CHAPTER 12

Using a storytelling/story-acting practice to promote narrative and other decontextualized language skills in disadvantaged children

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This study examined whether a peer-oriented practice of child-initiated storytelling and group story-acting, integrated as a regular component of the preschool curriculum, can serve as a powerful context for promoting the development of narrative skills and a broader range of decontextualized language skills in young children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. This storytelling and story-acting practice (STSA) was introduced into one Head Start class of 3- to 5-year-olds for an entire school year, with a similar class in the same Head Start center serving as a control group. Results indicated that participation in the STSA significantly promoted the development of both narrative and productive vocabulary skills. These findings help corroborate the claim that young children's narrative skills form part of an interconnected cluster of decontextualized oral language skills whose early mastery is a key foundation of emergent literacy. They also highlight the need for researchers to recognize that the social contexts promoting children's learning and development are not exclusively restricted to adult-child interactions.

Keywords: narrative, storytelling, story-acting, decontextualized language, peer group, preschoolers

Introduction

The study discussed here examined whether an activity combining voluntary storytelling with group story-acting, integrated as a regular component of the preschool curriculum, can help promote narrative and other oral-language skills in young children from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. Three orienting factors helped to define the distinctive orientation and agenda of this study.

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First, it was informed by a body of theoretical and empirical scholarship which has argued that young children's narrative skills are part of an interconnected cluster of decontextualized oral-language skills, and that children's early mastery of these decontextualized language skills serves as a crucial foundation for their acquisition of literacy and their long-term success in formal education. Thus, it assessed the development of two types of decontextualized language skills, narrative competence and productive vocabulary.

Second, whereas most research on narrative interventions has focused on various types of adult-child interaction, this study examined a structured practice of peer-initiated and peer-oriented storytelling and story-acting which is guided and facilitated by adults, but in which adult-child interaction does not play a central role. Thus, it sought to go beyond an exclusive focus on adult-child (or expert-novice) interaction to address the potential complementary role of peer-group activities and peer collaboration as contexts for promoting children's learning and development.

Third, whereas most research on this storytelling and story-acting practice (STSA) has been carried out in preschool or early-elementary classrooms with predominantly middle-class children, this study examined the potential value of the STSA for children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. The participants were 3- to 5-year-old children attending Head Start.[1]

Narrative development, reading comprehension, and school success

I will begin by outlining the research background and theoretical rationale for the study. It is generally accepted that the early and effective acquisition of literacy by young children is critical to their long-term learning and success in formal education (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, as a number of scholars have made clear (including Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001), training children in the kinds of technical skills related most obviously and directly to literacy – such as print awareness, letter recognition, and phonological processing – is not sufficient, by itself, to prepare them to be successful readers and writers. It is also necessary for children to master a broader range of linguistic and cognitive skills, and these become increasingly important as the child moves from simple decoding to reading for meaning and comprehension (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001).

1. Head Start is a federally funded preschool program in the U.S. serving children from poor families.

In this connection, during the past several decades a growing body of research has argued convincingly that the development of narrative competence by children in their preschool years serves as a crucial foundation for their acquisition of literacy and long-term success in formal education. The most influential work in this area has been that of Catherine Snow and her associates (for some key formulations and overviews, see Snow, 1983, 1993; Snow & Dickinson, 1990, 1991) and of Gordon Wells (1985, 1986), but the main thrust of their arguments on this subject has been supported by a wide range of other scholarship (including Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010; for a useful review, see Sénéchal & Lever, 2015). While the full array of early language skills may help prepare children for literacy and schooling (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005), this research has pointed to *narrative* skills as being among the most significant in this regard. Studies have found that the strength of early oral narrative skills is a significant predictor of later reading abilities during the elementary school years (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Griffin et al., 2004; Reese et al., 2010; Wells, 1985, 1986). For example, Dickinson and Tabors (2001) found that narrative production by low-income kindergarteners (roughly 5 years of age) predicted reading comprehension in grades 4 and 7 (9- and 12-year-olds). Similarly, Griffin et al. (2004) found that the length and quality of middle-class 5-year-olds' oral play narratives with structured materials predicted their reading abilities as 8-year-olds in Grade 3. Reese et al. (2010) found that the quality of middle-class 7-year-olds' narrative recall, after listening to a story told by the experimenter with the aid of pictures, predicted their reading fluency concurrently at Grade 2 and later at Grade 3.

Decontextualized language skills in narrative discourse and emergent literacy

The reasons for this link between early narrative development and reading remain a subject of ongoing research and considerable debate. Broadly speaking, however, the argument advanced by the scholars just cited and others (with some differences of terminology and emphasis) is that the cognitive and language skills required and promoted by young children's narrative activity form part of an interconnected cluster of *decontextualized* oral language skills that play a critical role in facilitating children's achievement of literacy and their overall school success.

