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# **Becoming Literate: The Acquisition of Story Discourse**

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Educators and researchers are focusing their attention on children's knowledge of reading and writing acquired prior to formal instruction. Many research projects have described the parallel between children's acquisition of spoken and written language. As a result of extensive research during the last twenty years, educators' understanding of how children learn to read and write has changed drastically. Marie Clay's work in the field of emergent literacy has been widely reported (e.g., Clay, 1991a, 1991b).

Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1982) made an assessment of preschoolers' knowledge of reading and writing by instructing a randomly-selected group of children to "write everything you can write." After an examination of the children's writing and a determination of the children's past experiences, the researchers concluded that the environment had a significant impact on the children's early writing experiences and the resultant literacy development.

When studying early writing experiences, Read (1971) found that children as young as three and one-half years of age produced invented spellings of words. Additionally, Read discovered that some children continued using these

invented spellings long after they learned conventional forms. In a similar study, Chomsky (1971) examined children's literacy development and concluded that reading and writing are related processes and that writing should precede reading. According to Chomsky (1971), children should play an active role in creating their own spellings for familiar words as they write their stories, and then start reading what they and others have written. As Chomsky states, "And what better way to read for the first time than to try to recognize the very word you have just carefully built up on the table in front of you" (Chomsky, 1971, p. 296). Moreover, she discovered that children were able to produce "writing" before they were capable of processing (reading) what was written. Several case studies support the assumption that reading and writing occur simultaneously, and that both communication processes are developed prior to formal instruction. For instance, Baghban (1984) observed and recorded her daughter's attempts to use writing in social situations, and concluded that her daughter was self-motivated to read and to write. Using observational techniques, Bissex (1979), Cohn (1981), and Cochran-Smith (1984) found that children's writing emerged with the beginning of reading.

The educational research provides ample evidence that children are interacting regularly with written language in their home and school environments. As a result, children learn that reading and writing are functional literacy activities. Similarly, research has shown that reading and writing are not separate processes in children's learning; instead, reading and writing are mutually-supportive literacy acts that develop simultaneously. Conversely, Chomsky (1971) and Baghban (1984) stated that writing should precede reading and that children are quite capable of writing themselves into reading. To determine the impact of social

interaction on story discourse, Dyson (1987, 1988) monitored the development of children's story-telling ability. Dyson found that children's understanding of story elements grows as children collaborate.

The findings of many research studies concerned with children's development of reading and writing skills have prompted educators and researchers to re-examine their position on children's literacy acquisition. More specifically, the educators' concept of "reading readiness" and the selection of methods and materials of instruction are changing as a result of research on children's literacy development. The purpose of the study reported here was to show the kindergarten children's literacy development as indicated by the use of six specific story elements in the children's original stories.

### **Subjects and procedures**

Subject selection was restricted to children who produced oral, dictated, and written stories. From a group of 20 kindergarten children, 16 students – 12 boys and 4 girls – met the criterion and were selected as subjects. The sample of children used in this study was non-random and was intentionally kept small because of the extensive analysis of the children's 48 original stories. The 16 children ranged in age from 5 years 1 month to 6 years, and came from families representing a wide range of educational backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. The children were enrolled in a university laboratory school in a small town.

Time was spent with the children to establish rapport; and as a result, the anxiety that children normally have when interacting with adults was reduced markedly. First, each child was taken, one at a time, to a quiet area in the laboratory school and was asked to tell a story, which was

audiotaped. Several days later, each child was taken to the same area and was asked to dictate a story, which was written by the teacher. Finally, each child was taken to a private conference area and was asked to write a story on a large tablet, and then the child was asked to "read" the story, which was audiotaped. The stories were collected during a five-week period. The audiotaped stories were later transcribed.

The transcriptions of the children's stories were analyzed to identify the use of the following six elements: 1) *Classic story version* — text that is directly related to classical stories and nursery rhymes; 2) *Connected events* — a series of related events in story discourse; 3) *Fantasy experiences* — text involving unrealistic experiences based on fancy and imagination; 4) *Goal directed experiences* — characters who perform goal directed activities; 5) *Personal experiences* — text that involves personal experiences in home and school environments and 6) *Social interactions* —text involving events and people in social settings.

A 2 x 2 chi-square analysis was used in this study to determine the significance of the difference between percentages of story elements by story mode, between percentages of a story element by modes, between three-mode averages, and between six-element averages.

## Results

**Oral stories.** The transcriptions of the children's oral stories were analyzed to determine the presence of the six story elements (see Table 1). The most frequently appearing story elements were "connected events" and "social interactions;" 75% of the children had "connected events" in their oral stories, and 63% had "social interactions." Fifty-six percent of the children told stories that dealt

with “personal experiences,” and 50% of the children told stories that had the element “goal directed experiences.” (See Figure 1 for examples of children’s oral stories.)

