

## The Meaning of Young Children's Story-Making from a Postmodern Perspective

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### Abstract

This study explored young children's story-making from a postmodern perspective. Over a ten-month period, the researcher engaged with 27 children aged four to five during free-play sessions, observing and participating in self-initiated story-making expressed through talk, drawing, dramatic play, and occasional use of digital images. Story-making refers to children's emergent practices of inventing and sharing narratives with peers and teachers while interacting with materials, spaces, and cultural resources. Rather than evaluating stories as finished products, the analysis focused on how stories emerge, shift, and transform through interaction. Data were generated through real-time transcription of children's storytelling using a tablet PC, video recordings of story-making and sharing episodes to capture verbal and nonverbal expressions and peer responses, and a reflective journal documenting contextual details during and immediately after observations. The findings indicate that children's story-making involved: (a) engagement with ever-changing materials, (b) collaborative encounters with peers, (c) the creation of imaginative functions and roles, and (d) movement into spaces where boundaries are fluid and dissolved. Overall, the study suggests that story-making for young children is not simply a means of conveying knowledge but a generative practice through which learning is actively explored and expanded.

**Keywords :** *postmodernism, story-making, serendipitous encountering, generative thinking*

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## Introduction

*Every stratum is a judgment of God; not only plants and animals, orchids and wasps, sing or express themselves, but so rocks and even rivers, every stratified thing on earth (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 44).*

From a postmodern perspective, meaning is neither fixed nor universal, nor does it reside solely within individuals; rather, it is continuously produced through relationships, encounters, and contextual interactions.

Postmodernism challenges representational and linear views of knowledge, emphasizing multiplicity, indeterminacy, and the act of “becoming” over stable structures or predetermined outcomes (Lyon, 2000). Human experience is thus understood as fluid and relational, shaped through interactions among people, materials, language, and socio-cultural conditions.

Drawing on poststructuralist philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2001), postmodern perspectives foreground concepts such as encounter, assemblage, rhizome, and deterritorialization to describe how meaning emerges through dynamic and non-hierarchical connections. Knowledge and learning are viewed not as the transmission or acquisition of predefined content but as generative processes that unfold through unexpected encounters and movements across boundaries. These ideas have increasingly been employed in early childhood education research to challenge developmental linearity and to reconceptualize children’s learning as open-ended, relational, and emergent.

Within this framework, children’s story-making is understood not merely as a linguistic or cognitive activity but as a relational and material practice through which meaning is continuously generated. Story-making involves interactions among children, peers, objects, spaces, sounds, and cultural resources, making it particularly suited to postmodern analysis. Rather than emphasizing representational accuracy or narrative coherence, a postmodern perspective attends to how stories emerge, shift, and transform through ongoing encounters.

Analyzing young children’s story-making in this way moves beyond developmental or representational explanations to foreground its generative, unpredictable, and collective dimensions. The focus is placed on the process through which stories are produced and re-produced, privileging becoming over being, and learning over knowledge.

Stories are integral to human life. Through stories, individuals engage with their communities, transmit culture and values across generations (Ong, 2012), and sustain social interaction (Bayer & Hettinger, 2019). In everyday conversations, stories promote understanding and empathy (Gergen, 2009), contributing to social

cohesion and defining individuals' positions within groups. Functionally, stories serve as mechanisms for communication, education, social bonding, and the transmission of culture. Aesthetically, they hold intrinsic value as unique expressions of an individual's thoughts, emotions, and worldview. They also reconstruct lived experience and contribute to the formation of personal identity (Bruner, 1990), linking past, present, and future in the ongoing development of the self (McAdams, 2001). Literary narratives, meanwhile, evoke emotional, philosophical, and moral reflection, extending storytelling beyond knowledge transmission (Spaulding, 2011).

Although functional and aesthetic perspectives differ-viewing stories as means or ends-both recognize storytelling as a fundamental and enriching human practice.

In Korean early childhood education settings, story- and play-centered activities are widely developed in recognition of young children's greater familiarity with spoken rather than written language (Lee & Choi, 2024b). Teachers commonly introduce activities by sharing stories to build background knowledge and spark curiosity, and they conclude by inviting children to reflect on their experiences. In addition, a weekly "Weekend Reflection" session provides opportunities for children to recount experiences from home.

However, traditional classroom story-sharing practices have notable limitations. Such interactions often follow a rigid "teacher initiation-child reply-teacher evaluation" (IRE) structure (Mehan, 1979), positioning stories primarily as vehicles for information delivery or verbal reporting. This representational approach emphasizes sameness and accuracy, foregrounding the functional dimension of stories while narrowing their meaning. Yet, storytelling can exceed its instrumental role and move toward an aesthetic dimension of free self-expression, where stories attain intrinsic value.