Language use is "decontextualized," in the technical sense used in this research, to the extent that it involves explicitly constructing, conveying, and comprehending information in ways that are not embedded in the supportive framework of conversational interaction and do not rely on implicit shared background knowledge and

non-verbal cues. Information is conveyed in ways that can, in principle, allow it to be understood by more unfamiliar, impersonal, or generalized audiences, even when it deals with subjects removed from the immediate setting of the communication (Snow & Dickinson, 1991, pp. 185–186; for one recent formulation, Demir, Rowe, Heller, Goldin-Meadow, & Levine, 2015). Decontextualized discourse thus raises greater demands than "contextualized" discourse for semantic clarity, planning, and linguistic self-monitoring. Examples of decontextualized language use include various forms of coherent extended discourse such as narratives, explanations, and other monologues, as well as metalinguistic operations such as giving formal definitions, monitoring the grammatical correctness of speech, and so on (Snow, 1983, 1993). Although this range of examples may appear rather heterogeneous, there is evidence to support the claim that the cognitive/linguistic skills underlying these activities are, in fact, highly interrelated and form a mutually supportive cluster. For example, children's degrees of success on different decontextualized language tasks tend to be strongly intercorrelated, while the correlations between their success on contextualized and decontextualized tasks are weak (Davidson, Kline, & Snow, 1986; Dickinson & Snow, 1987).

Furthermore, there is evidence supporting the claim that "skill at the decontextualized uses of language predict[s] literacy and school achievement better than skill at other challenging tasks that are not specifically decontextualized" (Snow & Dickinson, 1991, p. 185) and that "all decontextualized language tasks relate increasingly to reading skills with age" (Snow, Cancino, Gonzalez, & Shriberg, 1989, p. 238). Thus, early proficiency in decontextualized language skills constitutes a basic foundation for emergent literacy and educational success whose results become increasingly apparent as the child progresses through elementary school.

The significance of "self-contextualizing" narrative discourse

For preschool children, stories – especially fictional stories – are an especially important mode of decontextualized discourse in that they pose the challenge of explicitly building up a scenario or picture of the world using only words. To put it another way, free-standing stories are *self-contextualizing* (Wells, 1985, p. 253) to a considerably greater extent than other forms of discourse that young children typically experience and construct. Therefore, the experience of narratives – both hearing and telling them – helps bring home to children "the symbolic potential of language: its power to create possible and imaginary worlds through words" (Wells, 1986, p. 156; cf. Bruner, 1986). In the process, narrative discourse can be especially effective in helping the child prepare to grasp "the disembedded and sustained characteristics" of written texts and "the more disembedded uses of spoken language that the school curriculum demands" (Wells, 1986, pp. 250, 253).

Furthermore, unlike many other forms of decontextualized language use, narrative is an important and engaging activity for children from an early age. Young children do not often spontaneously generate formal definitions and are rarely very successful in achieving grammatical precision. But even very young children can begin to construct both fictional narratives and narratives of personal experience, and can become enthusiastically involved in listening to stories and telling their own.

This analysis has important practical implications, since there is considerable evidence that when children enter school the narrative skills of middle-class children tend to be stronger than those of children from poor and minority backgrounds (Dickinson & Snow, 1987). It is worth noting that systematic social-class differences have not been established for early conversational skills, as opposed to specifically narrative skills (Snow, 1983; Feagans & Haskins, 1986; Wells, 1985, 1986). But there are strong indications that social class differences in early narrative skills – and in decontextualized language skills more generally – favor middle-class over low-income children, and mainstream over minority children, with respect to long-term school success (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Peterson, 1994; Wells, 1985, 1986).

Promoting narrative development: Adult-child interaction and the untapped potential of peer-group practices

Considerable research effort has therefore been devoted to delineating the kinds of social contexts and practices that best promote the early development of relevant narrative skills. So far, however, with relatively few exceptions, this research has focused predominantly on modes of dyadic adult-child interaction, parent-child and teacher-child (McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Pesco & Gagné, 2015). Even when interaction between children has been studied in connection with socialization or education, peer relations have usually been conceptually assimilated to the one-way expert-novice model, with the older sibling or other peer taking on the "expert" role (for elaboration, see Nicolopoulou, 2002).

