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3 Narrative performance, peer group culture, and narrative development in a preschool classroom

Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Carolyn Brockmeyer Cates, Aline de Sá and Hande Ilgaz

Introduction

This chapter uses the analysis of a preschool storytelling and story-acting practice to explore some of the ways that peer-oriented symbolic activities and peer group culture can serve as valuable contexts for promoting young children's narrative development. In the process, it suggests the need to rethink, refine, and broaden the conceptions of the "social context" of development now used by most research in language socialization and development.

There is a substantial and growing body of work on the role of social context in language development (Hoff 2006). In practice, most research on this subject has focused on delineating and analyzing various forms of adult-child interaction, usually dyadic, in which an adult caregiver transmits information, provides cultural models, and in other ways instructs, guides, corrects, and "scaffolds" the efforts of the less capable child. By comparison, research on the complementary role of peers in socialization and development has been, as Blum-Kulka and Snow (2004: 292) put it, relatively "peripheral and noncumulative." As the present volume helps to demonstrate, that situation has gradually been changing. But with some notable exceptions, the perspectives informing peer-oriented developmental research often remain limited in important respects. Even when interaction between children is studied, it is usually assimilated to the one-way expert-novice model, with an older sibling or other peer taking on the "expert" role. And both adult-oriented and peeroriented research tend to reduce the social context of development, explicitly or in effect, to interactions between individuals and their direct consequences.

Interactions between unequals obviously play a very important role in children's development, education, and socialization. But an overly narrow focus on the model of expert-novice interaction obscures or neglects other crucial dimensions of social context. The role of peers is not limited to one-way transmission or facilitation, but also includes modes of genuine peer *collaboration* (Rogoff 1998). Furthermore, the contexts and outcomes of such collaboration are not restricted to dyadic (or even multi-party) interaction between individuals. Children, like adults, also create, maintain, and participate in *fields of*

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shared activity that provide resources, motivations, and affordances for development, including narrative development. To borrow a useful formulation from Ochs et al. (1989: 238–239), these constitute *opportunity spaces*, collectively defined and maintained, that enable and promote certain forms of activity and development (for a similar perspective, see Blum-Kulka et al. 2004). This chapter seeks to offer one concrete illustration of such processes.

To avoid any possible misunderstanding, the point is not to minimize the significance of interaction. But socially situated research needs to overcome its prevailing temptation to reduce the social context of development, conceptually and/or methodologically, exclusively to interactions between individuals. The social world of the child includes, for example, not only individual peers but also the peer group and peer culture, whose structure and dynamics have their own emergent properties and effects (emphasized, e.g., by Maccoby 2002). Interactions are themselves embedded in - and simultaneously help to constitute and maintain - various types of sociocultural context that enable and constrain them, and that structure their nature, meaning, and impact. At the most intimate or immediate level, these contexts include families, peer groups, classroom minicultures, and socially structured practices and activity systems for example, the shared symbolic space of the play-world. And those are in turn enmeshed in larger institutional and cultural frameworks ranging from organizations and communities to culturally elaborated images of identity, conceptual tools, and systems of meaning. These sociocultural contexts, both small and large scale, have to be understood as genuinely *collective* realities that, in manifold ways, shape the actions and experiences of those who participate in them. An effective approach to understanding development requires that we pay systematic attention to the ongoing interplay between three dimensions of the human world that are at once analytically distinct and mutually interpenetrating: individual, interactional or relational, and collective. (For some elaboration see Nicolopoulou 1996, 2002; Nicolopoulou and Weintraub 1998.)

