Introduction to Narrative, Literacy, and Other Skills: Studies in Intervention

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Studies in intervention

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Introduction

The ability to tell 'good' stories is a complex and sophisticated skill that requires the coordination and integration of both basic and higher-order cognitive, linguistic, pragmatic and social abilities. It is thus not surprising that children's narrative skills are found to be related to literacy, oral language, socio-cognitive abilities and, more generally, to school achievement (e.g., Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992; Dobson, 2005; Joffe, 2013; Makdissi & Boisclair, 2006; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Wenner, Burch, Lynch, & Bauer, 2008). Given the centrality of narrative skills, it is thus important to understand their multidimensional development and to set up ways that can promote or fully bring forth children's narrative competences, and this from very early on.

The present volume addresses both the relation of narrative development to other skills and the experiences as well as the specific interventions devised to promote oral narrative skills. Accordingly, this volume is organized into two main parts. The first part presents studies showing the interrelatedness between oral narratives and literacy, language and socio-cognitive development as well as the impact of oral narratives on the promotion of these various skills. The second part presents studies that aim to understand which early experiences, contextual settings or specific intervention procedures can help promote children's narrative skills themselves.

Before presenting the chapters in some detail, first we provide a brief discussion of the nature of narrative skills, and a brief overview of the development of narrative abilities and of their relation to other non-narrative skills, and then, we discuss some of the experiences and specific intervention procedures devised to promote children's narrative skills.

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Narrative skills

On the nature of narratives

Narratives are an extended form of discourse in which temporally and causally-related events, real or fictitious, are communicated to real or imagined listeners. Narratives often report events that listeners have not directly experienced and thus language is the main support to convey and understand these happenings. Compared to contextualized uses of language, narratives require greater explicitness and good discourse organization.

On the more accomplished side, monological narratives provide not only referential and temporal information but also evaluative information (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997; Labov, 1972). Narrators talk about the causes of events and behaviors, take the perspective of the story characters in order to convey their psychological states, such as emotions, desires, intentions or beliefs, which often motivate their actions and interactions with others (Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991), and may provide their evaluations about the events or characters' behaviors. 'Good' stories also require narrators to take into account the listeners' perspectives to make their stories interesting for them. Thus, to produce 'good' narratives, children need a good level of vocabulary, grammar, discourse and socio-cognitive competences, as well as an appreciation of how the events should be structured to make them interesting for one's listeners.

The development of narrative skills

Given the wide range and sophistication of abilities required to tell 'good' stories, it is not surprising that narrative abilities take years to develop. Their developmental trajectories vary depending on the content and on the context in which children produce them. For example, narratives of personal experience, particularly if relating recurrent events, seem to be relatively well organized sooner than fictional stories (Nelson, 1999; Berman, 2004), and conversationally-framed narratives are likely to contain more explanations and references to internal states than monological narratives (e.g., Eaton, Collis, & Lewis, 1999; Shiro, 2003; Berman, 2004). Variation also exists across individuals and socio-economic variables, with children from low-income families producing less elaborate narratives than children from middle-income ones (e.g., Peterson, 1994).

Narrative abilities have their origins in early adult-child interaction. The first narratives are simple and are co-constructed with familiar partners who most often initiate and scaffold children's references to their personal past or to previously heard fictional stories (e.g., Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Miller & Sperry, 1988;

Nelson, 1999; Sachs, 1983; Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995). Children then gradually become better able to initiate both personal life and fictional narratives, to share complex experiences with others and to construct or retell a coherent story from wordless picture books. The structural organization and linguistic expression of children's narratives continues to develop well into middle childhood (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Hickmann, 1995; Berman, 2009; Nelson, 1996) and even adolescence if not adulthood (Nippold, Hesketh, Duthie, & Mansfield, 2005).