These kinds of interactions between unequals obviously play a very important role in children's development, education, and socialization. However, this one-sided picture of the "social context" of development must be expanded to take systematic account of the complementary role of children's peer relations and group life (Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997, 2002; Nicolopoulou, Cates, de Sá, & Ilgaz, 2014). In this respect, the role of peers is not limited to one-way transmission, facilitation, or "scaffolding," but also includes modes of genuine peer *collaboration*. Furthermore, such collaboration is not restricted to dyadic (or even multi-party)

interaction between individuals; children, like adults, also create, maintain, and participate in *fields of shared activity* that provide resources, motivations, and affordances for development, including narrative development (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993). There is strong evidence that various forms of peer-group activity, when carefully and appropriately integrated into educational practices, can contribute to young children's development and education in ways that usefully complement the role of more direct adult-child interactions (Rogoff, 1998).

Storytelling and story-acting in the preschool curriculum: A peer-oriented narrative practice as a matrix for development

Various practices that emphasize adult-child interaction, including interactive bookreading (Pesco & Gagné, 2015), have been shown to promote early narrative abilities in valuable ways. But it is essential for early childhood education to complement practices focused on adult-child interaction with more child-centered, peer-oriented, and playful approaches (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 2014; Nicolopoulou, Cortina, Ilgaz, Cates, & de Sá, 2015). One activity that exemplifies such an approach is the STSA pioneered by the teacher and writer Vivian Paley (1990).

This Paley-initiated STSA, sometimes also described as story dictation and dramatization, has been used, with variations, in classrooms across the U.S. and abroad (Cooper, 2005; Cremin, Flewitt, Mardell, & Swann, 2017; Nicolopoulou, 1997). Although this practice is conducted with variations in different places, its main outlines tend to be consistent. Children are given the opportunity to compose stories and dictate them to their teachers, as a regular part of their self-chosen free play activities, and then to act them out later with their friends during a group-time activity that involves the entire class.

This is an apparently simple activity with complex and powerful effects. Several features of the STSA are especially worth noting. Although this is a structured and teacher-facilitated activity, the children's storytelling is voluntary, typically self-initiated, and relatively spontaneous. Their stories are neither solicited directly by adults nor channeled by suggested topics or story props. Because this practice runs the entire school year and the children control their own participation in storytelling, it provides them with multiple opportunities to work over, refine, and elaborate their narratives and use them for their own purposes–cognitive, symbolic, and social-relational.

Furthermore, the way that this practice combines story*telling* and story-*acting* has several important implications. Children typically enjoy storytelling for its

own sake, but the prospect of having their story acted out, together with other children whom they choose, offers them a powerful additional motivation to compose and dictate stories. And perhaps most critically, one result of having their stories read to and dramatized for the entire class at group time is that children tell their stories, not only to adults, but primarily to each other; they do so, not in one-to-one interaction, but in the shared public setting of the classroom peer culture. Children are therefore given opportunities to borrow elements from each other's stories and rework them, facilitating narrative cross-fertilization. When this practice is established as a regular part of the classroom activities, all children typically participate over time in three interrelated roles: (1) composing and dictating stories; (2) taking part in the group enactment of stories (their own and those of other children); and (3) listening to and watching the performance of the stories of other children. Thus, the children's storytelling and story-acting are embedded in the ongoing context of the classroom miniculture and the children's everyday group life. (For further elaboration, see Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 2014.)

Including low-income children

Examinations and analyses of this STSA in action, beginning with Paley's own insightful and illuminating ethnographic accounts of her classrooms over the years (e.g., 1986, 1990), provide evidence that it promotes children's narrative and emergent literacy skills as well as other cognitive and language abilities (Cooper, 2005; Cremin et al., 2017; Nicolopoulou, 1996). These examinations have mostly been conducted in preschool classrooms with children from predominantly middle-class children (exceptions include McNamee, 2015 and some of my own work, most recently Nicolopoulou, 2017; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). One reason is that those preschools are more likely to employ the sort of play-oriented, child-centered curriculum with which this practice dovetails easily. But there are good reasons to believe that practices of this type, if properly conducted, could be even more valuable for children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds than for middle-class children.

The study: Evaluating the storytelling/story-acting practice in a head start classroom

For the analysis reported here, I use data collected in my first effort to study the STSA in a preschool class of children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. The teacher of this class was planning to introduce this STSA into her classroom and invited me to help introduce it and assess its operation and

effects; I was able to use another preschool class in the same center for comparison. Some features of this study still make it especially well-suited to illustrate the potential value and effectiveness of the STSA for promoting the narrative skills of disadvantaged preschoolers. (For another analysis based on this study, with a somewhat different focus from the one presented here, see Nicolopoulou, 2017. These two analyses are complementary, and some formulations here draw on that discussion.)

The children in this class began the school year with exceptionally weak language skills in general and narrative skills in particular, even by comparison with children in other preschool programs with low-income children that I have studied over the years. By comparison with children in middle-class preschools I have studied, these children faced the task of building up many of their basic narrative skills from scratch. This case therefore offers an opportunity to examine the operation and potential benefits of the STSA in especially challenging circumstances.