A peer-oriented narrative practice as a matrix for development

The research reported here is one offshoot of a long-term project by the first author and associates that has examined the operation and effects of a storytelling/story-acting practice pioneered by the teacher/researcher Vivian Paley (1990) and widely used in preschool and kindergarten classrooms in the United States and abroad (e.g., McNamee 1987; Nicolopoulou 1996, 1997, 2002; Cooper 2009). Although this practice is conducted with variations in different contexts, its main outlines are fairly consistent. At a certain period during each day (usually during "choice time" activities), any child who wishes can dictate a story to a designated teacher or teacher's aide, who writes down the story as the child tells it. These are usually fictional or imaginary stories, rather than

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"factual" accounts of personal experience characteristic of "show and tell" or "sharing time." Later that day, each of these stories is read aloud to the entire class by the teacher, while the child/author and other children, whom he or she chooses, act out the story.

This is an apparently simple activity with complex and powerful effects. Several features are especially worth noting. Although this is a structured and teacher-facilitated activity, the children's storytelling is voluntary, self-initiated, and relatively spontaneous. Their stories are neither solicited directly by adults nor channeled by props, story-stems, or suggested topics. Because this practice runs through the entire school year and the children control their own participation in storytelling, it provides them with the opportunity to work over, refine, and elaborate their narratives and to use them for their own diverse purposes - cognitive, symbolic, expressive, and social-relational. Furthermore, the way that this practice combines storytelling with 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. To a certain degree, this practice also combines two aspects of children's narrative activity which are too often treated in mutual isolation: the discursive exposition of narratives in storytelling and the enactment of narratives in pretend play. And perhaps most important, one result of having the stories read to and dramatized for the entire class at group time is that the children tell their stories not only to adults, but primarily to each other; they do so not in one-to-one interaction, but in a shared public setting. 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.

There is strong evidence that these conditions lead children to produce narratives that are richer, more ambitious, and more illuminating than when they compose them in isolation from their everyday social contexts and in response to agendas shaped directly by adults (Sutton-Smith 1986; Nicolopoulou 1996). And, indeed, previous studies have suggested that preschoolers' participation in this storytelling/story-acting practice can significantly promote the development of narrative and related oral-language skills for children from middleclass (Nicolopoulou 1996) and from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds (Nicolopoulou 2002).

Adults certainly play a significant role in this practice, but their role is more facilitative than directive. Their key contribution is to help establish and

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facilitate a predominantly child-driven and peer-oriented activity that develops its own autonomous dynamics, within which children themselves can take an active role in their own socialization and development. As we have already suggested, it seems clear that the public *performance* of the children's narratives plays a critical role in these processes. It does so in several ways, but above all by helping to generate and maintain a shared public arena for narrative performance, experimentation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization. Even in a small class of children from similar backgrounds, different children come with distinctive experiences, knowledge, skills, concerns, and personal styles. The story-acting component of this practice allows these skills, perspectives, and other elements to be transformed into shared and publicly available narrative resources that each child can try to appropriate and develop, and to which he or she can contribute, in his or her own way. To borrow a telling formulation from Paley (1986: 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 fact that each child is at different times an author, a performer, and part of the audience further enhances the impact and developmental potential of this storytelling/story-acting practice.

Narrative performance, narrative development, and the uses of narrative activity: an introductory overview

This chapter focuses on the dynamics and consequences of this storytelling/ story-acting practice in one preschool classroom during the 2006–07 school year. However, to establish some necessary background we will first outline, very schematically, some findings from previous and ongoing studies of this activity.

Over the past two decades, the first author and associates have studied the use of this storytelling/story-acting practice as a regular part of the curriculum in twenty preschool classrooms differing by geography and social-class composition. Eleven were in preschools in California and Massachusetts serving children from middle-class backgrounds; the other nine were in programs serving children from poor and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds, including two Head Start classes, one in Massachusetts and one in Pennsylvania, and seven classes in a preschool/childcare program in Pennsylvania studied from 2005–07. Collection and analysis of the children's stories was complemented by ethnographic observations of the classroom activities, friendship patterns, and group life of the children involved.