Research suggests that when children are given space to invent, tell, and enact stories with peers, they actively construct narratives as collective meaning-making practices. Classroom-based work has shown that children's spontaneous storytelling and story-acting support both shared sense-making and emergent literacy

(Nicolopoulou et al., 2006; Paley, 1990). Similarly, research on children's everyday

narratives demonstrates that young children move fluidly between what is and what might be, drawing on lived experience and imagination to interpret relationships and events (Engel, 2005).

In this study, the focal construct is *story-making*. Story-making refers to young children's self-initiated practices of inventing and sharing narratives as they interact with peers, adults, and materials in the flow of play. These practices include individual and collaborative narrative talk, role enactment, gesture, drawing, and the use of images (including digital images) as narrative resources. Importantly, the analytic unit is not the story as a finished product but the unfolding work through which narratives emerge, shift, and are taken up in interaction. Accordingly, children's language and play are treated as entangled dimensions of meaning-making rather than as separate domains.

Storytelling is not simply the reproduction of memory but a generative process through which experience is revisited and reimagined (Bruner, 1986). Thus, when children engage in story-making, they move beyond receiving or reacting to others' narratives and are instead positioned as creators of their own stories, drawing on their thoughts, emotions, and everyday encounters. As narrative agents, they become *Homo narrans*-beings who tell stories. When early childhood settings actively support story-making, children may develop greater autonomy in interpreting their experiences and in living lives shaped by their own narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991).

Accordingly, this study pursues three objectives: (1) to delineate story-making in children's free play as a practice that entangles narrative talk, role enactment, peer uptake, and material/digital resources; (2) to interpret the meanings that emerge through this practice using a postmodern lens; and (3) to discuss how these meanings invite educators to reconsider children's learning as emergent, relational, and open-ended. The analysis focuses on four interrelated meanings of children's story-making: encountering ever-changing materials, encountering peers, generating creative functions and roles, and moving into spaces where boundaries are dissolved.

The purpose of this study is to explore the significance of young children's story-making from a postmodern perspective. The guiding research question is: What meanings do young children's story-making practices take on when interpreted through a postmodern lens?

## Method

### Participants

#### *A total of 14 children from Class A*

Class A comprised 14 five-year-old children (9 boys, 5 girls) enrolled at S Kindergarten in P City, South Korea. At the start of the study on March 2, 2023, the children had a mean age of 66.4 months. S Kindergarten fosters active engagement in wordplay and storytelling, and since 2023, the classroom teacher- who also served as the researcher-has participated in a research group on wordplay and story-making led by a supervising professor. Reflecting the teacher's interest, Class A children frequently engaged in story-making activities and were accustomed to expressing their experiences, thoughts, and imagination. This enriched classroom environment also influenced the reading education initiative, a key project for the grade. Every week, a storytelling grandmother<sup>1</sup> visited the class to share traditional fairy tales, yet it was challenging to proceed with the activity because the children were eager to tell stories based on their own imaginations. In summary, the children in Class A were highly expressive and eager to share their stories.

#### *Class B, consisting of 13 children and their teacher, Mr. Park*

Class B consisted of 13 four-year-old children (8 boys, 5 girls) attending D Kindergarten in S City, South Korea. At the start of the study on September 25, 2023, the children had a mean age of 62.2 months. D Kindergarten is characterized by an open and collaborative learning environment with flexible daily routines. During morning free-play periods, children move freely among spaces such as classrooms, hallways, and an auditorium, interacting with peers and teachers across classes. Like the researcher, the teacher of Class B has also participated in the wordplay and story-making research group since 2023 and completed a master's thesis on wordplay. Influenced by their teacher's interests, the children in Class B demonstrated strong engagement and enthusiasm for wordplay and story-making activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Storytelling grandmother" refers to elderly volunteers in Korea who contribute to the linguistic and social development of young children by narrating traditional stories in early childhood education settings.

## Researcher

The researcher is a public kindergarten teacher in South Korea with seven years of teaching experience and served as the teacher of Class A since 2022. She has maintained a sustained interest in children's narratives, particularly in how storytelling emerges through everyday classroom interactions. Although classrooms are rich in teacher-child and peer conversations, the researcher observed that much teacher-child discourse followed the IRE pattern (Mehan, 1979), positioning children primarily as respondents rather than as narrative agents. To create opportunities for children to assume more active storytelling roles, the researcher facilitated story-making activities over a 10-month period (March 6 to December 29, 2023), involving 27 children aged four to five years. Data were generated through participant observation, interviews, and the researcher's journal entries, and were analyzed using qualitative research methods.

As both the teacher of Class A and the primary field researcher, the researcher occupied a dual role. To manage the ethical and methodological implications of this insider position, she maintained an ongoing reflexive journal, clearly distinguished routine pedagogical interactions from research activities, and treated children's participation as voluntary at all times. Moreover, the children were invited to share stories only when they initiated or explicitly requested story-related engagement and were free to withdraw without consequence.