Participants

The participants were 26 3- to 5-year-olds attending two preschool classes, the intervention class and a control class, for the entire 1997–1998 school year. Both classes were part of the same Head Start center serving children from low-income backgrounds in a small semi-rural New England town. Each class began and ended the school year with 17 students, but the sample used for the analyses included only children present for the entire year. Three full-year children in the intervention class were excluded for various reasons: one child suffered from microcephalia and had minimal language skills; one was Spanish monolingual; and one was mistrustful of adults in general and refused to be tested. The sample used for analysis consisted of: 11 children from the intervention class (5 girls, $M = 4–2$, and 6 boys, $M = 4–4$; ages calculated at the beginning of the school year) and 15 children from the control class (7 girls, $M = 4–5$ and 8 boys, $M = 4–4$).

All the children in both classes came from poor families that qualified for Head Start, a federally funded program, by having annual household incomes of less than $13,000; with just a few exceptions, reported annual household income ranged from $5,000 and $7,000. Almost all the children's home environments also showed some degree of family difficulty or instability. More than 2/3 of the children lived with mothers who were divorced, separated, or single; and even those children who came from two-parent households experienced various family difficulties as reported to us by the teachers. Regarding ethnic and racial background, 79% of the children in the sample were non-Hispanic white (a category that made up 97% of the community as a whole), born and raised in the US. In the intervention class, 36% of the children in the sample were white Hispanic

(one or both parents were immigrants from the Caribbean), but all of them spoke English as their dominant language; in the control class, only one child was from Hispanic background. There were no non-Hispanic African-American children in either class.

Research design

Intervention and control classrooms were selected non-randomly. The intervention teacher volunteered to incorporate the STSA into her classroom for the entire school year. To ensure that the control group was as similar as possible, we asked the teacher of the classroom housed in the same building to let it serve as the control class.

Both classes were conducted by a head teacher and a teacher's aide, met 4 half-days a week, used the same curriculum, and were supervised by the same Education Coordinator. Both head teachers were of similar age (late 20s), had similar qualifications from teacher education programs at prestigious institutions, and displayed great enthusiasm for teaching. One difference was that the head teacher in the control class was somewhat more experienced. She had been teaching for three years in this Head Start program, while the head teacher of the intervention class was in her first full-time teaching position (having served as teacher's aide for the previous two years in a different Head Start program). This difference was not great; but, if anything, it could be expected to give a slight advantage to the control class in terms of the development of the oral language skills under consideration.

Procedure

The study was designed as a pre- and post-test, quasi-experimental intervention in combination with monthly videotaped and ethnographic observations. It consisted of three phases: pre-test, intervention, and post-test. At each assessment time, we measured children's narrative and productive vocabulary skills, as described below. Testing was conducted by a trained graduate student, from an institution different from the author's, who was not familiar with the goals of the research project. The pre-tests were administered in September, after we obtained informed consent from the parents of all the children in both classrooms for their children to participate in the study.

Intervention phase: The storytelling and story-acting practice

After pre-testing was completed, the STSA was introduced in the intervention classroom in early October and remained in operation throughout the school year until early May. Prior to this introduction, the teacher was trained in how to

conduct the activity and provided with a booklet containing detailed guidance. (A research assistant and the author provided further input and training during our monthly visits to the classrooms.) The teacher was encouraged to use the activity as often as possible, but at least twice per week. The control classroom continued its usual curriculum.

The storytelling part of the practice took place during "choice time," when children were free to participate in different activities available to them. After the children had settled down into choice-time activities, the head teacher made herself available to take children's stories. The number of stories she took down ranged from 2–3 up to 4–5 stories per session. If there were several more children who wanted to tell a story, a waiting list was established so that the waiting children could go on with other activities. The storytelling events were voluntary and largely self-initiated; no child was required to compose a story, though some of the more reticent ones were occasionally encouraged to do so. Children were allowed to tell any kind of story they wished. In practice, the great majority were fictional stories. The teacher usually wrote each story down with minimal intervention, repeating the child's words as she was writing them down. During the first few months, however, the teacher sometimes found it necessary to scaffold some children's storytelling because of their limited language and narrative skills.

The story-acting portion of the practice took place during "group time," with the entire class assembled. All the stories dictated during that day were acted out in the order dictated. The teacher read each story aloud, after which the child/author first chose which character he or she wanted to play and then picked other children to act out other roles. After all the characters were selected, the teacher read the story aloud once again. As she was reading it, the child-actors acted out the story, while the rest of the children watched attentively. This process was repeated until all the stories dictated during that day were acted out.

