

The Motor Fairy Tales: an Embodied Strategy

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Abstract: This contribution proposes a reinterpretation of motor fairy tales as a pedagogical device within Embodied Education, conceiving the body as an epistemic matrix of learning (Varela et al., 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Wilson, 2002). From this perspective, knowledge emerges from the dynamic interaction among body, environment, and experience. This view is consistent with the principles of Embodied Cognition and embodied simulation (Gallese, 2007; Barsalou, 2008). Through a theoretical-interpretative analysis, the study identifies the recurring categories of motor fairy tales, framing them within an embodied educational grammar (Gomez Paloma, 2013; Gomez Paloma et al., 2016). These categories are reorganized into an interpretative model across three interdependent levels (narrative structure, embodied experience, and pedagogical mediation), understanding motor fairy tales as a complex learning device. The model is operationalized through interpretative grids with a heuristic and design-oriented function, translating theoretical categories into preliminary pedagogical and observational indicators for instructional design in primary education. The resulting framework integrates cognitive, bodily, emotional, and relational dimensions within a unified learning process, ultimately advancing a perspective of learning as a situated and multimodal process.



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1. Motor Fairy Tales and Embodied Education: Towards a Definition of Foundational Categories

In recent decades, growing attention to the relationship between body, learning, and cognitive development has contributed to the emergence of theoretical perspectives that challenge the traditional mind–body dichotomy. Within this framework, the paradigm of Embodied Cognition argues that cognitive processes are not independent of bodily experience but emerge from the dynamic interaction between body, environment, perception, action, and emotion (Varela et al., 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Wilson, 2002). From this perspective, knowing is not merely a process of information processing, but a situated construction of meaning through embodied engagement with the world (Caruana & Borghi, 2016).

Recent developments in neuroscience have further supported this theoretical orientation, highlighting the close relationship between perception, movement,

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emotion, and cognition. Research on mirror mechanisms and embodied simulation has shown that observation, imagination, and narrative comprehension involve sensorimotor and affective processes like those activated during direct experience (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006; Gallese, 2007). In educational contexts, these contributions have supported the development of Embodied Education, a perspective in which the body is understood not as a mere instrument of learning, but as a primary mediator of knowledge construction, interpersonal relationships, and personal development (Gomez Paloma, 2013; Gomez Paloma et al., 2016).

Educational and neuroscientific literature highlights the relevance of movement for children's holistic development, involving not only motor competence but also cognitive, emotional, relational, and social dimensions (Bailey, 2006; Singh et al., 2019). Movement represents a privileged mode of exploring the environment, constructing identity, and developing executive functions, emotional regulation, and communication skills. Accordingly, the body becomes a site of experience, meaning-making, and learning (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Damasio, 1994; Gomez Paloma, 2009). As Gamelli (2016) argues, the body is inherently present in educational practices and cannot be confined to specific moments of teaching; rather, it should constitute a foundational dimension of a pedagogy oriented towards the construction of knowledge through bodily mediation.

Within this theoretical framework, motor fairy tales (Mazzoni et al., 2010) emerge as educational practices that integrate narrative and movement within a unified learning experience. Through bodily participation in the story, children do not simply receive a narrative but actively construct meanings by embodying characters, environments, emotions, and actions. Motor fairy tales therefore represent a potentially relevant context for embodied learning, as they engage cognitive, motor, imaginative, emotional, and relational dimensions simultaneously. The narrative provides a symbolic framework in which children can explore themselves, others, and the surrounding world through action.

The educational value of narrative has been widely documented. Story-based activities support linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development by promoting shared meaning-making and transversal competences (Bruner, 1990; Nicolopoulou, 2008). When narrative is combined with play, dramatization, and movement, it may enhance engagement, motivation, and meaningful learning processes (Yazici & Bolay, 2017). Furthermore, narrative experiences have been interpreted as relevant contexts for embodied simulation, allowing children to experience characters' intentions, emotions, and actions through bodily involvement (Calabrese, 2020).

Despite these theoretical premises, research on motor fairy tales remains fragmented. Existing studies mainly investigate storytelling, movement-based activities, or motor-narrative practices separately, while limited attention has been devoted to identifying the structural dimensions that characterize motor fairy tales as coherent experiences within an Embodied Education framework. Although the expression "motor fairy tale" is widely used in educational contexts, a shared theoretical definition of the construct is still lacking. Current contributions draw on different fields, including educational storytelling, physical education, psychomotor approaches, dramatization, symbolic play, embodied cognition, and movement-based storytelling.

