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Supporting the Narrative Development of Young Children

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This article presents the developmental continuum of children's storytelling skills and provides examples at each of five levels: labeling, listing, connecting, sequencing and narrating. The authors connect these developing narrative skills to communication, literacy and cognition. Strategies to facilitate development from one level to another are described.

KEY WORDS: preschool narratives; teaching narratives; storytelling; oral language; narrative development; preschool classrooms; language teaching strategies; retell; original story; causality; sequencing.

Children develop language skills from birth as they participate in interactions with other, more mature language users. These interactions teach children about the meaning, structure, and use of language, which is typically expressed in a conversational format. Beginning at about the age of 3 or 4 years, children begin using another language format—storytelling. These narrative skills develop over time and are valuable for three reasons. First, narratives are a useful tool for the development of oral language (Morrow, 1985). Second, narratives are thought to form a bridge to literacy (Hedberg & Westby, 1993) and predict academic success (Bishop & Edmundson, 1987). Third, there is evidence that narratives are related to conceptual development (Applebee, 1978; Vygotsky, 1962).

Research supports using narratives as an effective format for the facilitation of oral language skills because stories require more complex language than that needed for daily conversations. In order to describe an event to a listener who did not share in that event, the storyteller must use explicit vocabulary, be extremely clear with pronouns, and have a command of temporal connectives such as "when," "so," and "while." Narratives provide opportunities for children to develop this higher level of language before they become readers.

Oral narratives are an important link to literacy. Hedburg and Westby (1993) described this bridge in terms of topics and functions. The topics of conversations tend to revolve around familiar and immediate experiences, whereas literate topics are more abstract and occur in the past. Narratives serve as a transition with familiar, but past topics. So too, narratives often assist children in moving from the sharing function of conversations to the teaching function of written language by imparting lessons based on one's experiences. Oral narratives have been linked to school success reflected in emergent literacy (McCabe & Rollins, 1994) and reading studies (de Hirsch, Jansky, & Langford, 1966; Feagans & Applebaum, 1986).

Applebee (1978) described narratives as related to a child's development of concepts. This presents us with a connection between language and cognition reminiscent of Vygotsky (1978). In order to tell a good story, children must have knowledge of the following concepts: temporal and cause-effect relationships and theory of the mind (knowing that others can think and feel differently than we do). Westby (1991) made a similar observation noting that the narrative form facilitates the use of language to monitor and reflect on experiences and reason about, plan, and predict experiences.

Narrative content and structure are greatly influenced by culture (Bloome, Champion, Katz,

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Morton, & Muldrow, 2001; Collins, 1985; Hedburg & Westby, 1993; Jalongo, 2003; McCabe, 1997). For example, retells of folktales by Western Europeans are told in cycles of three, whereas cycles of four are more common with Canadians and Alaskan Athabaskans (Collins, 1985). Audience participation varies from dialogic with African Americans, Hawaiian-Americans and American Indians to monologic with middle-class white Americans (Collins, 1985). The stories of Euro-Americans characterized by a single topic focus and clear beginning, middle and end contrast with those of the African American culture in which one topic flows into the next. Euro-Americans are more likely to value storytelling as a pathway to literacy whereas African-Americans generally place greater value on oral virtuosity and the oral tradition for performance, communication and moral education (Bloome et al., 2001; Hale, 2001, Jalongo, 2003). These differences (and others) must be considered so that narrative performances are interpreted within a broad range of cultural contexts.

Applebee (1978) presented six developmental levels of narratives that build on the critical elements of centering (focus on a topic) and chaining (sequencing events). These levels are thought to be most appropriate for understanding how the stories of children develop from about 2–6 years of age. Stein and Glenn's (1979) model of narrative development, based on story grammar elements, parallel and go beyond Applebee's to describe the stories of children through elementary school. Both of these models are based on the European storytelling tradition and may not be appropriate for all cultural groups.