A major impetus to the study of narrative development was the use of wordless picture books such as the storybook *Frog where are you*, where children of different ages and different mother tongues were confronted with the same story, elicited in the same way (e.g., Berman & Slobin, 1994; Strömqvist & Verhoeven, 2004). One line of development is reflected in the growing interconnectedness and logical sequencing among events. While preschool children produce mostly descriptive narratives, from about 6–7 years of age children start talking about the causes of events and continue doing this with increasing complexity and sophistication (e.g., Bamberg, 1994; Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991; Berman & Slobin, 1994; Berman, 2004). In addition, children enrich their stories by attributing emotional and mental states to the characters (Bokus, 2004; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007), which are then mentioned to account for the characters' actions (Bamberg, 1994; Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991; Berman & Slobin, 1994) and to express, if needed, the different points of view and internal states of the characters, including their possible false beliefs (Aksu-Koç & Tekdemir, 2004; Kielar-Turska, 1999; Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991; Küntay & Nakamura, 2004).

According to Berman (2009), another line of narrative development is observed by tracing the way children express form-function relations such as *connectivity* (referential and temporal) or *evaluation* (taking the perspective of the narrator and/or that of the characters). Initially, children have a small number of underdifferentiated linguistic devices that they use across the board. Gradually, these forms come to fulfill more specific and differentiated functions while children acquire a wider range of linguistic devices that constitute expressive options to convey one particular function in a more precise and differentiated way. For example, while children, at around 5 years of age, add to the linguistic devices expressing the temporal sequencing of events (*then, and then*) the linguistic devices to express causal sequencing (*because, so that*), they also use other newly acquired forms to convey more complex and differentiated temporal (*meanwhile*, *when … then*, *next morning*) as well as logical relations (*and so*, *in order to*). The same development is observed for the expression of other narrative functions such as character referentiality or the combination of events in sophisticated ways, while preserving overall coherence. At the same time, as children acquire more linguistic devices, their functions also become more differentiated and complex.

Narrative abilities and their relation to other skills

The development of narrative abilities, is related to reading comprehension and writing skills in school-aged children (e.g., Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Reese, Suggate, Lang, & Shaughency, 2010), to language development (e.g., Cooper et al. 1992; Mallan, 1991) and to children's school achievement more generally (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The relation can be found to hold within a set of other oral language abilities (e.g., Dickinson, Hofer, and Rivera, this volume; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998)

Concerning reading, robust relations are found between narrative abilities and reading comprehension. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) found that oral narratives and vocabulary in kindergarten, were related to reading abilities in 4th and 12th grades, but in their study, they did not find that narratives made a specific contribution beyond oral language skills. Such a specific contribution was found, for example, by Griffin, Hemphill, Camp and Wolf (2004) and by Reese et al. (2010). Griffin et al found that the length and quality of 5-year-olds' narratives, such as evaluations, characters' psychological states, plot structure, and plot elaboration, predicted reading fluency and comprehension in 8-year-olds (3rd graders), and Reese et al. (2010) found that the quality of children's story retelling, such as orientation and evaluations, at 6 years predicted their reading fluency two years later.

Children not only tell but also listen to stories, often in the context of shared bookreading with caregivers or teachers. It has been shown, for example, that while the frequency of shared reading, as reported by parents, is not linked to the quality of children's narrative production (Nicolopoulou, Hindman, Sawyer, & Ünlütabak, 2016; Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever, & Ouelette, 2008), it was found to predict children's receptive and expressive vocabulary (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Sénéchal, 2011) and to improve emergent literacy skills (Justice & Piasta, 2011; Pentimotti, Justice, & Piasta, 2013). Moreover, there is evidence indicating that the quality of interactive storybook reading improves the quality of children's narratives (Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; Zevenbergen, Whitehurst, & Zevenbergen, 2003).