**Table 1**  
**Percentages of Story Elements by Mode**

Story Modes

<u>Story Elements</u>	Oral Stories (N=16)	Dictated Stories (N=16)	Written Stories (N=16)	<i>Three-Mode Average</i>	Rank
Classic Story Version	19%	63%	31%	38%	6
Connected Events	75%	69%	75%	73%	1
Fantasy Experiences	38%	50%	44%	44%	5
Goal Directed Experiences	50%	44%	56%	50%	3
Personal Experiences	56%	75%	44%	58%	2
Social Interactions	63%	63%	19%	48%	4
<i>Six-Element Average</i>	50%	61%	45%		

The 2x2 chi-square analysis showed that the percentage for “connected events” was significantly larger than that of “classic story version” ( $\chi(2) = 62.94, p < .001$ ); “fantasy experiences” ( $\chi(2) = 13.32, p < .001$ ); and “personal experiences” ( $\chi(2) = 7.96, p < .01$ ).

## Figure 1

### Examples of Kindergarten Children's Oral Stories

Story A. Oral story mode. Age of child: 5 years 10 months.

Once upon a time in a far away land lived the three bears. First, there was the Papa Bear, the Mama Bear, then the Baby Bear. They went into the forest because their porridge was too hot, and along came a girl with long curly hair, name was Goldilocks. She was hungry so she took a bite of Papa's porridge, but it was too hot. So she took a bite of the Mama's porridge, but it was too cold, took a bite of the Baby's porridge and it was just right. So she ate it all up. Then the three bears came back. Well, the Papa Bear said, "Someone's been eating my porridge," and the Mama Bear said, "Someone's been eating my porridge, too," and the Baby Bear said, "Someone's been eating my porridge, and it's all gone." And Goldilocks said... So the Mama and Papa Bear came and the Baby Bear came and said, "Someone has been sleeping in my bed," said the Papa Bear. "Someone's been sleeping in my bed," said the Mama Bear. "And someone's been sleeping in my bed," said the Baby Bear and... that's who.

Story B. Oral story mode. Age of child: 5 years 3 months.

Teeth are good for you. If you get cavities, don't brush cause, that you know what, if you brush with cavities, they can hurt your teeth. Tooth can get food in it. You could be... sick. That is about all I was thinking about.

Story C. Oral story mode. Age of child: 5 years 10 months.

Well... uh... there is a rabbit and it got cut up into a stew and then it em then it em. Then it was asleep, and they put back together, and it was still dead. And they put some emmm poison on it, and when they did and he still didn't come back alive. But then he pulled a gear cause... he survived. Then he flipped the switch, and it turned everything invisible. Then he said, "Oh, Jesus there is something wrong here, everything is disappearing." Then he ran into everything cause it wasn't really gone. Then he fell asleep and dreamed about a giant, and he got a bar of soap in his dream and put the soap in his mouth and chewed it up. And again... uh... then he got into a refrigerator and ate all the things. Then he went everywhere in the world. Consploid the wor... conspl... consplored the world. Then when he woke up he didn't even know that... then he forgot all about it. And then he was so glad that when scary thing didn't really happen. And then he got a rubber cup and broke it in two. Then he ate all the things in the world. And... and um... and then he drank some poison. Then that's the end.

**Dictated stories.** The dictated stories were analyzed to determine the use of the six elements and the significance of the difference between percentages. The analysis showed that 75% of the children's dictated stories had the story element "personal experiences," and 69% had "connected events." Sixty-three percent of the children's stories were based on "classic story version," and 63% of the dictated stories had "social interactions." The story element "fantasy experiences" was found in 50% of the children's dictated stories, and the story element "goal directed experiences" appeared in 44% of the stories. (See Figure 2 for an example of a child's dictated story.)

### Figure 2

#### Example of Kindergarten Children's Dictated Stories

Story D. Dictated story mode. Age of child: 5 years 9 months.

Once upon a time there was three billy goats. The littlest one's name was Kirk. One day he said "Let's go on the other side of the bridge." The other goats' names were Button and Muffin. Button and Muffin agreed. The next morning they went on the other side of the bridge. Kirk went over it first. But he didn't know there was a Troll under the bridge. The Troll had eyes as big as plates. Kirk said, "Don't eat me. My sister is bigger and fatter." Along came Button. The Troll said, "Who's tramping over my bridge?" "It is I," said Billy Goat. Along came Muffin and hit the Troll with her horns.