Additional data collection and fidelity of implementation

The teacher wrote the stories down in a single "storybook" as the child dictated the story, indicating who the author was, when the story was told, and which children acted what roles in the story performance. The storybook thus provided a record of how often the activity was used and how many children participated in it either as tellers or actors. It was given to us at the end of the year for analysis. (All the parents had signed consent forms to make the stories of their children available to us.)

The author and research assistants visited both classrooms for two consecutive days once a month (from September through June). During our visits we remained in the intervention classroom for most of the day, observing the STSA as well as other classroom activities, and we wrote detailed field notes. We also visited the control classroom and observed the ongoing classroom activities and children's

engagements in them. These observations helped to ensure that the classrooms engaged in similar activities except for the intervention and to assess how well the intervention was conducted. After our observations each time, we discussed with the intervention teacher how well she was following the activity and gave her advice and suggestions for implementing it effectively.

Pre-test and post-test assessments

Pre-testing took place at the beginning of the school year (September), before the intervention began, and post-testing towards the end of the school year (May), after the intervention was completed. The tasks were administered individually to each child, in a random order, a few days apart, in a small quiet room adjacent to the classroom.

Expressive vocabulary test (EVT). This test (Williams, 1997) was selected because it focuses on vocabulary production rather than comprehension and also tests children's understanding and use of synonyms, making it especially well-suited to tap some elements of children's decontextualized language skills. In the first part of the test, the child is presented with pictures of familiar objects and asked to name the depicted object (e.g., "What is this?", or "What is this called?"). In the more advanced portion of the test, administered to children who have demonstrated a certain level of competence (usually achieved by age 4), the tester provides an appropriate word that identifies the object in the picture, and asks the child to give another word that means the same thing (i.e., a synonym). The synonym portion of the EVT was administered to most children in both the intervention and control classrooms in the fall, and to all the children in the spring.

Figurine-based narrative task (FBNT). To measure children's narrative skills, we devised a narrative task that elicited two stories from each child using suggested themes accompanied by Fisher-Price figurines. My previous research had indicated that two of the most popular themes around which young children organize their spontaneous stories are depictions of (a) family life and (b) powerful animals, and that these themes are gender-related, with girls favoring the first and boys the second (Nicolopoulou, 1997). To ensure that the task would engage both boys and girls equally, each session included two story-formats, beginning with the theme characteristically favored by children of that gender and then moving on to the next one.

To encourage the child to tell a story, the tester provided the beginning of a story as a prompt, while presenting and naming the illustrative figurines, and then invited the child to continue the story. For the *family story*, the tester began, "Once upon a time there was a mommy, a daddy, a brother, a sister, and a baby." As she named each of these characters, she lined up the corresponding figurines

in front of the child. Then she added, "Can you continue this story?" or "Can you tell me what happened?" The same procedure was followed for the *animal story*, for which the tester began, "Once upon a time there was a bear, an elephant, a tiger, a dinosaur, and a crocodile." In both formats, the tester encouraged the child to continue as long as the child's responses remained generally focused on the figurines or on the suggested story themes. Each story-elicitation was brought to a close when the child said that the story was finished, indicated an unwillingness to continue, or seemed to have lost interest in continuing with the task. Children's responses were audio-recorded.

Conceptualizing and coding the FBNT. Children responded enthusiastically to the FBNT, often at some length, but their responses did not always take the form of a single continuous narrative. Instead, they typically generated a range of discourse types, which might include narrative constructions but also simple descriptions, play interactions among the figurines, and conversational interactions with the tester.

Each response to each of the two story-elicitation themes was transcribed verbatim and divided into three types of discourse units: *narrative, pretense*, and *other non-narrative.* "Narrative" and "pretense" discourse units presented fictional scenarios through symbolic means; what distinguished them was the extent to which they constituted decontextualized discourse, in the sense explained earlier. A *narrative* discourse unit built up a complete scenario, or a portion of one, using words – a scenario that a listener could, in principle, understand without seeing the gestures of the child or physical manipulations of the figurines. Even if a child used figurine manipulations, noises, motions, and imitations as special effects to accompany or *illustrate* the story, the discourse unit was classified as "narrative" if the scenario being conveyed would still be comprehensible without these non-verbal elements.