Entry to Class B was negotiated through institutional permission and collaboration with the classroom teacher, Mr. Park. Participant observation was conducted during scheduled visits to minimize disruption to daily routines. While Mr. Park supported logistical access, he did not evaluate or influence children's participation or responses for research purposes.

To protect confidentiality, all children were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details (e.g., names of people and places) were removed from transcripts. Video recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices and used solely for research. Given the study's reliance on naturalistic interaction in classroom life, particular care was taken to minimize any sense of obligation associated with the teacher-child relationship, including repeated reminders that participation was optional and separate from classroom assessment.

## Data Collection

Data were generated primarily through participant observation of children's story-making during free play in two kindergarten classrooms. In both sites, the researcher served as the primary observer and was responsible for recording, transcription, and analytic memoing. In Class B, the classroom teacher assisted with coordination (e.g., ensuring that recording procedures were feasible within the routine) while the researcher carried out observations and documentation.

Children's story-making was observed over a ten-month period (March 6 to December 29, 2023).

Story-making episodes were defined as moments during free play when a child or group of children spontaneously initiated a narrative (or explicitly requested to tell a story) and the narrative developed through talk and/or concurrent play enactment. Participant observation was conducted intensively during free-play sessions lasting 2 hours and 30 minutes (9:00–11:30 a.m.), which occurred more than three times per week. All story-making episodes were video-recorded. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from the guardians of all participating children after they were provided with detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and privacy protections.

To further contextualize children's perspectives, brief semi-structured interviews were conducted.

These interviews were conversational and developmentally appropriate, taking place one-on-one or in small peer groups in a quiet corner of the classroom. Prompts focused on children's motivations and experiences (e.g., why they enjoyed making stories, how peers' ideas affected their stories, and how materials or digital images contributed to their story-making). Interview excerpts were used as contextual evidence to support and refine the interpretive claims in the Results section.

The children's participation in story-making was voluntary. During free play, they created narratives while engaging in activities such as folding paper, drawing, building with blocks, and role play, and shared these emerging stories with the researcher and peers. When requested, children accessed the MiriCanvas online

platform via the researcher's tablet PC to select or explore digital images as narrative resources. The researcher transcribed children's storytelling in real time using the tablet PC,

checking accuracy during interaction.

During participant observation, the researcher captured on video not only the children engaged in storytelling but also the verbal and nonverbal expressions of their peers who were listening to the stories. The recordings were transcribed on the day of collection, yielding 1,188 files with a cumulative size of 389.9 GB. From these materials, 978 children's stories were identified and archived based on corresponding videos and transcripts. During and immediately following observations, the researcher documented reflections and contextual details in brief field notes, which were later elaborated during data organization. The reflexive research journal totaled 42 A4 pages (10-point font) and provided rich contextual grounding for subsequent analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Analytic Approach and Coding Procedures***

Data analysis was iterative and interpretive, moving between children's story-making episodes, field notes, interview accounts, and postmodern theoretical concepts. The unit of analysis was a *story-making episode*, defined as a child-initiated narrative during free play, expressed through talk and/or embodied play in relation to peers, materials, spaces, and (at times) digital images. Episodes were treated as situated events rather than decontextualized story products.

First, video recordings were transcribed, and the real-time tablet transcriptions were verified against recordings to preserve the children's wording and interactional context. First-cycle coding combined descriptive, in vivo, and process codes to ensure fidelity to participants' language and action (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Next, second-cycle pattern coding clustered related codes into provisional categories, which were refined through constant comparison across episodes and classroom contexts.

Throughout this process, analytic memos documented coding decisions, emerging questions, and moments of uncertainty. Provisional categories were discussed in regular peer debriefings with the supervising professor and revised when cases aligned more strongly with other categories, carried multiple meanings, or rendered category definitions overly broad.

### ***Codebook and Decision Rules***

To enhance transparency, a codebook was developed that specified operational definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and decision rules for each theme. When an episode fit more than one theme, it was coded according to its most salient analytic focus, with the rationale documented in memos. Table 1 summarizes the final themes with illustrative excerpts.