In certain respects, the patterns have been strikingly consistent across all the classrooms studied, though every classroom also has its unique features. In all cases, children became enthusiastically involved in this storytelling/

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story-acting practice and brought considerable energy and creativity to it. As the school year progressed, children's stories became more complex and sophisticated, manifesting significant advances in both narrative competence and cognitive abilities. But along with these broad similarities, it is also worth noting some systematic differences between the predominantly middle-class preschools and those serving low-income and otherwise disadvantaged children - whose backgrounds also included higher degrees of family disorganization and instability. In the latter, children tended to begin the year with weaker oral language skills, including narrative skills (as one would expect from, e.g., Peterson 1994; Hart and Risley 1995; Hoff 2006), and less familiarity with the basic conventions for constructing free-standing, self-contextualizing fictional narratives (for some elaboration, see Nicolopoulou 2002:128-129, 139-141). Thus, by comparison with the middle-class preschoolers, they were much more in the position of building up the basic foundations for their participation in this narrative activity from scratch, rather than simply applying and expanding narrative skills they had already mastered.

In constructing their narratives, the children drew themes, characters, images, plots, and other elements from a wide range of sources including fairy tales, children's books, popular culture (especially via electronic media like TV and computer games), and their own experience; they also drew elements from each other's stories. However, they did not simply imitate other children's stories, nor did they just passively absorb messages from adults and the larger culture. It is clear that, even at this early age, they were able to appropriate these elements *selectively*, and to *use* and rework them for their own purposes. These processes of active and selective appropriation and narrative cross-fertilization became increasingly conspicuous as the children achieved greater mastery of narrative skills. So they took off more rapidly in the middle-class preschool classes, but in the long run they flourished in the low-income preschool classes as well.

This was also true for one striking manifestation of this active and selective appropriation: the emergence of systematic gender differences in the children's storytelling, linked to the formation of two gendered peer group subcultures within the classroom that defined themselves, to a considerable extent, against each other (see Nicolopoulou et al. 1994; Nicolopoulou 1997; Nicolopoulou and Richner 2004; Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001). This was initially an unexpected finding, since all the preschools involved made strong and deliberate efforts to create an egalitarian, non-sexist atmosphere, and one goal in using this storytelling/story-acting practice was to help generate greater cohesion and a common culture within the classroom group. The children did indeed use their narrative activities to help build up a common culture; but they also consistently used them to help build up gendered subcultures within this common culture. Intriguingly enough, this gendered narrative polarization emerged more quickly and sharply in the middle-class than in the low-income preschools. That difference may seem counterintuitive, but at least part of the explanation is probably that middle-class preschoolers usually began the school year with greater mastery of the relevant narrative skills and a greater ability to use them effectively and flexibly for their own purposes. In the long run, however, broadly similar tendencies appear in both types of preschool classes.

The gender-related dimensions of children's storytelling in the low-income preschool classes still require further examination (both Nicolopoulou 2002 and the present chapter make some preliminary efforts along those lines). But these gender differences have emerged strongly and unambiguously in all the middle-class preschool classes we have studied, so we will begin by sketching out some of the patterns there. Although the stories were shared with the entire group every day, analysis has demonstrated that they divided consistently and increasingly along gender lines. They were dominated by two highly distinctive gender-related narrative styles, differing in both form and content, that embodied different approaches to the symbolic management of order and disorder, different underlying images of social relationships and the social world, and different images of the self. The girls' stories, for example, typically portrayed characters (or at least a group of core characters) embedded in networks of stable and harmonious relationships, whose activities were located in specified physical settings. One common genre revolved around the family group (including pets) and its activities, centered topographically on the home. In contrast, the boys' stories were characteristically marked by conflict, movement, and disruption, and often by associative chains of extravagant imagery. One genre often favored by the boys might be termed "heroic-agonistic," since it centered on conflict between individuals or, in some cases, rival teams. While the girls tended to supplement their depictions of family life by drawing on fairy-tale characters such as kings and queens or princes and princesses, boys were especially fond of powerful and frightening characters such as large animals, cartoon action heroes, and so on. Each of these narrative styles can be seen as a generative framework for further development, characterized by different themes and concerns, different narrative possibilities, and different formal problems (for elaboration, see Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001).