Studies closer to this concept describe activities in which narrative functions as an organizing structure for movement, exploration, play, and symbolic representation.

Yazici and Bolay (2017), for example, highlight how narrative combined with movement and dramatization can create multisensory learning environments. Similarly, Latino and Tafuri (2024) describe a “motor-narrative approach” centred on the body as a means of expression, creativity, and meaningful learning through the integration of movement and storytelling.

From an Embodied Education perspective, motor fairy tales may be interpreted as forms of embodied learning in which narrative understanding emerges not only through verbal processes but also through bodily action, motor simulation, emotional involvement, and interaction with the environment. This interpretation is consistent with theories of embodied simulation and with pedagogical approaches based on pretend play, in which imagination becomes a medium for experiencing and constructing meanings through the body.

The theoretical gap identified above highlights the need for conceptual clarification aimed at identifying the foundational categories of motor fairy tales from an embodied perspective.

Accordingly, the present study does not aim to evaluate the effects of motor fairy tales on children’s development, as this issue has already been addressed indirectly by extensive research on the educational value of movement and narrative. Rather, the study aims to identify and systematize the foundational categories of motor fairy tales within an embodied framework, to develop an interpretative model supporting teachers and educators in the design of learning experiences consistent with embodied learning principles. The identification of these categories may contribute to guiding educational planning towards experiences in which body, emotion, imagination, relationships, and cognition operate as interconnected dimensions of a situated and meaningful learning process.

2. Aims and Methodology

This study aims to develop a conceptual framework for an embodied educational grammar of motor fairy tales, understood as a pedagogical device that integrates cognitive, bodily, emotional, and relational dimensions within situated learning processes. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- reinterpret motor fairy tales in light of Embodied Education;
- identify their underpinning pedagogical categories and organize them into a three-level interpretative model;
- provide a heuristic, design-oriented tool for primary school teachers.

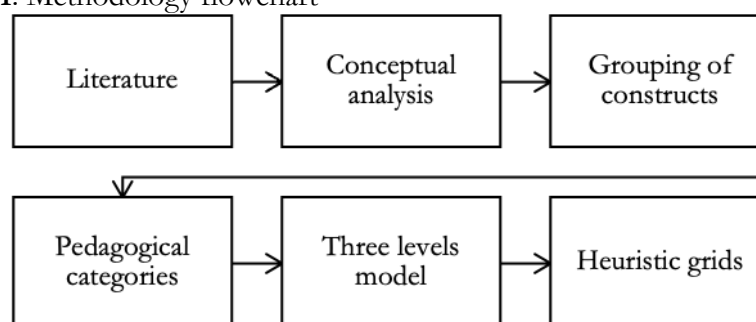
Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven interpretative approach aimed at constructing conceptual categories for educational design (Mortari, 2007; Maxwell, 2012). In line with traditions of theoretical educational research, the study focuses on the interpretation, synthesis, and reorganization of existing knowledge rather than on the collection of empirical data.

The development of the interpretative framework followed a concept-oriented analysis of the literature (Jesson et al., 2011; Grant & Booth, 2009). Literature from Embodied Cognition, Embodied Education, narrative pedagogy and movement-based storytelling was considered based on its theoretical relevance to embodied learning and to the pedagogical integration of narrative and movement. Through iterative reading, comparison, and conceptual interpretation, recurring constructs and pedagogical dimensions associated with embodied learning were identified and

grouped according to their educational function. The resulting categories do not derive directly from individual sources but represent an original theoretical synthesis of recurrent constructs identified across the literature. These categories were then used to elaborate an interpretative framework for examining motor fairy tales from an embodied educational perspective. Particular attention was devoted to the relationships among narrative, bodily experience, and pedagogical mediation as recurrent dimensions emerging across the literature.

The analytical framework was subsequently translated into heuristic grids intended to support educational interpretation, design, and reflection. These grids are presented as preliminary conceptual and observational tools rather than validated assessment instruments and therefore require future empirical testing.