The percentage for "personal experiences" was significantly larger than that of "goal directed experiences" ( $\chi^2 = 19.92, p < .001$ ) and "fantasy experiences" ( $\chi^2 = 13.32, p < .001$ ). In contrast, the percentage for "goal directed experiences" was significantly smaller than the percentage for both "social interactions" and "classic story version" ( $\chi^2 = 7.24, p < .001$ ).

**Written stories.** Finally, each child was asked to write a story and then to read the story, which was audiotaped and transcribed. The transcriptions were then analyzed to



detect the use of the six story elements. The most frequently appearing element in the children's written stories was "connected events," which appeared in 75% of the stories (see Table 1). The next most frequently appearing element was "goal directed experiences," with 56% story use. Each of the two story elements, "fantasy experiences" and "personal experiences," was found in 44% of the children's written stories. Also in written stories, the least frequently appearing story element was "social interactions," which appeared 19% of the time. (See Figure 3 for examples of children's written stories.)

### Figure 3

#### Examples of Kindergarten Children's Written Stories

Story E. Written story mode. Age of child: 5 years 10 months.

Ones there was three little pig's and they had home's and they were happy. And the fox was afre the pig's. Then the pig's had foxstew the end." (as written by the child)

Story F. Written story mode. Age of child: 5 years 2 months.

MDHMWMTSKPTMBMSFIDET (as written by the child). As read by child to examiner: "My dad helped me with my tricycle. He pushed me by myself. I did it."

The 2 x 2 chi-square analysis showed that the percentage for "connected events" in written stories was significantly larger than the percentage for "classic story version" ( $\chi(2) = 38.84, p < .001$ ); "personal experiences" and "fantasy experiences" ( $\chi(2) = 19.92, p < .001$ ); "goal directed experiences" ( $\chi(2) = 7.96, p < .01$ ); and "social interactions" ( $\chi(2) = 62.94, p < .001$ ).

#### Other comparisons across modes and elements

The kindergarten children used some story elements more often than others, regardless of the story mode used. Of the six elements, the story element "connected events,"

with a three-mode average of 73%, occurred most often in the children's stories, and this three-mode average was significantly larger than the three-mode average of the following elements: "classic story version" ( $x(2) = 34.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ); "fantasy experiences" ( $x(2) = 17.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ); "goal directed experiences" ( $x(2) = 11.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ); and "social interactions" ( $x(2) = 13.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). "Personal experiences" had the second largest three-mode average, and the average was significantly larger than that of "fantasy experiences" ( $x(2) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and "classic story version" ( $x(2) = 8.00$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Of all the story elements by mode, the two elements with the smallest percentage (19%) were the "classic version" in oral stories and "social interactions" in written stories. Yet "social interactions" was the story element that ranked fourth overall in frequency, whereas "classic story version," which did not have the smallest percentage in dictated or written stories, was the least frequently appearing story element overall, with a three-mode average of only 38%.

Within a single story element and across story modes, the "classical version" story element was produced significantly more often in the dictated story mode. The percentage (63%) for the story element "classical version" was significantly larger than the percentage (19%) for "oral stories" ( $x(2) = 40.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the percentage (31%) for written stories ( $x(2) = 20.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Across story modes, the "personal experiences" story element was produced significantly more often in the dictated story mode than in the oral or the written story mode. The dictated story mode percentage (75%) for "personal experiences" was significantly larger than the "personal experiences" percentage (44%) for the written story mode ( $x(2) = 19.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the percentage (56%) for the oral

story mode ( $\chi(2) = 7.96, p < .01$ ). Across the three modes, the story element "social interactions" appeared significantly more often in oral and dictated stories than in written stories ( $\chi(2) = 40.00, p < .001$ ). In contrast, there was no significant difference in percentages between modes – oral, dictated, or written – for the story elements "connected events," "fantasy experiences," or "goal directed experiences."

The percentage of elements found in the children's stories differed according to story format – oral, dictated, or written. As shown by the six-element average, the children had a larger average percentage of the six story elements in dictated stories (61%) than in oral (50%) or written stories (45%). The percentage for dictated stories was significantly larger than the percentage for written stories ( $\chi(2) = 5.12, p < .025$ ). On the contrary, the percentage for dictated stories did not differ significantly from the percentage for oral stories ( $\chi(2) = 2.42, p > .05$ ).

## Conclusions

The children's dictated story mode had the largest percentage of the six story elements. Perhaps this mode gave the children more freedom, which in turn caused them to produce more story elements. Obviously, the kindergarten teacher who wishes to increase the children's use of the six story elements, as identified in this study, should use dictated stories as a first choice. The next best choice would be oral stories. The last choice would be written stories, which had the smallest percentage of story elements.

When considering the findings of this study, some teachers might avoid using written stories because of the low story-element generation and the obvious difficulty that children have when expressing themselves in writing.