Furthermore, this narrative polarization was one aspect of a larger process by which two distinct gendered subcultures were actively built up and maintained by the children themselves. These subcultures were marked by the convergence of gendered styles in the children's narratives, gender differentiation in their group life, and increasingly self-conscious gender identity in the children involved. At the same time, the crystallization of these subcultures within the microcosm of the classroom provided a framework for the further appropriation, enactment, and reproduction of crucial dimensions of personal identity as defined by the larger society, including gender.

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These findings suggest some broad conclusions that go beyond the specific subject of gender. The narrative construction of reality is not a purely individual process but a sociocultural one, whose cognitive significance is inextricably linked to the building up of group life and the formation of both individual and collective identities. Children participate – by way of narrative practices – in the process of their own socialization and development, and they do not do this *only* through the individual appropriation of elements from the larger culture. They also help to construct some of the key sociocultural contexts that shape (and promote) their own socialization and development.

The current study

The study reported here sought to reconstruct and analyze these processes as they unfolded over the course of a school year in a preschool class of lowincome and otherwise disadvantaged children. A key orienting concern was to examine the complex interplay between the emergence and transformations of the classroom peer culture and the development of the children's narrative activity, with careful attention to the mediating role of the storytelling/storyacting practice, especially its story-enactment component. For reasons suggested above, there were grounds to expect that analyzing this interplay in the context of a low-income preschool class not only could help broaden our understanding of the operation, effects, and potential benefits of this storytelling/story-acting practice, but also might bring out some of the most basic developmental dynamics in especially illuminating ways.

Method: participants, data, and procedures

This preschool class was included in a recent project that examined whether this storytelling/story-acting practice could be used effectively as a schoolreadiness program to promote the development of oral language (including narrative), emergent literacy, and social competence. During 2005–07 the storytelling/story-acting practice was introduced for an entire school year into six experimental classrooms in a preschool/childcare program in Pennsylvania; seven classrooms served as controls. This chapter focuses on one of the experimental classrooms during the 2006–07 school year and follows the children's narrative activities and development, as well as the evolving peer group culture in the classroom, over the course of the year.

Participants

The sample consisted of eighteen children who attended this preschool class. In September the class comprised fifteen children, eight girls and seven boys, most of whom were four-year-olds (age range 3;10 to 5;0). If we set 4;4 as a convenient dividing line between younger and older children, two of the girls

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were younger (3;10–4;4) and six older (4;5–5;0), whereas four boys were younger (3:10–4;4) and three older. There was some turnover during the year. Two children, a girl and a boy, left around the middle of the year, at the end of January and February, respectively. They were replaced by three new children, one girl and two boys, who were transferred from a nursery class in the same building when they turned four. Thus, the stories analyzed in this study were generated by the eighteen children who spent all or a significant part of the year in this classroom. (A few other children were officially enrolled at one point or another, but since they were in the classroom for short periods and told almost no stories, they were not included in the analysis.) The children came from low-income and working-class families, and 28% were Head Start eligible (very poor). Most (61%) were European-American, 28% were Hispanic, and 11% African-American; all spoke English as their first or only language. A majority (56%) lived with a single parent, usually their mother.

Procedure

The storytelling/story-acting practice was conducted from the middle of October through the middle of May. During the storytelling phase, usually during morning choice activities, any child who wanted could dictate a story to a designated teacher or to a research assistant who helped take down the stories. This storytaker wrote down the story in a classroom composition book as the child told it with minimal intervention, usually asking only for clarifications that would be critical for the story-acting phase later the same day. In the enactment phase, each story dictated during the day was read aloud to the entire class by the teacher during large-group time, while the child/author and other children acted out the story. The selection of actors was carried out by the child/author immediately after dictating the story. The author first chose a role for himself or herself and then picked other children to be specific characters in the story performance.