Figure 1. Methodology flowchart



3. Theoretical Synthesis and Proposed Interpretative Model

3.1. From narrative structure to an embodied educational grammar

Within the theoretical framework adopted in this study, the relationship between narration and embodied learning cannot be interpreted in deterministic terms, whereby movement alone would guarantee meaningful learning outcomes. Consistent with Embodied Cognition, learning is conceived as an emergent process arising from the dynamic interaction among body, environment, lived experience, and cultural mediation (Varela et al., 1991; Wilson, 2002; Barsalou, 2008).

From this perspective, motor fairy tales are understood not simply as activities combining storytelling and movement, but as educational experiences in which meaning emerges through the integration of narrative organization, embodied participation, and pedagogical mediation. In line with the methodological process described above, the categories identified in the literature were synthesized into an interpretative framework aimed at examining motor fairy tales from an embodied educational perspective.

The framework is organized around three interconnected analytical levels:

- narrative structure, referring to the narrative elements that organize action and support meaning-making;
- embodied experience, concerning the child's lived bodily engagement with the narrative world;
- pedagogical mediation, referring to the teacher's role in facilitating reflection, conceptualization, and educational transfer.

These levels should not be understood as distinct or sequential phases. Rather, they represent complementary perspectives through which motor fairy tales can be

interpreted as embodied educational devices. Their organization into a unified framework constitutes a conceptual synthesis intended to support educational interpretation and design. The dimensions presented below should be understood as analytical categories derived from the theoretical synthesis of the literature. They are not intended as exhaustive properties of all motor fairy tales but as recurring pedagogical dimensions that may support the design and interpretation of embodied narrative activities. Although the proposed framework has not yet undergone empirical validation, this study represents a first attempt to systematize the pedagogical dimensions of motor fairy tales within an embodied perspective, offering a conceptual basis for future educational design and research.

3.2. Narrative structure

Motor fairy tales are characterized by five recurring dimensions: action-oriented sequentiality, embodied symbolic representation, imaginative motor engagement, situated challenges, and intersubjective co-construction of meaning. Together, these dimensions configure narration as an action-organizing system consistent with situated cognition, in which meaning emerges through the interaction between subject and environment (Varela et al., 1991; Wilson, 2002).

Symbolic processes are grounded in embodied simulation (Gallese, 2007) and conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), whereas motor imagination reflects mechanisms of grounded cognition (Barsalou, 2008). Situated problem-solving is linked to experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), while the social dimension aligns with socio-constructivist approaches to learning (Bruner, 1990; Gomez Paloma et al., 2016).

Taken together, these elements constitute the structural grammar of motor fairy tales as an embodied narrative framework.

Table 1. Interpretative Grid of Narrative Structure in Motor Fairy Tales

Dimension	Interpretative criterion	Potential pedagogical indicators
Action-oriented narrative sequentiality	Narration structures experience as a sequence of actions guiding situated movement and understanding.	Narrative phases (beginning–development–ending); motor transitions; adaptation of actions to progression; group recognition of sequence.
Embodied symbolic translation	Narrative elements are understood through embodied simulation and bodily meaning-making.	Bodily role enactment; gesture/posture transformation of narrative elements; peer recognition of roles.
Imaginative motor engagement	Narration fosters anticipation and scenario construction through embodied engagement.	Spontaneous motor variations; invented movements; diverse responses to prompts; anticipatory actions/verbalizations.
Situated motor challenges	Meaning emerges through resolving narrative problems via bodily action.	Presence of constraints/obstacles; varied motor strategies; contextual adaptation; task resolution.
Intersubjective co-construction of experience	Learning emerges through social interaction, role distribution, and meaning negotiation.	Role allocation and enactment; collaboration; shared narrative space; peer communication.

3.3. Embodied Experience

The second level concerns the child's lived experience during the activity. The fairy tale is enacted through the body, which becomes a mediator of meaning through motor simulation, imagination, emotion, and interaction.

In line with Embodied Cognition, knowledge is not reducible to amodal representations detached from perceptual and motor experience but emerges through the dynamic integration of perception, action, and context (Barsalou, 2008; Gallese, 2007). This process activates situated, multimodal, and relational learning principles in which the body functions as an epistemic resource (Gomez Paloma, 2013).

Motor fairy tales can be interpreted as embodied analogical mediators (Damiano, 2003), in which symbolic representation is enhanced through bodily enactment. Through bodily participation, the child does not merely interpret the story from an external perspective but experiences it from within the unfolding narrative situation.

