. This occasion points how social context is important for children's development and how cooperation with the adults helps children in their social interactions. The teachers use the story dramatization to include children in the discussion about the roles they wish to undertake and gives the children a possibility to take part in the process of making decisions. This opportunity gives to the children a chance to become aware of their social surroundings and to learn from the adults and peers.

#### *Stories as Regulative Tool*

The regulation of behavior as well as the self-regulation is commonly mentioned in preschool practice. Some children have difficulties to sit still during the circle time and follow the activity, or to get along with their peers. Teachers argue that stories are useful in regulating children's behavior. One of the common arguments was that in the morning, when children are arriving, teachers have to come with the solution how to gather them before they start their daily activities. It turns out that storytelling is a good way for children to gather in the morning hours.

*We read to them every morning when they arrive. We have a special corner where I work, it is a book corner. The teacher sits there with the children and parents come there to leave the children. We sit there and read half an hour every morning. (Teacher B)*

*When I come in the morning and a lot of children come at the same time, they can be loud and just run around not knowing what to do. I get them together and read a story. (Teacher C)*

From the example above it is obvious that morning time is a bit turbulent with a lot of parents and children coming in the preschool. The teachers appreciate storytelling activity and the book corner to gather the children and prevent loud and crowded atmosphere.

The stories are also perceived as a good instrument to make children calm down and rest, so teachers use them at lunchtime or resting time. The stories are used to amuse children when they come back from outdoor play or if they are staying too much indoors because of the bad weather.

Another example where the teachers use stories to regulate children's behavior is in problem solving situations. The teachers use stories to communicate with children indirectly, through story characters.

*Sometimes I see that they cannot come along, if they want the same toy and they become upset. I can use the theater and puppets and tell the story so they know how to behave in future. I do not put them as main characters, but they can recognize. (Teacher B)*

Situations where teachers need to interfere to help children solve the problems are common in preschool practice. The teacher uses stories, puppets and theater to explain to the children what patterns of behavior are acceptable and at the same time she avoids directly naming the children. The teacher finds the storytelling drama activities as a good way to make the children more responsible towards each other and to respect the opinion of their peers.

Socio-cultural theory stresses the importance of the context where the learning process takes place. It is highly important that the surrounding is stimulating for children. The teachers argue that storytelling, theater and puppets make the environment more relaxing for children. Further, the teachers argue that children feel free to take part in storytelling and puppetry what makes them active learners.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Regarding different methodological approaches, the results of the study show that the teachers use the stories as an educational as well as regulative tool. This indicates that the role of the stories is multiple and that the stories can be used differently what greatly depends on the teachers.

When considering Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, it is interesting to mention Wells' (1999) observation of the schooling process in general, where he argues that schooling as a form of socialization through cultural transference has been part of our culture for a very long time. Further, he argues that Vygotsky's theory suggests that the goal of the education is to provide children with the appropriate and stimulating environment in which the children will be able, in cooperation with adults and peers, to develop their maximum potentials. The appropriate environment and the cooperation with more experienced adults or peers will enable the child to adopt cultural tools and social values and to develop his identity and dispositions to act responsibly as a part of the larger society. Being socially active is a prerequisite for the development of language as a cultural and social tool. When discussing preschool period, Vygotsky stresses the presence of oral expressions more than written language, finding children's drawings as the beginning of the language written expression (Kozulin et.al, 2003).

Wells (1999) argues that classroom community has to be organized in a way to reflect the caring environment that strives towards collaborative and dialogic mode of meaning making. In addition, the curriculum has to cover broad themes of inquiry that will stimulate the children to reach for knowledge in cooperation with adults and peers. Further, he argues that the goals of that kind of classroom community and curriculum are to make conditions that will challenge and motivate the children to develop their interests and abilities while involving their feelings, personal and cultural values and cognition. The adults' role is to give feedback and provide opportunities for the children to master the culture's tools and technologies. The appropriate environment together with constructive feedback should enable the children to reflect on the acquired knowledge.

### *Stories as Educational Tool*

Traditionally, stories are used for preserving the culture and traditions of different societies. Usually the stories have educational and entertaining elements and the quality of the story presentation depends how good the storyteller is (Lockett, 2007). Tingöy et al. (2006) argue that storytelling is an art where a good storyteller presents real or fictive events through words, images and sounds. Further, they argue that stories like folktales and fables are one of the oldest educational tools and that nowadays the stories can be perceived as traditional, but also as a technologically modern educational tool. The results of this study show that teachers support the view that stories are educational as well as entertaining tool. The teachers agree that stories should be part of the preschool curriculum and they use various ways in presenting the stories to children.

The areas where the stories can be used as an educational tool are diverse and it is up to the teachers to decide how and when they are going to use a story. Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Mutton, Gilden and Bell (2002) state that in order for the learning process to take place, the teachers need to choose an appropriate teaching approach.