The activity took place two days per week, with three or four stories recorded each day. (In the middle-class preschool classes we have studied, this practice took place almost every day. But in those classrooms it was already well established as part of the regular curriculum.) If other children wanted to tell a story when the daily quota was filled, they were placed on a waiting list for the next time. At the end of the year, we collected the storybooks for analysis.

Coding and analysis

The analysis is based on a total of 210 stories generated and collected during the 2006–07 school year, which included stories from all eighteen children in the sample. The stories were analyzed in two stages. First, to conduct a baseline test of whether narrative development occurred over the course of the year, we focused on the fifteen children who began the class in the fall and coded each child's first and last story using five standard measures of narrative development (Table 3.1). Table 3.1 Means or mean percentages (and standard deviations) of narrative dimensions for the first and last stories told by children who attended this class from the beginning of the school year

	First story (N = 15)	Last story $(N = 15)$	F and p values
Length (# of clauses)	7.13 (3.42)	16.60 (5.33)	F(1, 14) = 34.36, p < 0.001
% of clauses in the past tense ^a	55.21% (44.57)	78.33% (27.55)	F(1, 14) = 4.49, p = < .05
Temporal & causal connectivity ^b	1.67 (0.98)	2.60 (1.12)	F(1, 14) = 7.34, p < 0.05
Narrative voice ^c	1st person: 53% (N = 8)	1st person: 6.7% (N = 1) 3rd person: 93.3%	F(1, 14) = 12.25, p < 0.01
	3rd person: 47% (N = 7)	(N = 14) 1.93 (0.26)	
Standard opening	1.47 (0.52) 20% (N = 3) 0.53	73% (N = 11) 1.60	F (1, 14) = 16.00,
& ending ^d	(0.83)	(0.74)	p = 0.001

^a Mean proportions.

^b It is based on a 0–5 system: 0 = none, 1 = conjunctions, 2–3 = temporal only, 4–5 = plus causal per story.

^c These are Means and (Standard Deviations) based on a 3-point system per story: 1 = 1st person, 2 = mixed, 3 = 3rd person.

^d Percentages indicate stories with both standard opening and closing. It is based on a 0-2 system: 0 =none, 1 =any one, 2 =both.

Second, we analyzed the complete set of stories using a systematic interpretive analysis directed by the first author. In addition to basic quantitative measures such as length and number of characters, stories were coded in terms of themes, level of coherence (high, medium, low), story voice (first- or thirdperson), and tone (neutral, scary, or humorous). We also tabulated general and specific elements shared with other stories by the same child and between different children. Two other sources of information were consulted: (a) field notes by two research assistants who visited the classroom twice per week and by the third author, who coordinated the intervention in this classroom, and (b) focused observations of children's classroom interactions (e.g., play and selfregulation) conducted three times per year (October, March, and May).

Results and discussion

Narrative development from children's first to last story

As Table 3.1 indicates, the children's narratives improved significantly over the course of the year on all measures. Children's stories got longer, were told more consistently in the third person and past tense, used more complex temporal and connective language, and included a higher number of conventional openings

and endings. Having established this basic pattern of narrative improvement, we moved to a more detailed examination of the processes through which these and other developments occurred.

Narrative cross-fertilization and narrative development in the context of an evolving classroom peer culture: three phases delineated

This section reconstructs and explores the interplay between the evolving patterns of narrative cross-fertilization in the classroom peer culture and the development of the children's storytelling. Over the course of the school year, this process went through three broad phases. During the initial phase, many of the children were still struggling to master the ability to construct even the simplest kinds of coherent, free-standing fictional narratives. And their participation in the storytelling/story-acting practice generated only a limited amount of mutual sharing and creative appropriation of narrative elements. The main exceptions on both counts, to a certain degree, were among the older girls, most of whom shared a fictional family genre.