We implemented a pilot study to gather and explore a variety of narratives from 14 preschoolers, aged 3–5 years. Eleven children were typically developing and three were diagnosed with speech or language impairments. Each child told one original and one retold story to a small group of peers. Then each told another original and retold story to the researchers. Children told the original stories using a single picture as a prompt (e.g., birthday party or circus). Retold stories were prompted using familiar books of folk tales (e.g., *Snow White* (Grimm & Grimm, 1996), *Goldilocks* (Galdone, 1979). Each story was transcribed from videotape and classified into one of five narrative levels described in the next section. Our levels were guided by Applebee's (1978) and Stein and Glenn's (1979). However we combined their levels and renamed them to more clearly reflect their descriptions. (See Appendix for comparison of narrative levels). Following the study, we continued to observe the same classrooms noting strategies that facilitated the construction of oral narratives by the preschoolers.

Narratives are a valuable, yet typically underused format for facilitating the language development of young children. It is our contention that knowledge of how narratives develop and a description of strategies to facilitate their development could benefit professionals in their work with young children.

DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVES

Children begin learning to tell stories by recounting personal experiences. We attempted to elicit these experiences by providing the children in our study with single pictures of common childhood events (e.g., birthday party, amusement park, trips to the farm or beach). Sequentially, children then begin to tell stories in play and finally retell and create fictional stories (McCabe & Rollins, 1994). We used books of folk tales (e.g., *Cinderella* (Cohen & Hogan, 1999), *Beauty and the Beast* (Titlebaum & Hogan, 1999), *Snow White* (Grimm & Grimm, 1996) as the stimuli for eliciting these higher level retells. Below are descriptions and examples of each of our five levels.

Labeling

Our first level is *Labeling*. Stories in this stage are characterized by nominal labels and repetitive syntax which aptly describes the conglomeration of assorted and unrelated thoughts found in the following story told by Eric, age 4. This story was prompted by a picture of a cat and a girl watering flowers. Eric references a cat, bee and girl using demonstrative pronouns (that, this, here) over and over.

> No, that's not my cat. That's my cat. That's her cat. This is, and this is bee. Here's my girl.

Listing

Our second level is *Listing*. Stories at this stage sound like a topic-centered list of perceptual attributes or character actions as evidenced in the following example. Even though this story is more than a listing of things, the characters' actions, are presented as a list with no temporal or causal relations between them. Amy told this story from a picture of a school classroom. Her story is more advanced than

the previous level because she not only labels things, but uses verbs to list the actions of characters and conjunctions to connect items logically. Note: ''XX'' indicates an unintelligible word.

> My picture is a XX. And it have, and it has kids with music. And there's some guy who's teaching them how to do music. And then trying to make it. Some of 'em are not listening cuz that one's who's being, like (gestures) are doing that. This one's doing that. And so he broke the wire with the call the phone. (claps) He break it and the guy's drinking some soda. And they're doing their music concert. And the end.

Connecting

Connecting is our third stage. Stories at this level include a central topic with character actions that link to related characters or events. Jennifer, age 5, selected a picture of a cat and a girl with a watering can and related the next story. The topic was clearly a garden and she had moved beyond the previous stage by linking her characters' behaviors. Her use of pronouns alerted the listener to these character connections. For example, ''my grandma and gramp'' became ''they'' in the next utterance. And then Jennifer connected herself with her grandparents with the pronoun ''we.'' This child's story is still missing temporal sequencing. The major events (e.g., putting poop in the garden, flowers blooming, watering flowers) could have happened in any order, not necessarily the one she presented here.

> I have a garden by my house. And, it, um, I have a dog. And my dad puts her poop in the garden. Yeah, because that's the only place we can put it. So he puts it in the garden. And we have some little pink flowers growing in there. And, um, they, um, my grandma and gramp came over. And they were going to check one day. And then we saw those red flowers and they were blooming. And, um, um, my mom always goes to the garden. And she takes a watering can and waters them so they grow. They grow, but not too often in the spring.

Sequencing

Once a child is able to use consistently correct temporal sequencing and cause and effect, s/he has moved on to *Sequencing*. These stories attempt to answer the questions ''when'' and ''why'' and therefore they usually contain more advanced language, such as ''but'' or ''because.'' A story told by 5 year old Vicky from a birthday party picture demonstrates these skills. Not only does Vicky connect the actions of Cindy, the vet, and the cat, but she also sequences them in time and tells us why the cat no longer has front nails.