A *pretense* scenario was verbally incomplete in this sense. The child used the figurines and other non-verbal elements to demonstrate (not merely illustrate) the actions, events, or characters being described. A significant number of elements were left implicit in the verbal account and needed to be filled in by observing the child's gestures and physical manipulations. (For example, the child might say something like "Then they do this" or "This one goes here" – communications that were incomplete without including the non-verbal elements.) Referents essential to establishing the context or action of the story were conveyed through actions and physical props, not words. In short, during "pretense" episodes the child was primarily showing, not telling, the story. *Other non-narrative* was a residual category that included a heterogeneous range of utterances that did not form part of a sustained effort to build up a symbolic fictional scenario: conversational

interactions irrelevant to the task, non-symbolic comments about the figurines, simple counting or description, and so on.

Each time the child shifted from one of these discourse types to another, the shift was marked as the beginning of a new discourse unit. The total number of discourse units comprising the child's response for each story-elicitation response served as the denominator to calculate the proportion for the three types of discourse units occurring in each response. Because two stories were elicited per child for fall and spring, analyses were based on mean proportions.

Results

Intervention class: Operation of the storytelling and story-acting practice

As indicated, the STSA was introduced into the intervention class in October and remained in operation throughout the school year. The activity took place an average of 2 days per week (59 days out of 120 for the school year). The 11 children in the sample generated a total of 151 stories.[2]

Overall, the children found this activity highly engaging. As soon as it was initiated, most of them were immediately eager to tell stories and all were eager to participate in acting them out. Within a short time, almost all the children were participating enthusiastically in both components of this activity, and their enthusiasm remained undiminished throughout the school year. During a storytelling session, there were always several children gathered around the story table, waiting their turn fairly patiently while other children dictated. Almost all the children who were in this class from the beginning of the year participated in telling stories, and most told between 9 and 21 stories each during the year. Furthermore, all the children acted in other children's stories, and all acted in more stories than they told (the typical pattern I have observed in classrooms using the STSA). When characters were being chosen, many children vigorously expressed their desire to be picked, even waving their hands and shouting "me, me!" to request desired roles.

Intervention and control classes: Comparative measures

The overall hypotheses informing this study were that participation in the STSA should improve the children's narrative skills and also, directly and indirectly, contribute to the improvement of a wider range of decontextualized language skills

2. Nicolopoulou (2017) provides an analysis of these stories and their patterns of development and narrative cross-fertilization during the school year.

– specifically, in this case, productive vocabulary skills that included generating synonyms. The results confirmed our expectations.

Promoting narrative development: Figurine-based narrative task (FBNT)
A 3-way repeated measures ANOVA with discourse types (narrative, pretense, other non-narrative) and semester (fall, spring) as the within factors and class (intervention, control) as the between factor was performed on these scores. The results showed a clear contrast between the developmental trajectories of the two classes over the course of the school year (see Table 1). In the intervention class, children's responses moved significantly in the direction of greater narrativity between fall and spring, whereas the responses of the children in the control class did not.

Table 1. Mean Proportions (and standard deviations) of discourse types for figurine-based narrative task

	Pre-test (September)			**Post-test (May)**			
	Narrative	**Pretense**	**Other**	**Narrative**	**Pretense**	**Other**	
Intervention	5	27	69	34	34	33	N vs. N**
	(14)	(24)	(30)	(28)	(17)	(18)	O vs. O***
Control	9	31	60	16	42	43	N vs. N *ns*
	(24)	(28)	(33)	(18)	(16)	(23)	O vs. O *ns*

** $p < .01$,
*** $p < .001$

In the intervention class, the mean proportion of "narrative" discourse units increased from 5% to 34%, and this difference was statistically significant, $F(1,69) = 10.73$, $p = .002$. The proportion of "other non-narrative" units decreased correspondingly, from 69% to 33% ($F(1,69) = 16.29$, $p = .0002$), with a slight (and non-significant) increase in the proportion of "pretense" units. In the control class, by contrast, the proportion of "narrative" units increased only slightly (from 9% to 16%), and the change was not statistically significant, $F(1,69) = .62$, $p = .43$; the decrease in the proportion of "other non-narrative" units was somewhat greater (from 60% to 43%), and almost reached statistical significance, $F(1,69) = 3.64$, $p = .06$; and there was a non-significant increase in the proportion of "pretense" units. In short, the children in the control class, unlike those in the intervention class, showed no significant improvement in the narrativity of their responses.

Building decontextualized language skills: Expressive vocabulary test (EVT)
The results were striking and statistically significant (see Figure 1). In September, the mean age-standardized scores for the control class were significantly higher

than for the intervention class (intervention M = 92.5, control M = 96.26). But over the course of the year the performance of the children in the intervention class increased sharply, and that of the children in the control class did not, so that in May the relative positions of the two classes had actually reversed themselves (intervention M = 95.33, control M= 92.94). Because the mean scores of the two groups differed during the pre-test, the data were analyzed using one-way ANCOVA with the EVT fall scores as a covariate. This analysis confirmed that the productive vocabulary skills of the children in the intervention class improved significantly more over the course of the year than those of the children in the control class. $F(1,22) = 6.77$, $p = .02$.