During the second and third phases, the children's stories became longer, more complex, and eventually more coherent. However, their developmental trajectories were far from simple, uniform, or unilinear – partly, we would suggest, because the children were pursuing several ultimately complementary but sometimes competing agendas in their narrative activity. At the same time, the children made increasingly active and effective use of the possibilities afforded by the shared public arena of narrative enactment. Analysis of their narratives indicates that the children became increasingly attentive to each other's stories as they listened to them being performed or participated in their enactment, and in constructing their stories they also took increasing account of their peers as an audience and of the broader patterns and dynamics of peer group life in the classroom. Furthermore, the third phase was marked by the emergence of a widely shared fictional genre among the boys in the class, based on Power Rangers cartoons, that served as a generative framework for narrative cross-fertilization, elaboration, and development.

Phase 1. Setting the stage: idiosyncratic first-person narratives and the beginnings of a family genre

During the first month-and-a-half of the storytelling/story-acting practice (from mid-October through November), the children composed and enacted a total of fifty-one stories, including some very rudimentary proto-stories. All the children told at least one story, though some were considerably less active than others. The great majority of stories fell into one of two categories: 39 percent were first-person "factual" accounts of personal experiences and 33 percent were third-person fictional stories organized around the family and its activities. These

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categories shared some features, since most of the first-person stories included family members (overwhelmingly parents) and some stories in the family genre lapsed into the first person and/or included the storyteller either explicitly or in thinly fictionalized form. The other 28 percent were fictional stories of miscellaneous types, including 18 percent based on characters and themes drawn from TV cartoons, video games, and other electronic media sources (e.g., Thomas the Tank Engine, Cars, SpongeBob SquarePants, PowerPuff Girls) and 10 percent that drew on themes from various other sources.

The distribution of stories in the two main genres was linked to age and gender differences. The first-person accounts of personal experiences were almost all composed by younger children (4;4 or younger at the beginning of the school year), specifically by three of the four younger boys and one of the younger girls. These first-person narratives tended to be brief and simple; they were typically a few sentences long and contained few actions. Children often repeated the themes in their stories and rarely borrowed from other children's stories, so one could quickly recognize stories by particular children. For example, one boy liked to talk about the foods his mom made for him, while another described the special outings (which may have been real or wishful) that he took with one or both parents.

My <u>mommy</u> and I went to McDonald's and my <u>daddy</u> picked me up at McDonald's. My mommy and I went to the park and my daddy picked <u>me</u> up at the park and I went home. (Kayleb, October 23, 2006)¹

On the other hand, almost all of the stories in the (largely) third-person explicitly fictional family genre were told by older girls (4;5-5;0), and four of the older girls (4;8-5;0) told stories predominantly in this genre. This pattern is not surprising, since in most preschool classrooms where this activity has been studied the family genre was disproportionately and characteristically a girl's genre - and increasingly so as the children developed greater mastery of narrative skills (e.g., Nicolopoulou 1997, 2002; Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001; for one instructive exception, see Nicolopoulou 2002:147). Children who compose family-genre stories typically attempt to achieve relational completeness in their picture of the family group, making sure to include at least a mother, father, brother, and sister (or, in the fairy-tale versions that were rare but not entirely absent in this particular classroom, a king, queen, prince, and princess), and sometimes a baby as well. Animals may also be integrated into the family group as pets. In this classroom, the family stories during the first phase were not always relationally complete, but they tended in that direction. These stories were longer than the first-person narratives and often included several episodes. Here is an example:

My story is about little girls. Once upon a time there was two little girls walking. They were so cute they had a <u>doggie</u> and a <u>cat</u>. And they had a <u>mommy</u> and a <u>brother</u> and a

sister. And there was a little little boat for the dog. And the dog was riding the boat, and the mommy and <u>dady</u> took a shower with the dog. They were gone for 3 days and they didn't know how to get home because they were lost in the woods. The end. (Tanya, November 8, 2006)