> On my birthday, I was holding my cat. And then my Mama took a picture with my brother holding it. And I was holding his head. And it was Jessica, my big sister's cat. And her name is Callie. But she doesn't have front nails. And she's very little, because Cindy took her to the doctor. And then the doctor cut all her nails out. But it didn't hurt at all. She couldn't feel a single thing.

Narrating

Given that we collected narratives from children between the ages of 41 and 68 months, our sample only included one story at our highest level *of Narrating* as Jennifer retold the story of Cinderella. This level includes all of the components of the previous four levels as well as developed plots with evidence of planning to reach goals. The listener can now predict the end from the beginning of the story. We hypothesize that this level story necessitates some reversibility of thinking typical of concrete operational learners. Below are two excerpts from Jennifer's multiple episode story. You can almost read the godmother's thoughts as she plans to create Cinderella's gown and we begin to sense what the king is thinking before he says it.

> As she looked up, she saw her fairy godmother. And the fairy godmother said, ''No wonder you're so sad. I must make you a coach.'' And she did. And Cinderella said, ''Don't you think my dress?'' ''It's wonderful!'' her godmother said. And she looked again. ''Oh, good heavens, my child, you couldn't go in that.'' So Bibbety, Bobbety Boo. There stood Cinderella in the most perfect gown. And Cinderella said, ''This is wonderful. It's like a dream.'' And the prince danced with the charming Cinderella. And the king said, ''That prince danced with that girl all night. So I think that means he found the girl that he wanted to marry.''

The sample stories presented above are not perfect examples of each level. This is because these children are in the process of developing their narrative skills. We classified each story based on our overall perception of its level, rather than how consistently the child kept the story at that level. Although we hypothesized that the youngest children would only tell stories at the lowest levels and the oldest children would tell stories at the highest levels, we found that this is not always the case. In fact, we

discovered that stories from any one child may represent different levels depending on the stimuli. This was supported by the fact that the only story told at the *Narrating* level was a retell of a familiar folk tale. The original stories (elicited with single pictures) told by this child were at *the Connecting* level and her other retell (of Snow White) was at *the Sequencing* level.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Carr (2001) notes that the child uses event knowledge to carry on discourse for multiple purposes: to frame language structures, to learn and use new words, to engage in fantasy play, to make up stories, to remember specific happenings and to form object categorization. Providing opportunities and encouragement for children to use language in multiple ways would seem to be an effective way to scaffold the merging of language and thought reflected in the sequential development of narrative as outlined above.

Our background research, our conversations with teachers, and our experience in listening to the narratives of preschoolers have confirmed our belief in the importance of storytelling for language development. These experiences have also helped us evaluate the effectiveness of strategies for scaffolding both original and retold stories in the preschool classroom setting. We believe that various strategies can be employed to scaffold sequencing, cohesion, vocabulary development and event and audience awareness and to support a child's development from *Labeling* to *Narrating*.

Choosing an Appropriate Catalyst

Some of the props used as story telling catalysts were pictures, sequences of pictures, wordless picture books, puppets, miniature items, children's memorabilia from home, blocks and other constructive play materials, dramatic play "scenes," drawing, painting and stamping. These props were used with various strategies to encourage children to incorporate more complex elements in their stories. Although all of the props were developmentally appropriate for each stage of narrative development, the adult focus and guidance varied according to the developmental readiness exhibited by the child being supported. Props and strategies were employed to ensure that a meaningful, purposeful context for language expression was provided.

LEVELS OF NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Labeling

Labeling people and objects is a necessary stage for the development of narratives. One of the settings we visited was an inclusive preschool with several children requiring language support. Another had a mixed age grouping of 3–5 year olds. In both of these settings, there were children who benefited from language activities devoted to labeling. Below are some suggested techniques to encourage labeling.

The "Me Bag" was a turning point for two children who had previously had very little verbal interaction with peers. Larry shared his Halloween mask and some artifacts from his birth country in South America. Ben shared his love for drawing and Lego construction. In both these cases, the teachers noted that verbal interaction with peers and adults changed significantly after the special sharing time.