Shared bookreading can also help promote children's socio-cognitive understanding. Hutto (2008) argued, for example, that conversational interactions about the characters' mental states and reasons for their actions are likely to promote children's understanding of mind. Ratner and Olver (1998), in a study of four 3- and 4-year-old children interacting with their parents, found that repeated readings of a tale of deception elicited conversations about the thoughts, intentions and feelings of the characters. In the course of subsequent readings, children showed increased comprehension of the story's episodes related to deception and needed less parental support to talk about them. Other studies further showed that the amount of mental state language, particularly about the story characters, used by mothers during shared storybook reading correlated with children's performance on standard false belief (Adrian, Clemente, Villanueva, & Rieffe, 2005) and emotion tasks (Racine, Carpendale, & Turnbull, 2007; Symons, Peterson, Slaughter, Roche, & Doyle, 2005), and predicted children's performance on these tasks one year later (Adrian, Clemente, & Villanueva, 2007). These findings lend support to theoretical perspectives such as that of Mar and Oatley (2008) who, for literary narratives, argued that carefully crafted stories are in fact 'simulative experiences' that help readers to better understand others and promote their capacity for empathy and social understanding more in general, a suggestion that finds empirical support with adult participants (e.g., Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016).

Promoting children's oral narrative skills

Given the centrality of narrative abilities, many studies have tried to understand which experiences, contextual settings or specific intervention procedures would promote children's narrative abilities.

The quality of parent-child conversation during shared bookreading provides particularly favorable experiences for the promotion of narrative abilities in children. In stories children are likely to talk about the characters' inner motives and how these relate to their actions. Early bookreading is indeed found to be related to children's narrative skills (e.g., Harkins, Koch, & Michel, 1994; Kang, Kim, & Pan 2009). For example, Harkins et al. (1994) found a relation between mothers' references to psychological and emotional states of the characters in shared bookreading and children's mention of these aspects when retelling these stories (see also Fein et al., this volume).

Conversations focused on the 'there and then' also seem propitious for the development of narrative skills (e.g., Beals, 2001; deBlauw, Baker, and Rispens, this volume; Uccelli, Hemphill, Pan, & Snow, 2005). For example, Uccelli et al. (2005) found that children who participated in more decontextualized talk at 2 and 3 years of age were better narrators of personal experiences and fictional narratives at age five.

Several studies have devised specific intervention procedures to help promote children's narrative skills (see Pesco & Gagné, 2015, for a review; Nelson and Khan, this volume). In some studies, parents were encouraged to read books to their children interactively, focusing on asking children questions about the causes of the story events or about the psychological states of the characters (e.g., Lever & Sénéchal, 2011), to ask open-ended questions and to respond in an elaborative style (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). In other studies, the shared bookreading intervention was held in preschool classrooms over a good part of the academic year. For example, Zevenbergen, Whitehurst, and Zevenbergen (2003) had Head Start children participate in shared bookreading both in school and at home. The narratives children produced after the intervention period contained more explanations and/or references to the psychological states of the characters than those produced before the intervention or by a control group. Also, studies using a Storytelling/Story-acting practice have been introduced in classroom curricula to promote children's narrative skills, with positive results (e.g., Cremin, Flewitt, Mardell, & Swann, 2017; Nicolopoulou, 2017 and this volume).

In other studies, short interventions were held within a single session. For example, Silva, Strasser and Cain (2014) compared the narratives of children who were asked questions about the cause of events and actions before narrating to those where the questions were asked after narrating the story. They found that the narratives of children who answered the questions beforehand contained more explanations than the narratives of children who had not previously answered those questions. Veneziano and colleagues (Veneziano, Albert, & Martin, 2009; Veneziano & Hudelot, 2009; Veneziano, 2016) used a within-subject design comparing the narratives produced by the same children before and after a short conversation about the causes of key events of the story. They found that children did not only tell the same story in a more causally interconnected way but also made more references to the psychological states of the story characters which had not been specifically targeted during the conversation. These positive results were obtained also one week later and on a new story (Veneziano, Hudelot, Plumet, LeNormand, & Elie, in press; Veneziano & Plumet, this volume).

Overview of the volume

The present volume is organized into two main parts. The chapters in the first part present research supporting the involvement of narrative abilities in several other skills and their role in the promotion of these skills. The chapters in the second part focus on the experiences and intervention procedures likely to promote children's narrative abilities.