Table 1. *Codebook summary of themes and decision rules*

| Theme                                                       | Operational definition                                                                                                          | Inclusion/ exclusion criteria                                                                                                                               | Illustrative excerpt                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Encountering<br>Changing<br>materials                       | Children's narratives shift through engagement with changing materials (objects, images, sounds) that prompt new directions     | Include: material/ sensory prompt reorganizes story world; child attributes new function/identity. Exclude: object merely mentioned without transformation. | "There's an ant! ... What if the ant was looking for its mom and dad ..." (Group Storytelling, Age 5, 3 May, 2023) |
| Encountering<br>peers                                       | Story-making is shaped by peer uptake (laughter, suggestions, critique) that redirects or revises the narrative.                | Include: peers' Responses alter plot/characters; negotiation/conflict. Exclude: solitary storytelling with no peer influence.                               | "My friends come up with things I didn't think of." (Interview, Age 5, 7 July, 2023)                               |
| Generating<br>Creative<br>Functions<br>and roles            | Children assign unexpected functions/roles to familiar materials, characters, or experiences, subverting conventional meanings. | Include: subversion of conventional roles/ functions; novel recombination. Exclude: Straightforward reproduction of known scripts.                          | "The cupcake is hiding ... now you can't see it." (Ha-ni, Age 4, 7 December, 2023)                                 |
| Moving into<br>a space where<br>boundaries are<br>dissolved | Narratives expand across worlds (time/space/genres/life-death), allowing discontinuity and transformation without fixed rules.  | Include: cross world character merging; fluid physical laws; reversible death. Exclude: linear retellings with fixed constraints.                           | "Snow White... turned into a gorilla... the fart transformed into Mario." (A-ra & Ji-a, Age 5, 6 December, 2023)   |

### ***Thematic Sufficiency and Case Selection***

The analysis continued until additional episodes no longer produced substantive codes but instead refined existing categories. The stability of the coding scheme was further checked by reviewing episodes across different months and both classroom

settings to confirm that the themes captured variation in children's story-making rather than idiosyncratic events.

Episodes were included when children voluntarily initiated story-making during free play (individually or collaboratively) and when narratives unfolded through interaction (e.g., peer uptake, material engagement, or unexpected shifts). Episodes were excluded when storytelling occurred primarily within teacher-led evaluative discourse (e.g., routine "sharing time") with minimal child-driven transformation, or when contextual data were insufficient for interpretation.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Credibility was supported through data triangulation (video, real-time transcription, field notes, and brief interviews), prolonged engagement in the field, and reflexive journaling that made the researcher's assumptions and interpretive decisions explicit. An audit trail (coding memos, codebook revisions, and category decision notes) was maintained to enhance dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure the accurate interpretation of children's story-making, the analysis consistently focused on contextual features such as emotion, tone, gesture, facial expression, and peer response. Video recordings were therefore analyzed alongside participant observation transcripts. Additionally, story portfolios and transcripts deemed analytically significant from a postmodern perspective were grouped into related concepts and discussed with the supervising professor to reduce researcher bias. Given that the stories often carried multiple meanings, each case was reviewed to determine whether alternative or multiple categorizations were warranted. When cases were coded under a single theme, the most salient meaning was selected, with contextual justification provided. This process of reflexive review and reclassification continued through the writing of the study's conclusions.

## **Results**

### **Unexpected Encountering**

The children's story-making often emerged through *serendipitous encounters* (Deleuze &

Guattari, 1980/2001) that redirected narratives beyond their initial intentions. These encounters-arising from everyday classroom life-opened possibilities for discovery and transformation, thereby expanding children's thinking. While serendipitous, these moments were essential, sparking new ideas and expanding their thinking. Notably, the children did not respond passively in such moments; instead, they actively interpreted and transformed these encounters in divergent ways, **with each child assigning different meanings to the same object during the story-making process (Lyon, 2000).**

### *Encountering with Ever-changing Materials*

The materials children encountered during story-making varied widely, ranging from self-made art to wooden blocks, insects, tree branches, and imagined characters. As the stories unfolded, these objects shifted identity and meaning, becoming something other than they initially appeared to be through the children's

reimaginings. Thus, matter in children's story-making was not inert but active-emerging, interacting, and exerting agency within the narrative assemblage (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010).

*Ba-da: (Bringing his paper artwork from the hallway) Can I tell you the magic ring story?*

*Researcher: That sounds fun!*

*Ba-da: This ring can fly super fast, even over lava. It can run really fast in the lava, and it's got energy inside it ... (omitted) ... If you take off the ring, you're not invisible, but if you wear it, you become invisible, so the thieves can't come in. It can shoot lots and lots of cannons ... (omitted) ... This costs ten million one hundred thousand won ... It's super expensive. Only rich people can buy it.*

*(Ba-da, Age 4, Boy, 31 October, 2023)*

In this encounter, Ba-da found a paper ring he had previously made during free play and transformed it into a powerful and valuable object. In his story, the ring shifted repeatedly-becoming a vehicle, a protective device, a weapon, and a luxury item. Through storytelling, a mundane artifact was reimagined as an agent of action, power, and desire.