However, even when recognizing the reduction of the six story elements in the written story format, the kindergarten teacher should not neglect this mode. A high-level, dynamic, expressive language activity occurs only when children write their stories. There is another reason for using written stories: this story mode had the largest percentage for two of the story elements – “goal directed experiences” and “connected events.”

One possible explanation for the children’s high level of awareness and use of the six story elements is that these children had many opportunities to participate in functional literacy events. Each day the kindergarten teacher read a story to the children from a fantasy or a predictable book. Also, the children listened to many audiotaped, read-along stories in the school’s listening center, and the children averaged two stories a week in this activity. Moreover, the children had written many stories and had made books from their stories, which they read regularly.

This study found that age, prior knowledge, level of social interaction, and environmental experiences influence the content and organization of the children’s stories. Story length and complexity increased with age. Therefore, in this study, the eight older children, aged 5 years 7 months to 6 years, composed stories that were longer and more complex (see stories A, C, and F in Figure 1) than the stories composed by the eight younger children, aged 5 years 1 month to 5 years 6 months.

As would be expected, the story element “fantasy experiences,” which involves the use of imagination, increased in use and sophistication with age (see story C in Figure 1); this result corroborated the findings of other researchers. For example, Botvin and Sutton-Smith state

“that the complexity of children’s fantasy narratives progressively increases with age” (1977, p. 384). In addition, the children’s stories – oral, dictated, and written – in this study contained plots and characters that ranged from simple to complex.

This study found that some kindergarten children are consciously aware of story beginnings, middles, and endings. Unfortunately, there are other children who do not have a good understanding of stories; therefore, story knowledge varies greatly among children.

### **Instructional implications**

The gaining of knowledge of story discourse is a developmental process and is not a discrete skill that can be taught through formalized basal textbook worksheets, which are often used for this purpose in many elementary schools. As a general rule, children acquire story discourse by engaging in environmental experiences that provide them with many opportunities to hear and to read high quality literature (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Teale, 1984). Some of the children in this study participated in pretend reading and reading reenactments, which are high literacy transactions that are beneficial in helping children acquire story discourse (Sulzby and Teale, 1987). Moreover, the children had experienced repeated readings of their favorite stories. Morrow and Smith (1990) found that repeated readings facilitate comprehension and help to develop story knowledge. Another way children can develop story sense is by the use of pretend reading. Kindergarten teachers can encourage this activity by providing wordless picture books, which should motivate children to create stories.

The findings of the present study give direct support to the belief that learning to read and learning to write are

separable elements in literacy development. Thus, kindergarten teachers must acknowledge and use for instructional purposes what children already know about reading and writing. Of course, the more precocious children would become familiar with many story elements before entering kindergarten. From their encounters with stories, children naturally acquire a rhythm for language patterns; or as Holdaway (1979) states, children develop a "story set." Children gain this knowledge from positive experiences with stories.

Numerous research reports and journal articles concerned with children's literacy growth have recommended instructional techniques for developing story discourse. For example, Brown and Briggs (1987) made these suggestions for teachers: 1) Children must be exposed to various types of literature to broaden their story knowledge. Teachers should allow student self-selection of many stories. 2) Children should be encouraged to write. Unfortunately, many teachers still believe that reading precedes writing. 3) Teachers must realize that children constantly read as they write. The same cognitive process is involved; only the communicative mode is different. 4) Writing must be presented in meaningful and functional situations, such as in writing poems, stories, letters, or notes. 5) Children must be allowed to share their writing with an audience other than the teacher. The meaning should be conveyed to a known audience. 6) Parents and teacher should demonstrate literacy events (reading and writing) in the presence of children (p. 280).

Story-telling experiences in the home and school environments can provide children with an opportunity to acquire knowledge of story discourse in a natural context. Reading to children is a common activity in many homes

and schools, and the activity is associated with accelerated development of children's story understanding because "children expand their knowledge of written language from hearing stories read aloud" (Brown and Briggs, 1986, p. 54). Indeed, observational learning – learning by observing others – can make a significant contribution to children's growth in literacy.

Children should be encouraged to participate in environmental literacy activities because these experiences are indispensable to language development. Also, the desire to communicate and the frequency of communication are influenced by the environment. The contribution of the home environment is crucial to literacy growth. As Jencks et al., state, "Our research suggests, however, that the character of a school's output depends largely in a single input, namely the characteristics of the entering children" (1972, p. 256). Variability among home environments is reflected in differences in children's qualitative and quantitative language acquisition. Regardless of the child's developmental language level, the school must build on the literacy foundation established in the preschool environment.

Although the findings of the present study support the current views on children's language acquisition, further research is needed to assist parents and teachers in designing even better home and school environments for fostering children's literacy development.

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