The importance of oral narratives for literacy, language and socio-cognitive skills

Narrative skills and literacy

The first three chapters in the first part of the volume report new data that support the relation between narrative experiences and early literacy, particularly reading comprehension.

Reading abilities. The first part opens with the chapter by *Dickinson, Hofer and Rivera* dealing with the hotly debated issue as to which language abilities of preschool children best predict their later reading comprehension. Highlighting the importance of the early childhood years and the paucity of large-scale studies on the interrelations between different oral language abilities in the preschool age period, the authors present a large-scale study in which different kinds of children's language abilities – vocabulary, syntax and extended discourse – were followed longitudinally (at the beginning and end of preschool and at the end of kindergarten) in 356 African-American children from low-income homes in the United States. Their results show that preschool vocabulary and extended discourse, including measures of narrative comprehension and production, were closely related in preschool and kindergarten, and that by 1st grade all three language abilities were not only become closely related to one another but also to reading comprehension. Dickinson et al. conclude that a full understanding of the language abilities involved in later reading comprehension requires a comprehensive approach where not only vocabulary and grammatical measures but also narrative abilities are considered at the same time.

In Chapter 2, *Makdissi, Sirois and Boisclair* describe the developmental steps that children go through from their early ideas about reading and writing up to the construction of an alphabetical system, and presents the method of interactive storybook reading and early writing that can be integrated in the everyday curricula of kindergarten classrooms. As an illustration, the authors report the results of a study in which interactive reading and writing methods were implemented during a whole year in a kindergarten classroom in Quebec (Canada). Results obtained from reading and writing tasks administered at the beginning and at the end of the school year show that the children made significant progress in their representation of the alphabetic system. These results are very encouraging and supportive of the relation between interactional narrative experiences and early literacy.

In Chapter 3, *Chen Kingston, Kim, Burkhauser, Mulimbi and Quinn* also address the issue of the relation between narrative practices and literacy. The chapter deals with somewhat older children, 3–4th graders, who participated in a summer literacy intervention program. The authors, using a new methodology, aimed to investigate whether students' retelling of narratives was specifically related to their later reading comprehension. One hundred and seventeen children were contacted by teachers over the phone and were invited to retell the stories of two narrative books as well as informational texts. They found that the quality of the oral retellings of narrative books predicted students' later reading comprehension scores, while this relation was much weaker for children's retellings of informational texts. This study nicely confirms the link between narrative experience and reading comprehension and suggests that narratives are more propitious to advances in reading comprehension than informational texts. The authors suggest that the specific impact of narratives may be due to children's greater knowledge of narrative text structure and to the greater difficulty they may have in identifying causes and effects in informational texts.

Vocabulary. In Chapter 4, Rohlfing, Nachtigäller, Berner and Foltz address the issue of the relation between narratives and the acquisition of new words. The study explores in particular whether the nature of the stories – emotional or neutral – that 2-year-old German-speaking children listened to in a day care center influenced the acquisition of the spatial prepositions *behind* [hinter] and *next to* [neben] included in the stories. An experimental group listened to 'emotional' stories while a control group listened to 'neutral' ones. Results show that all children retained the spatial prepositions, whether they heard them in emotional or neutral stories, suggesting that experience with storybook reading might already be a sufficiently propitious experience for vocabulary learning independently of the more or less emotional content of the stories heard.

Theory of mind understanding

The next two chapters deal with the impact of narrative experience on emotional language and Theory of Mind understanding. In Chapter 5, *Grazzani, Ornaghi, Agliati, Brazzelli and Lucarielli* present a study in which 2- to 3-year-old children in daycare centers listened to emotion-laden stories several times a week for three months. After the story, children in the experimental group engaged in conversations where they were encouraged to feel the emotions attributed to the story characters, an interaction that children in the control group did not have. They found that children in the experimental group used more psychological state terms and showed a greater understanding of the four emotions mentioned in the books and focused upon during the conversations, than children in the control group who only listened to the emotion-laden stories. This result is particularly interesting as it suggests that conversations about emotional terms in a narrative context are a crucial experience for the promotion of children's production and understanding of internal state words and this even at 2 years of age.