Interestingly, the materials that sparked children's narratives were not limited to crafted objects but also emerged from encounters with the natural world:

*Ho-seo: (Excitedly) Hey, there's an ant! (Other children gather around him) How did the ant get in here?*

*Si-ha: What if the ant was looking for its mom and dad, and it thought the teacher was its mom and dad, and came in here to get some food?*

*(After lunch)*

*Ho-seo: Did the ant lose its mommy and daddy? It looks like it's lost. Or maybe it's following us to the cafeteria because it's hungry?*

*Mi-na: (Laughing as if amused) The ant was going home and found a banana, so it ate the banana. There was also an apple next to it, and it ate that apple too.*

*Ji-a: (Interrupting Mi-na) But then a monkey suddenly appeared and ate the whole apple. That made the ant mad, so it tickled the monkey.*

*Researcher: The magic ring story? That sounds fun!*

*(Group Storytelling, Age 5, 3 May, 2023)*

In this encounter, when Ho-seo saw an ant in the classroom and shouted, "There's an ant!", the other children quickly gathered to collaboratively construct a narrative. The ant became a searching child, a hungry traveler, and a character capable of emotion and retaliation. In this process, the ant exceeded its status as an observable object and emerged as an active narrative agent, blurring boundaries between reality and imagination.

Serendipitous encounters also extended beyond physical entities, with sounds from outside the classroom also acting as mutable matter in the story-making process, aligning with the idea that matter is intra- active, not fixed (Institute of Body and Culture, 2022):

*Da-mi: A monster showed up out of nowhere and gobbled up all the friends and the cat.*

*Se-ho: But ... the friends and the cat inside the monster's tummy pushed hard and pooped a lot. The monster's tummy got filled with poop.*

*Da-mi: (Looking at Se-ho and laughing as if amused) The monster felt queasy and threw up. So the friends and the cat escaped.*

*(An ambulance siren sounds from outside)*

*Se-ho: But the monster threw up so much ... it turned into a sea of vomit, and a warning siren went off. (Imitating the siren sound while running around his friends) (The sound of the ambulance siren grows louder and closer)*

*A-ra: (Covering his ears) The ambulance ... The siren was so loud, the monster covered*

*itsears and collapsed. So the monster stopped throwing up.*

*(Group Storytelling, Age 5, 9 May, 2023)*

Here, the children gathered in a large group and collaboratively created a story titled “The Cat’s Adventure.” In the story, a cat and its friends explore the seaside until a monster, introduced by Da-mi, swallows them, but they narrowly escape. When an ambulance siren sounded outside the kindergarten, Se-ho interpreted it as evidence that the monster had vomited excessively, turning the area into a “sea of vomit.” As the siren grew louder, A-ra covered her ears and said the noise caused the monster to collapse. Everyday sensory encounters, such as sounds, thus became narrative resources that redirected the story.

### ***Encountering with Peers***

The children’s story-making was also shaped through encounters with peers. Stories were woven not only from their own experiences but also from social relationships, cultural references, and interactions, forming assemblages that could merge, shift, and expand fluidly (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). Given that stories generated by children’s imagination are grounded in their experiences (Bruner, 1986), even imaginary stories can be seen as shaped by unexpected encounters with peers.

*Researcher: Why do you like making up stories with your friends?*

*Ha-na: When we make stories together, they become more fun. My friends come up with things I didn’t think of.*

*Si-ha: Da-mi and Se-ho told such a funny story ... I laughed so much.*

*Ho-seo: Yeah, that’s right!*

*(Interview, Age 5, 7 July, 2023)*

Ha-na and Si-ha often sought collaboration, finding that peers’ unexpected ideas made it easier to develop engaging narratives. For them, the story-making process became more enjoyable and generative through interaction.

Peer encounters also shaped stories that were initially created individually. When children shared their stories, listeners’ reactions-verbal or embodied-often became catalysts for narrative change. The following episode illustrates how spontaneous peer contributions

redirected a child's story in real time:

*Bo-mi: (Laughing while listening to Se-ho's story) Among Us! Among Us!*

*Na-ra: (Looking at Bo-mi and laughing) It flew away ... and Among Us was doing the "Gangnam Style" dance.*

*... (omitted) ...*

*Bo-mi: (Interrupting Se-ho) The pig ... it pooped in heaven and the poop fell down! (Laughs while looking at Na-ra, finding it funny)*

*Se-ho: Suddenly, poop started falling, and then a whirlwind appeared. Turns out, this is the world of toilets.*

*(Se-ho, Age 5, Boy, 30 May, 2023)*

During free play, Se-ho shared a story he had created through drawing. Bo-mi's repeated references to *Among Us* functioned as an implicit request, which Se-ho incorporated into the narrative, spontaneously adding the *Among Us* character dancing to "Gangnam Style." Na-ra's humorous suggestion regarding "Pigster" then further redirected the story, and Se-ho integrated these ideas as the story progressed. Thus, peers' interests, laughter, and engagement-whether affirming or disruptive-can act as serendipitous encounters that reshape a story's trajectory.