In this phase, the use of this family genre remained largely restricted to the subgroup of older girls (though toward the end of November two boys told stories that included royal families); and even within that subgroup, the sharing of more specific narrative elements was fairly minimal. Each girl's family stories had distinctive features that gave them a recognizable personal flavor – for example, Maxi's stories often included a baby; Tanya's often included a scary or frightening element, as in the example just quoted; and Ruby often inserted herself, her family, and/or her friends into her stories. None of those specific features was picked up, adapted, and elaborated by any of the other girls. And the other categories of stories showed even less evidence of narrative sharing and cross-fertilization. During this initial phase, it would appear, the children's energies were largely tied up in constructing this shared narrative activity, mastering its operation, and familiarizing themselves with its possibilities. During the next phase they began to exploit these potentialities more extensively and creatively.

Phase 2. Playful experimentation, peer group crossfertilization, and the search for narrative coherence

By the end of November this practice had become solidly established in the classroom, and during December and January the children's storytelling entered a transitional phase whose features are not easy to summarize neatly or completely. There was a notable increase in narrative sharing and crossfertilization, along with other indications that the children were listening more attentively to each other's stories and were increasingly willing and able to draw on them effectively. The children's stories were more ambitious, diverse, and eclectic than during the first phase. They became longer, included more characters and episodes, and incorporated a wider variety of themes. Firstperson narratives about real or alleged personal experiences also became less frequent, though one boy persisted with them until mid-March. (For a similar shift from first- to third-person narratives in another low-income preschool class, see Nicolopoulou et al. 2006.) However, the development of the children's storytelling did not proceed in a straightforward, uniform, or unilinear manner. Different aspects of their narratives changed at different rates and in different combinations for different children, with occasional plateaus and reversals for specific characteristics. And in many cases the children's stories actually became less coherent and more fragmented than during the first phase. The overall pattern that marks this second phase is that the children were attempting to include a wider range of elements in their stories and to use their

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storytelling in more flexible and ambitious ways, but were still struggling to integrate these elements successfully into coherent and satisfying narratives.

The complexity and unevenness of these developmental rhythms should not be entirely surprising, but their salience during this phase of the children's storytelling was especially striking. At this point, we can offer only a tentative and preliminary explanation, but our analysis in this and previous studies suggests that this pattern resulted, at least in part, from the interplay of several distinct and sometimes competing agendas being pursued in the children's storytelling. In the long run, these agendas are complementary and can help promote children's narrative development in mutually supportive ways; but in the short run, they may operate in tension, with uneven and centrifugal effects on the developmental trajectories and coherence of the children's narratives, until the children are able to balance and integrate them successfully.

Most generally, children's narrative activity in this storytelling/story-acting practice appears to be shaped and driven, to a considerable extent, by the interplay of two analytically distinct but ultimately interrelated types of motivating concerns (see Nicolopoulou 1996: 383-387). Each of these sets of concerns is influenced by, and at the same time helps to sustain, the sociocultural context of the children's narrative activity. And the different ways that children manage this interplay help generate a range of distinctive trajectories of narrative development. On the one hand, it is clear that children's storytelling is guided, to varying degrees, by what might be termed intrinsically narrative concerns cognitive, symbolic, expressive, and formal - including the mastery of narrative form for its own sake. Certain children seem especially preoccupied with developing a greater control of characters and their interrelations, attaining more coherent plot structure, achieving more powerful or satisfying symbolic effects, and so on. On the other hand, children are also motivated by socialrelational concerns, including various pragmatic functions of their narrative discourse that go beyond those inherent in direct conversational interaction. In the context of this practice, these are linked directly or indirectly to its story-acting portion, which mediates between the storyteller and the evolving classroom peer culture. These social-relational concerns affect the character of stories in a number of ways, two of which are especially worth mentioning.