In Chapter 6, *Brockmeyer Cates and Nicolopoulou* provide further support for the importance of interactive storybook reading for socio-cognitive understanding. In particular, they found a positive relation between interactive bookreading and theory of mind abilities in low-income 4- and 5-year-old children attending daycare centers. The books used involved either socio-cognitive themes, such as false beliefs, deception and appreciation of the difference between appearance and reality, or did not include these themes. Results show that all children who participated in bookreading performed better in a battery of Theory of Mind tasks than children in a control group who did not participate in the bookreading activity. Children who heard stories with mental state themes succeeded in deception tasks more than children who heard stories without those themes, but no other differences were found between the two groups. These results highlight the importance of narrative experiences for promoting mental state understanding independently of the themes contained in the stories, a finding that is consistent with the result obtained by Rohlfing et al.(this volume) for the acquisition of new words, though narrative contents related to the target skills may have an advantage in some domains.

Argumentative skills
In Chapter 7, the last chapter in this first part, *Surrain, Duhaylongsod, Selman and Snow* point to the intricacies between narrative and argumentative discourse in adolescence. Argumentation skills are an important discourse resource in everyday life and are central in middle grades when students are required to provide supporting evidence for their assertions. The authors argue that since narratives and argumentation are both forms of extended discourse based on an understanding of the social world, narrative skills may support students' early attempts at argumentation. Drawing from examples of argumentation produced by 4th to 7th graders (in the 9- to 14-year range), the authors show that students as young as 9–10 years, and increasingly over the course of middle grades, used narrative thinking to produce elements of argumentation, in particular elements that are usually encountered rarely up to 9th grade, such as 'warrants' (providing evidence for the claims) and 'rebuttals' (providing exceptions to a claim). The authors argue that narrative thinking may play a fundamental role in the acquisition of sophisticated skills such as argumentation by allowing students to rely on contents drawn from personal experience and on analytic skills acquired in interaction with others.

Promoting oral narrative skills

The second part of the Volume contains studies whose main purpose is to understand the experiences and conditions that can help children develop or promote their narrative skills. In Chapter 8, *Nelson and Khan* provide a comprehensive review of narrative intervention studies aiming to support and promote narrative skills in children. They argue that the production of 'expert' narratives requires that multiple abilities – such as the understanding of intentionality, the use of flexible linguistic devices to implement internal discourse cohesion and planning abilities – attain threshold levels at the same time, a state limited by cognitive constraints on the number of operations that can be processed in parallel. Accordingly, the authors provide a detailed account of the different abilities that they consider necessary for the development of expert narrative skills, and detail their developmental status at each of the eight sequential levels described from early childhood through adolescence. The authors also review several intervention studies aiming to promote narrative skills and argue that, to be effective, intervention programs need to take into account the specific characteristics of each of the developmental levels identified.

Narrative skills and parent-child interactions
As previously mentioned, early experiences with shared bookreading in interaction with familiar adults are considered central for the development of narrative skills. In Chapter 9, *deBlauw, Baker and Rispens* expand the search for early experiences that can promote the development of narrative abilities to children's participation in parent-child conversations dealing with non-present talk. The in-depth analyses of three Dutch-speaking children in spontaneous interactions with their parents in the period between 1;9 and 3;9, provide indications that there may be a positive relation between children's engagement in non-present talk in the early years and the quality of narrative structure at age seven. If confirmed by larger-scale studies, these results suggest that narrative abilities can also develop through children's participation in everyday conversations during which parents and children talk about topics of interest that go beyond the 'here and now'.