*Ji-ho: He's a thousand years old! Ba-da: Then shouldn't he be dead?*

*Ji-ho: (Yelling) Hey! (Hesitates for a moment) I'll just make the eagle a hundred years old.*

*Ba-da: Isn't that older than our grandpa? Is he Grandpa Eagle? Ji-ho: (Glaring at Ba-da) He's not a grandpa!*

*... (omitted) ...*

*Ji-ho: The eagle was struck by lightning a long time ago ... and that made him live super long. So even at a hundred years old, he's not a grandpa. And he's the fastest and strongest in the sky.*

*(Ji-ho, Age 4, Boy, 30 May, 2023)*

As can be seen from this encounter, Ji-ho created a story using a tablet PC to select digital images. He nicknamed an eagle "Swift" and assigned it an age of one thousand years. Ba-da

questioned whether the eagle should already be dead, prompting Ji-ho to revise its age to one hundred. Ba-da then joked that the eagle was older than his grandfather, calling it a “grandfather eagle.” In response, Ji-ho reworked the narrative, explaining that the eagle had been struck by lightning, enabling it to live unusually long. Through this exchange, peer critique functioned as a serendipitous encounter that prompted narrative revision and transformation.

### **Experiencing Generative Thinking**

Story-making enabled the children to reject conventional images of thought and engage in *generative thinking*. Rather than disempowering them, conventional ideas served as catalysts for new sense-making, as children repeatedly challenged fixed concepts and social norms. They reorganized object functions, character roles, and relationships based on their own thoughts and feelings, blending characters from comics, games, movies, and books into fluid narratives. Existing frameworks thus became reference points for deterritorialization and reterritorialization, enabling *flight*—that is, not escape, but an expansion of thought and adaptation to new environments (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001).

#### ***Generating Creative Functions and Roles***

Children's verbal expressions were not mere reproductions of memory but a reorganization of narrative knowledge, making story-making a creative mental effort (Lee & Noh, 1997). While everyday materials inspired story ideas, they did not impose fixed roles or functions. Thus, the “inevitability” of serendipitous encounters arose not from repeating familiar knowledge but from how they redirected thinking and opened new perspectives (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). The following example illustrates how the same material was reimagined differently depending on the context:

*The pig tried a little bit of poop. It looked like Nutella, so he tasted it. ... (omitted) ... The pig was rolling around and slipped on poop, falling to the ground. But the pig was full of poop inside, so he survived. The poopy belly was cushy.*

*(Ji-ho, Age 4, Boy, 4 April, 2023)*

In children's stories, “poop” was not merely a symbol of dirt or waste but became food, an

obstacle, and even a protective cushion. Conventional associations of worthlessness were subverted as materials were assigned creative and shifting functions. Similarly, digital images encountered during story-making exceeded their usual representational roles and were reconfigured as narrative agents. In a similar vein, the next example illustrates how a child assigned new meaning to a digital image encountered serendipitously on a tablet PC:

*(Looking at the tablet PC and choosing a bakery image) There were so many like, really, really a lot of breads in the bakery. (Selecting bread images one after another and then stopping) The cupcake is hiding really well among the breads! It's so funny. The cupcake is hiding with the bread and cakes, now you can't see it. So the bakery owner couldn't eat the cupcake.*

*(Ha-ni, Age 4, Girl, 7 December, 2023)*

Using a tablet PC and the platform MiriCanvas, Ha-ni selected a cupcake image as the protagonist of her story. She then randomly chose various bread images, unintentionally obscuring the cupcake. Noticing this, Ha-ni reinterpreted the image arrangement narratively, explaining that the cupcake was “hiding.” Here, digital images did more than represent objects; they actively generated narrative possibilities by concealing one another. Through such moments, children resisted fixed meanings and conventional patterns of action.

*The space warrior ate spicy chives and fire came out of his butt and mouth to defeat the space monsters. ... (omitted)*  
*... The boss level was so strong that the spicy chive power couldn't blast him away. The space warrior ate super spicy kimchi, chili peppers, mala soup ... and ... fiery octopus ... all of it. So his fire power got super strong.*

*(Bo-ra, Age 5, Boy, 29 June, 2023)*

Noticing this, Ha-ni reinterpreted the image arrangement narratively, explaining that the cupcake was “hiding.” Here, digital images did more than represent objects; they actively generated narrative possibilities by concealing one another. Through such moments, children resisted fixed meanings and conventional patterns of action. Similarly, familiar authority figures, like the “scary mother” who often scolds the child in real life, were reconfigured:

*So-ra's mom and Da-mi's mom are best friends. One day, the moms heard that there was an elephant living next door.*

*The moms love elephants so much that they ran over to the neighbor's house. But the lady next door got mad because the moms came in without asking for permission. So, she told the elephant, "Eat So-ra's mom and Da-mi's mom!" ... (omitted) ... So-ra's mom and Da-mi's mom promised that they would never do that again.*

*(So-ra, Da-mi, Age 5, Girls, 30 March, 2023)*

So-ra and Da-mi, whose mothers were often described as strict, decided to reverse their roles and portray them as characters who were scolded and disciplined by others. This reversal disrupted everyday power relations and challenged fixed perceptions of adults. Across these examples, story-making functioned as generative thinking, enabling children to deterritorialize familiar roles, behaviors, and values and to reassemble them in imaginative, open-ended ways.