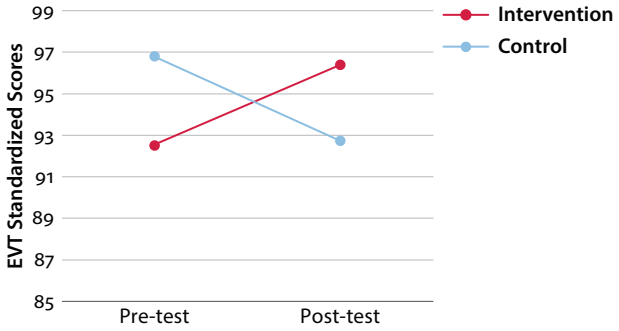

Figure 1. Mean EVT pre-test and post-test age-standardized scores for intervention and control groups

Discussion, conclusions, and implications

The results of this intervention study add to existing evidence that a storytelling and story-acting practice of the type pioneered by teacher and writer Vivian Paley, integrated as a regular component of the preschool curriculum, can be educationally and developmentally valuable for young children from poor and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, they suggest that participation in this STSA promotes the development of narrative skills and other decontextualized oral-language skills that are important foundations for emergent literacy. The scores of the children in the intervention class on both the Figure-Based Narrative Task (FBNT) and the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT) increased significantly more between the beginning and end of the school year than those of the children in the control class. These findings also support the claim that young children's narrative skills form part of an interconnected cluster of decontextualized oral language skills whose early mastery has been identified as a key foundation of emergent literacy

Results from a small-scale study using only one intervention class and one control class, however promising, are not necessarily conclusive. But this study deserves attention, not least because it tested the viability and effectiveness of the STSA for children who started with unusually significant handicaps in their narrative and other oral language skills. And further evidence of the value of the STSA for disadvantaged preschoolers comes from other sources as well. These include a more large-scale study I subsequently conducted in a different preschool program serving children from low-income families, comparing 6 intervention with 7 control classes and using a wider range of outcome measures (see Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Results from that study indicated that children's participation in the STSA was associated with significant improvements in their narrative abilities – as well as other oral language, emergent literacy, and social competence skills (though not expressive vocabulary, as measured by the EVT – an intriguing discrepancy which may be worth further exploration).

How should we explain the developmental and educational benefits of the storytelling/story-acting practice?

These very promising results impel us to consider *how* and *why* the STSA can promote young children's narrative development and, plausibly, the development of other decontextualized language skills. Given the structure of the STSA, the kinds of mechanisms usually emphasized in the context of expert-novice interaction, such as scaffolding, expert guidance, or conversational fine-tuning, do not seem to play a key role here. So how should the developmental and educational benefits of children's participation in this practice be explained? Without pretending to offer a complete or definitive answer to that question, I will suggest what has long seemed to me the most fruitful and plausible approach to addressing these issues (for related discussions, from which some formulations that follow are drawn or adapted, see Nicolopoulou, 2002, 2017; Nicolopoulou et al., 2014).

The key starting point, I would argue, is to look beyond interactional reductionism and recognize that the STSA provides the framework for an ongoing, socially structured, and collectively constituted field of shared symbolic activity. Although teachers play a necessary and important role in structuring, facilitating, and sometimes guiding the STSA, the children themselves help to generate and sustain this activity system through their participation in the STSA; and it serves, in turn, as a sociocultural context that shapes their participation and offers them opportunities, resources, and motivations for narrative development. In this respect, several interconnected features of the STSA, some of which were noted earlier, seem especially critical.

One key feature is the public, peer-oriented, and peer-evaluated character of the children's narrative activity. Each child freely composes his or her own stories, but then the stories are presented to the class as a whole, and at one point or another all the children also participate in acting out their own stories and each other's. As a result, this activity engages the children and creates a public arena for narrative communication, appropriation, experimentation, cross-fertilization, and collaboration. With respect to collaboration, I am not referring primarily to forms of direct cooperation such as multi-authored stories. They are not uncommon in some of the middle-class preschools where I have studied the STSA, though it so happens that there were none in the classroom discussed in this chapter. Rather, the key vehicle for collaboration in this context is children's participation in the public arena of the STSA itself. Even in a small class of children from similar backgrounds, different children come with distinctive experiences, knowledge, skills, concerns, and temperamental styles. The STSA allows those individual skills and perspectives to be transformed into shared and publicly available narrative resources, so that each child can benefit from the variety of resources that other children bring with them through processes of narrative cross-fertilization, mutual influence, and variations on shared themes. To borrow a phrase from Paley (1986, p. xv), this public arena offers children an "experimental theater" in which they can reciprocally try out, elaborate, and refine their own narrative efforts while getting the responses of an engaged and emotionally significant peer-group audience.