In Chapter 10, *Fine, Aram, and Ziv* present an intervention study that focuses on parent-child conversation during shared bookreading. Parents of 4- to 5-year-old children from low socio-economic neighborhoods were instructed to read books (one book per week for six weeks) interactively according to a structured protocol that included asking their children questions about the events and their causes, and about the psychological states of the characters. Parents in the control group read the same books to their children but were not instructed in the conversational protocol. When retelling the story, children in the intervention group referred to the characters' mental states and showed that they understood the story significantly better than children in the control group These results support other findings regarding the importance of conversation about the causes of events and the characters' psychological states for promoting children's narrative production and comprehension, and strongly suggest the significance of conversational experiences beyond storybook reading.

Narrative skills and intervention procedures
In Chapter 11, *Kucirkova, Messer and Sheehy* investigate the potential of the specific story-sharing/story-making App "*Our Story*" to support children's narrative skills. The iPad App, developed by psychologists and educational professionals, allows users to create their own story, choose or draw the pictured components, record the narrated story, and interact with adults or peers about the story. The

Our story App was made available, for six months to a classroom of 3- to 5-year-old English preschoolers of mixed socio-economic background to see whether the particular features of the Tablet App – attractiveness, multimodality, interactional possibilities and gradual increase in difficulty – could promote children's narrative skills. Results show that, at post-test, both fictional and personal experience narratives produced by the children contained more evaluative information such as the characters' or the narrator's thoughts and feelings about the events or other characters. The authors argue that the use of the App generated a new dynamic in the classroom as well as changes in the teachers' attitude towards the use of these types of new technologies.

In Chapter 12, *Nicolopoulou* examines the impact of a storytelling/story-acting (STSA) practice introduced in a Head Start preschool classroom for an entire school year. Children aged 3 to 5 years from disadvantaged backgrounds engaged, at least twice a week, in STSA during which they were free to construct and dictate their own stories to the teacher, and later on to act them out with their classmates. A classroom from the same Head Start center did not engage in such an activity and served as a control group. Compared to the control group, children who participated in STSA activities, at post-test, increased the percentage of narrative discourse, (here defined as a discourse that can be understood without the help of contextual support), and provided more synonyms. This study nicely shows that child-initiated narrative activities occurring in a context of peer-to-peer interaction have a positive effect on children's more frequent use of decontextualized discourse and more sophisticated vocabulary skills.

Finally, in Chapter 13, *Veneziano and Plumet* attest the usefulness of a short conversational intervention (SCI) to promote children's narrative skills. The SCI solicited children's thinking and talk about the causes of the events depicted in a wordless five-image story of a misunderstanding between two characters. The chapter relates results obtained with typically-developing 4- to 10-year-old children showing that, from 6 years of age onwards, the narratives children tell after the SCI on the basis of the same pictures, contain significantly more causal and mind-oriented content, even though the psychological states of the characters, including their beliefs and their different points of view on the same events, were not specifically focused upon in the SCI. Similar results were obtained in the new study presented here with children with high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFA). After the SCI, these children likewise produced narratives that contained more explanations and attributed more internal states to the characters, although these references occurred to a lesser degree than in typically-developing controls. It is possible that the SCI, though useful also with children with HFA, may not be sufficiently focused on psychological states to lead these children to express as much as TD children, mind-oriented content, known to be more difficult to handle for them.

Concluding remarks and some future perspectives

The chapters in this volume contribute new data about two main issues: the implication of narrative abilities in the development of literacy, language and socio-cognitive skills, and the role of specific experiences and intervention procedures in the development and promotion of narrative skills. By considering the first issue, the chapters address questions such as which specific aspects of narrative skills are involved in the development of reading comprehension, in the acquisition of new words or in the promotion of children's understanding of the emotions, intentions and mental states of others. They have considered whether narrative experiences are specifically related to these skills or whether the relation is more multidimensional, involving a set of other language abilities as well. They have also considered whether shared bookreading may be sufficient, or whether conversation encouraging causal and mind-oriented thinking constitutes an additional crucial experience for children's socio-cognitive understanding and the expression of causal links. Another interesting issue the chapters have addressed is whether experience with stories that contain specific features such as, for example, emotional themes, have a stronger impact than neutral stories on both language and theory of mind understanding.