#### ***Moving into a space where boundaries are dissolved***

The children's stories unfolded rhizomatically, extending in all directions without a fixed beginning or end (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). Time, space, characters, and physical laws remained fluid, as children continuously added ideas, producing open-ended maps rather than linear narratives (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). The following example shows a child merging characters from different creative works into a single story:

*Dracula was waiting to bite Snow White. Then Snow White ate an apple and farted. Suddenly, Snow White turned into a gorilla. And the fart transformed into Mario. It also turned into Heungdungi. So Dracula couldn't drink any blood because he only drinks human blood.*

*(A-ra, Ji-a, Age 5, Girl and Boy, 6 December, 2023)*

Here, A-ra and Ji-a created a collaborative story featuring characters like Dracula<sup>2</sup>, Snow

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<sup>2</sup> The protagonist of Bram Stoker's Gothic horror novel *Dracula*, a non-human character who represents the vampire legend.

White<sup>3</sup>, Mario<sup>4</sup>, and Heungdungi<sup>5</sup> from films, fairy tales, games, and animations. Figures from distinct narrative worlds deterritorialized into a shared smooth space, where incompatible characters coexisted without hierarchy or constraint. Children also reworked physical laws, rearranging familiar elements into impossible configurations:

*Mi-na: ... (omitted) ... Someone jumped really high and grabbed a cloud. Then they secretly threw it into an empty playground and left.*

*Na-ra: After a long time, the cloud turned into cotton candy.*

*(Mi-na, Na-ra, Age 5, Girls, 8 June, 2023)*

Although grounded in everyday experiences, the elements in Mi-na and Na-ra's story were deterritorialized into imaginative spaces unconstrained by reality. For Mi-na and Na-ra, storytelling functioned as a limitless domain where the impossible became plausible. Moreover, within this space, death was not simply "the end of the story":

*The Star God killed the bad guy boss. So the bad guy boss was gone. But ... the bad guy boss wasn't really dead. The bad guy boss just suddenly disappeared because he moved to Earth. ... (omitted) ... Then the Star God stabbed the bad guy boss with a sword and killed him. But the bad guy boss wasn't really dead. It was just a clone!*

*(Ji-ho, Age 4, Boy, 11 September, 2023)*

In Ji-ho's story, death repeatedly marked narrative transformation rather than closure. Life and death coexisted, dissolving binary distinctions. A similar theme was explored in Ga-ho's story:

*The rabbit and the squirrel rode the train smoke up to heaven. But there was a hole in the cloud of heaven, and the rabbit fell to the ground. The squirrel cried because it was sad. But then, suddenly, the rabbit came back to heaven. The rabbit had died and returned to heaven. The rabbit and the squirrel met again, and they were so happy.*

*(Ga-ho, Age 4, Boy, 18 October, 2023)*

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<sup>3</sup> The protagonist of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale Snow White, a beautiful and pure princess was cursed by a witch.

<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of Nintendo's video game Super Mario, a plumber who embarks on adventures to rescue a princess.

<sup>5</sup> A popular white dog character from Japanese animation.

Here, death is used as a transitional device to create movement, tension, and reunion. Across these stories, boundaries between life and death, reality and imagination, and beginnings and endings were continuously blurred. Story-making thus became a space of boundless becoming, freed from fixed order and rigid rules.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study originated from the belief that children can act as the central agents in story creation.

Drawing on stories spontaneously produced by five-year-olds during kindergarten activities, the analysis

examined children's story-making through postmodern concepts. These concepts were used as sensitizing tools to illuminate how meaning emerged through relations, encounters, and transformations, rather than as exhaustive explanations of children's lived worlds. Accordingly, the interpretations offered here represent one plausible, contextually grounded reading among many others.

To address concerns about over-attribution to Deleuzian concepts, the discussion below briefly considers how the same episodes may also be understood through complementary lenses, including media intertextuality, developmental accounts of symbolic play, and sociocultural/dialogic perspectives. While these perspectives overlap with the postmodern reading presented here, they diverge in their emphasis on relational emergence, material agency, and transformation rather than representation or individual cognition.

Firstly, children's story-making involved a series of serendipitous encounters with various entities, including self-made creations, natural objects, digital images, everyday sounds, and their peers. They transformed ordinary objects from daily life into distinct elements in their stories by asking questions such as "Why is this here?" and "What relationship does this have with other things?" These encounters evoked emotions such as surprise, pride, joy, fear, and anger, often redirecting stories away from children's initial intentions. Objects functioned not merely as stimuli but as active participants in story-making. At the same time, children were not passive recipients of these encounters; they actively interpreted, reworked, and assigned meaning to materials and peer contributions. Story-making thus emerged through mutual

relations among children, materials, and environments, functioning as collective rather than individual agency.