The results of this study show that teachers find stories as an appropriate correlative link between different activities. They use story as a basis to include different educational areas like music, motor skills and language development and they argue that the environment where the stories are presented is also important. A similar situation is examined in the study presented by the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (1999) where expressive arts like dancing, painting and sculpturing are connected to language development through the stories children tell and perform. The study shows that it is common to use this kind of approaches where the stories are employed as an expressive and linking media. What is evident is that stories in connection with other activities cover a broad spectrum of learning and developmental goals. Also, in order to present the story and use the story as a linking media it is important to think about the environment what coincides with the argument of Rogoff and Morelli (1989) who argue that Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory highlights the importance of the environment where the learning takes place.

### *Stories as regulative tool*

The teachers see a good opportunity to use stories as a regulative tool. The situations are diverse; teachers argue that there is a big number of children in the group and that usually they have to find ways how to calm them down. The teachers use stories and drama activities in order to avoid direct emphasis of children whose behavior is not appropriate. Berk, Mann and Ogan (2006) argue that early childhood period is crucial for the development of self-regulation. An appropriate cognitive and socio-emotional development of children is important for the acceptance of socially and morally appropriate behavior.

One of the situations where children learn to regulate their behavior is play and teachers in this study argue that story time is usually connected to children's play. Wright, Diener and Kemp (2013) calls it storytelling dramas while Berk, Mann and Ogan (2006) discuss about make-believe play, however the concept is the same. In both cases, stories are used as a basis for acting and playing activities. Wright, Diener and Kemp (2013) argue

that the storytelling, drama activity meets the conditions to be perceived as intentional teaching practice where developmental goals are met. At the same time, this kind of an activity can be perceived as play-based and child-led where the children are the storytellers, actors and audience.

Vygotsky (1978) perceives language as a tool for expression and communication. Further, he argues that once the children acquire the language and skill to think through words, the possibility for children to be affected by adults, expands. In the case of this study, the teachers find storytelling and drama activities very useful for developing the language and for using the language to regulate children's behavior. The teachers use stories to metaphorically portray the situations from which children can learn moral lessons. In addition, the stories serve to transfer certain regulative messages to the children in, for them, understandable and acceptable manner. Berk, Mann and Ogan (2006) argue that after the children have dialogs with the adults, they become influenced by the language messages that come from the adults and that is how the language becomes a mental tool for solving a broad range of issues including self-regulation.

In this study, the stories are used to start dialogs among children and between teachers and children. The teachers use different contents and story characters to explain to the children the principles of self-regulation and to discuss with children about social challenges that they face every day. Vygotsky (1978) argues that by having dialogs with their peers and adults, children can develop the sense of respecting other people's opinions and have a better understanding of their own thoughts. Cooperation also enables the children to develop skills for solving social and cognitive challenges. Further, he argues that children's adjustment to social and cultural norms and cooperation with the adults and peers makes the higher mental processes easier to develop. If we consider the Vygotsky's theory, it can be said that through social interactions and dialogs that are in the case of this study assisted by stories, children can easier develop higher mental processes like attention and perception. The teachers suggested that story dramatization initiate cooperation where children's attention is long-term directed towards solving a problem and that their perception of interpersonal relations is at a high level. The development of these higher mental processes allows children to become aware of their own behavior and makes their social interactions to be raised at a higher level.

### **Conclusion**

Child development and education depend on the adults and stimulating social environment where the children will be encouraged to acquire new knowledge and skills. How the stories are used and what benefits they bring, mostly depend on the adults and the way they perceive and understand the role of the stories. It is not easy to be a good storyteller and the skill requires practice and different techniques. From one side, it is important, how the story is presented to the children, but from the other side, it is also important not to give up from stories only because the teacher does not feel like capable to be a good storyteller. Therefore, how stories are used in preschool practice depends of the teachers' attitude and that is why this study's main aim was to gain insight into the teachers' perception on stories in preschool practice.

During the interviews, the teachers mostly perceived stories as a tool. They discussed about the ways they employ stories while doing some activity with the children. What came as an interesting view on stories is the point Daniel (2007) make about the ways storytelling is perceived. He argues that, except of being an educational tool the teachers could perceive stories as a way to shape their teaching practice. Daniel calls it “narrative structure of teaching” and he stresses the possibility to frame the teaching process as a narrative. He argues that if we consider the assumption that humans perceive life events and the world that surrounds them in narrative terms then there is an implication for narrative teaching in the general teaching process. This could also be a suggestion for further research. If the perception on how the teachers would organize their teaching practice in the shape of narratives is added to existing findings of this study, the perception on stories and their role in early childhood education would be broader and more striking.

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