For the second issue, the chapters address questions related to the experiences and procedures that are most propitious to the later development of children's narrative abilities. They highlight the importance of early shared bookreading in a context of conversation focused on causality links and on the psychological states of the characters, and suggest that, among the early experiences likely to promote children's later narrative abilities, everyday talk about entities and events that are spatially and temporally removed from the situation of enunciation (decontextualized talk) may make a valuable contribution as well. The chapters also consider and provide examples of specific intervention procedures that have already been implemented in educational contexts or have potential implications for pedagogical and clinical settings.

They also point to directions that should be taken more into account in future research. One of these directions is to give further consideration to inter-individual variation. Many studies mainly report results on group data and overall differences between pre- and post-test, and/or experimental and control conditions, paying less attention to the specificities of individual subjects. An interesting approach is provided in this volume by Nelson and Khan who argue that a good intervention should take into account the different developmental levels children have on each of the complex set of skills that are required to be a 'good' or expert narrator. And children differ not only with respect to these profiles but also in other endogenous variables, such as attentional and motivational levels, individual ways of reasoning and seeing the world, as well as in executive function abilities such as cognitive flexibility and inhibition. They also differ in exogenous variables, such as social and cultural contexts, interactional and narrative experiences, or exposure to different kinds of language models in terms of quality and diversity. Taking into account this variation may help, for example, to understand why experiences and interventions are effective with some children but not, or very weakly, with others.

Yet another direction that might be further pursued in the study of the two main issues addressed in this volume, is the comparison of subjects speaking different languages. Does language influence the relations highlighted between narrative experiences and reading comprehension, vocabulary or socio-cognitive understanding? And language differences should also be taken into account in devising intervention procedures, as knowledge of different lexical and grammatical structures should require specifically targeted interventions.

Another interesting line of research that needs to be pursued further is the impact of peer-to-peer interaction on the promotion of children's narrative abilities and other skills. What kinds of narrative abilities can be fostered in peer-to-peer interactions (evaluative content, language skills for decontextualized talk, …), and how does their impact compare to that obtained in adult-child interactions? Such a comparison would provide very useful insights for the implementation of intervention programs in educational settings, particularly in preschools and in the first grades of elementary schools.

Another more general issue in need of further thought and study is to understand at what level narrative experiences and intervention procedures work for the child. Do they lead children to acquire new knowledge such as socio-cognitive understanding, the capacity to express causality links or to take into account and express the psychological states of the characters of their narratives? Or are the interventions or the conversational exchanges part of a developmental dynamics to which also children's endogenous cognitive progress participates leading children to gradually better understand the experiences in which they participate? Single-session interventions are particularly interesting for a better grasp of this issue. It seems quite unlikely that a short conversation, even if well targeted and child-centered, will create new cognitive structures. The improvements these conversational procedures obtain seem more likely related to the better use of knowledge already at the child's disposal, but possibly not yet well established and/or difficult to access and to coherently integrate at the same time. Interventions may help children to focus on aspects they had not noticed previously or, discussing elements of the story with others, may help children to access, pull together and integrate into an overall coherent story the different pieces of knowledge required in telling a 'good' narrative. Left to their own resources only, children may underperform because of cognitive limitations on working memory, on the number of operations that can be processed at the same time or on the yet limited overall cognitive organization (e.g., Case & Okamoto, 1996). With the help of well targeted interventions, in one session or in sessions repeated over time, many children can make progress along these lines. One way to better understand this issue is to compare children's comprehension and production of stories, and to compare what children can produce within a conversational exchange to what they produce when telling a personally constructed narrative monologically (Veneziano, in press).

This field of research has made many important steps forward and more are expected to follow. With the extension of the domain of research and the introduction of new methodologies we can expect to ever better understand the underpinnings of the important results that have already emerged and to be better equipped to face the challenges inherent to the educational, social and clinical contexts of action.

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