Table 2. Interpretative Grid of Embodied Experience in Motor Fairy Tales: Dimensions and Design Indicators

Dimension	Interpretative criterion	Potential pedagogical indicators
Perception–action–context integration	Meaning emerges from dynamic interaction between body, environment, and narrative situation.	Continuous motor adaptation; context-sensitive responses; non-verbal modulation of action.
Embodied simulation and identification	Narrative comprehension occurs through motor simulation and bodily resonance.	Postural and gestural alignment with roles; embodied imitation; coherent bodily transformation.
Embodied immersion in the fairy tale	The child experiences the narrative from within rather than external observer.	Sustained role engagement; continuity of action; fluid transition between imagination and movement.
Embodied symbolic mediation	Symbolic representation is made meaningful through bodily enactment.	Transformation of roles into actions; symbolic coherence; bodily enactment of narrative meaning.
Emergence of meaning through situated action	Knowledge emerges through action, exploration, and adaptation within context.	Emergent motor strategies; non-predetermined solutions; meaning-making processes.

3.4. Pedagogical Mediation

The third level concerns metacognitive re-elaboration guided by the teacher. Through verbalization and dialogue, experience is transformed into conscious knowledge, consistent with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Post-action reflection enables the articulation of strategies, emotions, and meanings, thereby activating self-regulatory processes (Flavell, 1979; Brown, 1987). Within this framework, motor fairy tales integrate Embodied Education and metacognitive instruction, making embodied experience an object of reflection and transfer.

The categories associated with pedagogical mediation emphasize the teacher's role in supporting reflective processes through dialogue, verbalization, and formative

observation. In this perspective, assessment is primarily concerned with documenting participation, meaning-making processes, and the progressive articulation of experience rather than measuring predefined outcomes.

Table 3. Pedagogical Mediation in Motor Fairy Tales: Dimensions and Design Indicators

Dimension	Interpretative criterion	Potential pedagogical indicators
Teacher guidance	Teacher mediation supports the transformation of experience through scaffolding.	Shift from direct instruction to facilitation; use of open questions; progressive reduction of directive input.
Verbalization of embodied experience	Verbalization transforms embodied action into linguistic representation and awareness.	Sequencing of actions in speech; body-related vocabulary; chronological reconstruction of experience.
Metacognitive reflection	Experience is analyzed in terms of strategies, emotions, and decisions, fostering self-regulation.	Explicit strategies; peer comparison; emotional awareness during activity.
Experience–concept connection	Bodily action supports the construction of transferable and conceptual knowledge.	Links between motor activity and curricular content; cross-context generalization; concept emergence from action.
Formative embodied assessment	Evaluation focuses on emergent processes and quality of participation rather than outcomes.	Systematic observation; descriptive rubrics; process-oriented feedback; documentation.

3.5. *Synthesis of the Embodied Educational Grammar*

The theoretical synthesis presented in this study led to the elaboration of an embodied educational grammar structured around a triadic system in which narrative structure, embodied experience, and pedagogical mediation operate in an integrated manner. This model conceptualizes motor fairy tales as an embodied evolution of classical narrative grammar (Propp, 1966), highlighting their potential as complex learning environments capable of integrating cognitive, bodily, emotional, and social dimensions.

The analytical grids enable motor fairy tales to be interpreted as multilayered systems in which narrative structure, embodied experience, and pedagogical mediation interact dynamically. They function both as interpretative tools for analyzing existing practices and as design-oriented instruments for constructing learning environments consistent with Embodied Education principles.

3.6. *Application of the grids to the analysis of three canonical children's tales*

The following application is intended solely as a theoretical illustration of the heuristic potential of the proposed framework. It does not derive from classroom observation, empirical validation, or systematic analysis of educational interventions. For the purposes of this analysis, Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH) is considered in the version popularized by the Brothers Grimm (1812), The Three Little Pigs (3 Pigs) in the version collected by Joseph Jacobs (1890), and The Ugly Duckling (Duckling) in

Andersen's literary tale (1843). These versions were selected because of their widespread circulation in children's literature and their pedagogical relevance for movement-based narrative activities.

The associations presented in Tables 4, 5, and 6 should not be interpreted as intrinsic properties of the selected tales. Rather, they represent pedagogical readings derived from a qualitative interpretation of each tale's narrative structure, embodied affordances, and opportunities for pedagogical mediation, considered in relation to the embodied educational categories proposed in this framework.