From Labeling to Listing

To support children moving to the *Listing* phase, we used strategies and props to encourage the use of verbs and to help them focus on a central topic. In

Strategies to Support Labeling

Technique	Examples
Modeling, questioning and dialogue	Child: (pointing to painting) "Fish." Adult: "Yes, you are painting a striped fish."
Adult-directed activities	Use a mystery bag for child to feel and label objects. Child is asked to explain drawings and paintings.
Reading aloud or shared book reading	Adult labels and describes pictures in response to child's indications of interest.
Guiding symbolic play	Adult prompts in dramatic play area, e.g., "Who is that? What is that? What are they doing?"
Personal narrative construction and providing an audience	Utilize the "Me Bag" project (Dougherty, 1999)—children bring objects that have been chosen with parent assistance as a mnemonic for personal histories.

Strategies to Support Listing

Technique	Examples
Modeling, questioning, and dialogue	Ask closed questions "What did you see at the zoo?" and open questions "Tell me about your trip to the zoo." Model listing of actions within personal narratives.
Adult-directed activities	Review activities at end of the day using children's words to create newsletter.
Reading aloud or shared reading	Read themed books of varied genres. Ask questions to link characteristics of characters to child experiences, e.g., "What made 'the rainbow fish' so special? What kinds of things do you share?" (*The Rainbow Fish*, Pfister, 1992).
Guiding symbolic play	Encourage grouping of related objects and concepts, e.g., restaurant vocabulary of hungry, menu, salad, and hamburger. Teacher models vocabulary use.
Personal narratives and providing an audience	Implement the "Froggy" project—A stuffed frog is sent home over a weekend with note to parents to write a description of Froggy's adventures. Child then tells the story with Froggy as central character.

discussions and play we tried to get them to draw on their own experiences.

In consultation with the teacher in one of our pilot study classes, we replaced the "Me Bag" project with a "Froggy" project as we felt this would retain the emotional and social benefits of sharing personal stories while helping children move beyond the labeling of unrelated objects or the listing of unrelated happenings. This excerpt from Haley's story clearly demonstrates how the "Froggy" adventure ties her list of ideas together.

> We went in my jeep car, and then we go and swing with Froggy. We went and chased Daddy, and then we go on the trampoline....

From Listing to Connecting

After children begin to describe topic-centered lists of actions of characters, they can be encouraged to relate characters and events within their stories. Connectors are beginning to prioritize as they choose to group certain related ideas and they use more pronouns to link sentences back to the appropriately

Fig. 1. Sharing my froggy tale.

Strategies to Support Connecting

Technique	Examples
Modeling, questioning, and dialogue	Invite children to dictate stories about their pet or imagined pet following a visit from the Humane Society with adult questions to encourage links from children to pets, e.g., "What do you like to do with your pet?"
Adult-directed activities	Designate a "story writing person" to record children's stories in writing center. Make characters and props with play dough.
Reading aloud or shared book reading	Ask questions to connect characters with events, e.g., "Why is Nora doing so many naughty things?" (*Noisy Nora*, Wells, 1973)
Guiding symbolic play	Incorporate miniature items into constructive play area.
Personal narrative and providing an audience	Schedule "Talktime" (Selman, 2001)—Teacher sits with children at snack table, presents a topic and invites each child to contribute. Adult expands and links children's contributions.

referenced characters. Scaffolding strategies at this phase encourage children to use language in more fully developing a topic by connecting characters and events throughout.

From Connecting to Sequencing

In moving to the next level, students' oral narratives should include the "when" or temporal sequencing and the "why" or causality of events. In so doing, we guided them to view the sequence of events leading up to the climax of the story and encouraged them to identify the reasons for actions and events.

During a paired discussion, Mollie and Amy had a debate concerning Snow White's fate (Grimm & Grimm, 1996). Mollie insisted she was "only sleeping" and would be saved by the prince. Amy thought she had "died." Amy supported her view by pointing to the poison apple, whereas Mollie suggested that she had to be sleeping to be awakened by the prince. Together they were exploring causality.