Children's story-making can therefore be described as "encountering with ever-changing materials." This is because the various materials of everyday life took on new identities depending on the context and interpretation of the story. Furthermore, matter-understood as an internally interacting substance (Institute of Body and Culture, 2022)-encompassed not only physical objects but also non-physical entities. These non-human entities evoked memories, emotions, and imagination, shaping the direction of stories. Moreover, as children's desires emerged rhizomatically and were expressed through both real and imagined processes, their stories expanded in multiple directions by breaking from fixed structures and continuously incorporating new ideas (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001).

The children's stories also emerged through "encountering with peers." Their story-making was not a solitary act but a collective process in which peers' reactions-positive or negative-prompted narrative development and revision. Stories functioned as "machinic assemblages" shaped by social, psychological, and environmental influences rather than as expressions of individual intention. Through interaction, children modified existing ideas, incorporated alternative perspectives, and gradually produced stories that exceeded their original viewpoints (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001).

The experience of children capturing serendipitous encounters and creating stories holds educational significance, as it involves continuously exercising one's imagination and creatively expressing oneself without fixed boundaries, much like the concept of a plateau (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). Rhizomatic processes shift and reorganize continuously, allowing flexibility and adaptability to emerge through trial, failure, and revision.

Stories generated through children's spontaneity and interest thus offered greater openness than tightly structured narratives. These repeated experiences enabled children to move beyond striated spaces toward exploratory learning. Accordingly, early childhood settings should provide opportunities for child-initiated story-making, and teachers should value children's stories as multiplicities rather than products to be corrected. Such practices support learning that extends beyond knowledge acquisition toward sustained engagement with possibility and transformation.

Secondly, the children's story-making can be understood as "experiencing generative thinking." Although their stories were grounded in their direct and indirect experiences-even

when highly imaginative (Bruner, 1986)-they did not merely replicate experience. Indeed, if the reproduction of experience is understood as a *tracing*, and the integrative and transformative use of experience as a *map* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001), then the children's stories functioned as maps. When real-world materials were used as story elements, their original functions and roles were easily dismantled, transforming the story world into a space of escape from reality. Notably, in the context of children's story-making, such acts of destruction and escape were constructive, as they enabled new creation rather than negation (Lee & Choi, 2024a).

Rather than focusing on the conventional functions and roles of everyday materials, children created novel functions and roles based on their imagination and interests. In the same way that maps contain surplus beyond their tracings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001), children transformed familiar thought images derived from experience and convention to produce new meanings. They sought liberation not only from social norms but also from habitual ways of thinking shaped by prior experience. Children particularly enjoyed reworking familiar concepts in deliberately unexpected ways or developing stories that contradicted what they already knew. Through this process, objects were detached from fixed meanings and re-entangled through personal and relational encounters within the story world.

The children moved into a "machinic assemblage with an outside" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001)-that is, a space in which boundaries dissolved through story-making. As children generated stories, deterritorialization occurred as existing structures, norms, and systems were dismantled, allowing narratives to exceed fixed boundaries of time, space, physical laws, and even death (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). When teachers or peers asked "how" or "why," children often responded with "just because," immediately extending the story to create its own internal logic. Through such moments, children broke from linear or blocked paths and followed *lines of flight*, generating new directions and experiencing a sense of freedom and joy. These lines of flight reflected ongoing movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that traversed established territorialities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001).

Story-making thus held educational significance as an experience of generative thinking. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2001) argue that to depict accurate meaning, *anexact expressions*-deliberately imprecise attempts-are essential, as repeated failure and revision enable movement toward new understanding. Generative thinking, therefore, develops

through openness to multiplicity rather than adherence to fixed models. This suggests that teachers must listen receptively to children's stories, where binaries such as good and evil or beauty and ugliness coexist (Lee & Choi, 2024a). The results of this study suggest that, for children, the process of story-making is not so much about knowledge as it is about the pursuit of learning itself. Rather than producing a finished story, children engaged in encountering, during which they resisted fixed thought images and generated personal interpretations. Drawing on Deleuze's distinction between knowledge and learning, children did not simply recognize what was already known but responded creatively to problems posed by encounters, extending their thinking beyond habitual limits. In this process, they were not deficient subjects to be instructed but subjects of excess, expressing abundant potential through storytelling. By disrupting the teacher's dominant language of *tracing* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001), they ultimately reclaimed narrative agency. Accordingly, teachers should create spaces that allow movement and variation, enabling children's full potential to emerge through free story-making (Son & Lim, 2019).

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