Table 4. Narrative structure of fairy tales

Dimension	LRRH	3 Pigs	Duckling	Potential class-room indicators
Action-oriented sequencing	Linear spatial-temporal sequence	Cyclical iterative sequence	Developmental biographical sequence	Anticipation of next narrative phase; spontaneous adherence to sequence; movement adaptation to narrative progression
Embodied symbolic translation	Enacted roles (wolf, girl)	Boly/material constructions	Identity transformation	Coherent use of posture/gesture to represent roles; peer recognition of role without verbal mediation
Motor simulation and imagination	Immediate danger simulation	Design oriented simulation	Reflective simulation	Emergence of spontaneous motor variations; anticipatory actions
Situated motor challenges	Spatial obstacles	Structural problems	Social problems	Alternative motor strategies; adaptation to constraints; problem solving without direct instruction
Intersubjective co-construction	Role-based symbolic play	Functional collaboration	Inclusion dynamics	Role negotiation; spontaneous cooperation; shared decision-making

Table 5. Embodied experience of fairy tales

Dimension	LRRH	3 Pigs	Duckling	Potential class-room indicators
Perception action context integration	Spatial adaptation	Continuous feedback	Emotional regulation	Immediate movement adjustment in response to context or peers
Embodied simulation	Direct identification	Strategic simulation	Reflective simulation	Spontaneous adoption of role-consistent postures and movement patterns

Fairy tale inhabitation	Symbolic immersion	Operational immersion	Reflective immersion	Sustained role engagement without teacher prompting
Embodied symbolic mediation	Body as narrative sign	Body as design tool	Body as identity metaphor	Representation of narrative elements without external props
Emergence of meaning	Narrative meaning	Functional meaning	Social meaning	Emergence of non-predefined meanings

Table 6. Pedagogical mediation of fairy tales

Dimension	LRRH	3 Pigs	Duckling	Potential classroom indicators
Teacher orchestration	Narrative guidance	Design guidance	Dialogic mediation	Shift from direct instruction to facilitation; use of open-ended questioning
Verbalization	Sequential narration	Technical language	Emotional language	Ability to describe embodied action in temporal order
Metacognitive reflection	Motor strategies	Construction strategies	Relational strategies	Explicit articulation of “how I did it” and peer comparison
Experience–concept link	Space and direction	Force and balance	Identity and inclusion	Spontaneous transfer to disciplinary concepts
Formative assessment	Narrative process	Design process	Relational process	Qualitative process-based feedback

The grids, as constructed, function as a dual-purpose embodied didactic design tool: on the one hand, they support the planning of educational activities; on the other, they enable ongoing observation and monitoring during implementation. Rather than serving merely as analytical tools for fairy tales, they operate as a design matrix for translating narrative into embodied educational experience.

4. Conclusions

The embodied educational grammar proposed in this study can be interpreted as an epistemological and design-oriented framework that supports teachers in transforming narrative into lived experience, recognizing the body as a mediator of knowledge, and promoting educational pathways capable of integrating multiple semiotic systems. It provides a reference model for designing learning experiences in which movement is not merely a support for comprehension, but a means through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and shared.

From this perspective, the motor fairy tale is situated within the tradition of fairy-tale studies initiated by Propp (1966), who highlighted its deep structure and recurring narrative functions, and further developed by scholars such as Bettelheim (1976), who emphasized its symbolic and formative value, and Bruner (1990), who identified narrative as a fundamental mode of human meaning-making. However,

within the framework proposed here, the fairy tale is not conceived solely as a story to be listened to or interpreted, but as an experience to be bodily inhabited.

Based on the considerations developed throughout the study, the motor fairy tale can be defined as an embodied educational device grounded in the integration of narrative structure, embodied experience, and pedagogical mediation. Through this integration, children construct meaning through action, embodied simulation, imagination, and social interaction. It represents a form of situated and multimodal learning in which the body becomes a site of knowledge production and narrative is transformed into lived experience.

The embodied grammar of motor fairy tales outlined in this work does not aim to resolve the theoretical debate surrounding the topic, but rather to provide an initial conceptual systematization capable of supporting further developments in both research and educational practice. From this perspective, motor fairy tales may be understood not merely as a teaching method, but as a form of embodied education that recentres experience, the body, and relationality as fundamental conditions for knowledge construction.

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