From Sequencing to Narrating

As mentioned above, it is rare to hear a true narrative in the preschool setting. One reason is because most preschoolers tell narratives based on personal experiences, which do not lend themselves to true narratives as easily as story retells of literature do. In addition, reversibility of thinking is required to move back and forth through time to help the listener predict the end from the beginning. And finally, longer, more complex language than most preschoolers are capable of is required to create multiple episodes typical of plot construction. Our classroom experience leads us to hypothesize, however, that children who are read to and are told stories frequently are better equipped to retell stories and use these as models for their own stories. We recommend that teachers utilize a variety of stories from other cultures to enhance appreciation for different story forms and cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

Teachers can most effectively support children in developing oral narrative skills by recognizing children's developmental needs and meeting those needs through a varied repertoire of strategies. We have suggested five levels that will be encountered in an early childhood classroom: *Labeling, Listing,*

Strategies to Support Sequencing

Technique	Examples
Modeling, questioning, and dialogue	Ask cause and effect questions "Why was the caterpillar so hungry?" (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Carle, 1969) Ask sequencing questions "Tell me what happened next." Encourage peer discussion about character actions.
Adult-directed activities	Encourage kinesthetic activities such as drawing, painting or stamping.
Reading aloud or shared book reading	Share cumulative books that add characters (*Who Sank the Boat?*, Allen, 1996) and circular tales (*If you Give a Mouse a Cookie*, Numeroff, 1985)
Guiding symbolic play	Use miniature objects with question prompts, e.g., "What happens next?"
Personal narrative and providing an audience	Encourage show and tell with objects that are hand-made, collected or researched. Prompt with "when, why, how" questions.

Fig. 2. Eric drawing a story.

Strategies to Support Narrating

Technique	Examples
Modeling, questioning, and dialogue	Teacher tells stories and demonstrates story elements with puppets, hats and miniature objects, or story apron. Children draw pictures while listening to stories. Use questions to prompt prediction.
Adult-directed activities	Provide trays with miniature items representing elements of a story. Create pictorial story maps. Use wordless picture books. Provide story starters. Write class stories.
Reading aloud or shared book reading	Read folktales with predictability, temporal sequencing and cause/effect.
Symbolic play	Provide props in dramatic play area to act out stories read aloud in class.
Personal narrative and providing an audience	Encourage telling stories about personal experiences such as vacations, seasonal activities or a class trip which can be shared in pairs, small groups or at circle time.

Connecting, Sequencing, and *Narrating*. A child will likely relate stories indicating two or even three narrative levels at any age, but with support move to higher levels. For example, most of Erik's stories were *Labeling* or *Listing* at age 4. By age 5, they were mostly *Connecting*. He benefited from guided questioning, the provision of Froggy as a central character, and the opportunity to retell favorite stories and dictate his own. At 3½, Mollie's stories were often *Connecting*. Her *Sequencing* was supported by frequent opportunity to retell and dramatize known stories and by supporting her own storytelling with drawing. She also benefited from paired discussion about characters and plots. The best teachers match carefully chosen strategies to the learning needs of their students—stimulating narrative through questioning, dialog and discussion, stimulating language use through activities, reading aloud, guiding symbolic play and encouraging personal narrative construction to an audience. It is our contention that narrative development is important for all children and when teachers know how narratives develop, what level stories their students tell, and how to foster story telling at higher levels, they are better equipped to help all children develop oral narrative skills critical for ordering personal experiences, communication, concept formation, and literacy preparation.

APPENDIX. Comparison of Narrative Levels

Stadler and Ward's levels	Applebee's levels	Stein and Glenn's levels	Descriptions
Labeling	Heaps	Isolated description	Unrelated statements that label or describe.
Listing	Sequence	Descriptive sequence	Statements around a central topic.
Connecting	Primitive narrative	Action sequence	Statements around a central topic with perceptual, not temporal links.
	Unfocused chain		Temporally related statements without a central topic.
Sequencing	Focused chain	Reactive sequence	Temporally related statements around a central topic.
		Abbreviated sequence	Character goals and intentions and causality.
Narrating	True narrative	Complete episode	Temporally related statements around a central topic with a theme or moral. Developed plots.

Hedberg and Westby (1993).

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