The public arena of the STSA is itself enmeshed in the sociocultural framework of the children's peer relations and group life, with their emotional importance for children and their significance for children's experience, socialization, and development (Nicolopoulou, 1997, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 2014). In all the preschool classes where I have studied the STSA, the emotional significance of the peer group and peer relations is clearly part of what draws children into this practice and fosters their intense engagement with it. That generates a valuable mutually reinforcing dynamic. Children's participation in the STSA helps to form and sustain a common culture in the classroom (while also facilitating the expression and articulation of differences within this common culture); and, simultaneously, this STSA is shaped, supported, and energized by its embeddedness in that peer-group culture.

The operation of the STSA thus offers the possibility of fruitfully integrating individual spontaneity with peer-group collaboration and mutual support. As children participate in it, they contribute to, draw on, and work with a growing common stock of themes, characters, images, plots, and other cognitive, symbolic, and linguistic resources. But at the same time, individual children can participate in this field of shared activity according to their own pace, rhythm, and inclination. Since the children are given control over what stories to tell, when to tell

them, and who should act in their stories, it provides them with the opportunity to use and elaborate their narratives for their own diverse purposes – cognitive, symbolic, and social-relational.

The STSA also integrates two dimensions of children's narrative activity too often treated in mutual isolation: the discursive exposition of narratives in storytelling and the enactment of these narrative scenarios, which is a central feature of pretend play. As I have argued elsewhere (Nicolopoulou, 2015), we need to recognize the close affinity and interdependence between play and story in children's experience and development, while also recognizing that they involve cognitive and linguistic skills that are partly distinct and complementary. The STSA is able to utilize the interplay between them in a manner that promotes and facilitates narrative development. Composing and dictating their stories poses for the children a challenge and opportunity to engage in exceptionally *decontextualized* uses of language, since they are called on to construct free-standing, self-contextualized narratives that are not embedded in a framework of conversational interaction. On the other hand, my analyses of the STSA have indicated that the public reading and enactment of the children's stories, which in their own way are highly *contextualized* in the children's peer-group life and peer relations, not only help to motivate the children's storytelling, but also serve some important educative functions. In particular, they help bring home to the child in a vivid way what is required for a narrative scenario to be effectively complete, self-contextualizing, and satisfying.

In combination, these features of the STSA help explain why it can serve as a powerful context for promoting narrative development in young children, including those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. For these and other reasons, both research and educational practice should recognize it as a developmental matrix of rich complexity and great potential that can play a valuable role in early childhood education.

Some wider implications

I will close by re-emphasizing some key themes that have run through the discussions in this chapter, and which have implications for both developmental research and educational practice. An extensive and growing body of scholarship has argued convincingly that the mastery of narrative and other decontextualized oral-language skills by children in their early years lays crucial foundations for their acquisition of literacy and long-term success in formal education. It is therefore important to delineate, design, and encourage the kinds of practices and interventions, in classrooms and elsewhere, which can most effectively promote the development of these skills in young children. But doing this successfully, I

have argued, requires broadening and refining the most prevalent conceptions of the social context of development.

In addressing these issues, existing research has focused overwhelmingly on various forms of adult-child interaction, especially parent-child and teacher child. For example, in many of the most valuable and sophisticated studies aimed at identifying the social contexts and interactions that can best promote the early development of decontextualized language skills, a major focus has been on analyzing the ways that the adult both *supports* (scaffolds) and *pushes* the child toward greater achievement. In this regard, researchers have usefully argued for the value of interactions in which the adult questions the child, prods the child to greater clarity or consistency or grammatical precision, and so on.

Research that pursues those kinds of issues is necessary and commendable. And to avoid any possible misunderstanding, let me reiterate that the importance of these kinds of adult-child interactions for children's learning and development is obviously not in question. However, by itself, an exclusive focus on adult-child (or even expert-novice) interactions yields a one-sided and misleading picture of the social context of development. The study discussed in this chapter, in its own small way, helps underline the need for researchers also to examine the complementary role of children's peer relationships and group life in the process of development. The findings of this study, for example, suggest that certain kinds of narrative- and play-based practices like the STSA can provide sociocultural contexts in which children are given both motivations and resources to push *themselves* toward greater mastery of decontextualized language skills, and in which they can (in various indirect as well as direct ways) support *each other* in these efforts. In other words, these findings help demonstrate the untapped potential of peer-group activities to promote development in ways that can *complement* the kinds of adult-child interaction emphasized by most current research.

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