First, children can use their narratives as vehicles for seeking or expressing friendship, group affiliation, and prestige. This is especially true since the author of a story chooses the other children to help perform it – and children visibly enjoy the feelings of power and influence involved in the selection process. In composing stories, a child may be inclined to include specific characters that his or her friends like to act out, as well as using themes that will appeal to them or that mark the subgroup to which he or she belongs. In addition to encouraging closer attention to the narrative preferences of other children, these concerns may also promote the inclusion of larger numbers of characters in a story. Everything else being equal, multiplying the number of characters allows children to include all their friends, as well as potential friends and playmates who will then owe them a favor in return. And, indeed, between the first and second phases the average number of characters per story increased from about four to about seven. But children often included more characters in a story than they could manage effectively – naming characters, for example, without giving them actions to perform – and some stories even swallowed up all the children in the class, leaving none to serve as the audience. Second, during this phase, the children's storytelling manifested greater awareness of their audience and its responses. This increased attentiveness could motivate children to construct more effective, interesting, and satisfying narratives, but it could also tempt children to include popular themes and other elements before they were fully capable of integrating them in their stories.

Among both the boys and girls, these dynamics were further complicated by an increased tendency for playful, even exuberant, experimentation in their storytelling. Children often spiced up their stories by adding elements that were scary (e.g., monsters, vampires, ghosts, skeletons), humorous, or silly. A number of stories, especially by boys, included powerful or frightening animals (e.g., lions, bears, tigers, crocodiles). Children were also increasingly likely to draw characters and images from cartoons or video games. Animating inanimate objects (e.g., walking socks, singing cars, talking pencils) was one device that often drew laughs from the audience. Here, for example, one of the older girls begins by outlining the basic framework for a family story and then moves on to describe the comical adventures of a walking sock.

There was a <u>baby</u>. And the baby and the <u>mom</u> and the <u>dad</u> and the <u>sister</u> and the <u>brother</u>, and they were pushing the baby to McDonald's. And then I went somewhere else and we went to Chucky Cheese and a lot of houses and then we went to Grandma's house and then we went to Daddy's house and then we went to Mommy's house and then something peeked out of the room. And then a sock came, peeking out of the room and then the sock started to walk. And then the sock went into the brother's room and the sock bit the brother's heiny. And then the sock went into the sister's room and bit the sister's butt. And the sock went into daddy's room and bit Daddy's butt. And the sock went into mommy's room and bit the mommy's butt. (Maxi, December 6, 2006)

This particular story actually hangs together fairly well. But in many cases disparate elements were simply added on to the story without really being integrated, resulting in a string of loosely connected or even disconnected characters and episodes.

For several of the boys, an additional factor was at work. During this phase, as noted earlier, children who had been composing first-person narratives of personal experiences (real or alleged) began to shift away from them toward third-person fictional stories. From a long-term perspective, that could be regarded as an advance. But one ironic side-effect of this shift, in the short

run, was the loss of some formal advantages of the earlier narrative genre. Like the family genre favored by the older girls, the younger children's first-person genre provided an interrelated set of characters that ran through the story, and the brevity and simplicity of their first-person stories made it easier to maintain their continuity and coherence. Now these children faced the challenge of finding and mastering an alternative narrative genre that would allow them to construct third-person fictional stories with more characters, greater complexity, and a wider range of themes. In the meantime, their narrative ambitions often overloaded their narrative abilities, and their stories were often thematically scattered, jumbled, and fragmented.

Phase 3. The emergence of a dominant shared storyline: the Power Rangers genre

The final phase, running from February through the end of the storytelling/story-acting practice in the middle of May, was marked by two notable developments. It commenced with a significant shake-up in the classroom peer group. Ruby, a popular older girl who was also one of the most capable storytellers, left the class at the end of January, and one of the boys left later in February. Three new children, who had just turned four, entered the class together. An older girl, Denise, who had been part of the original class in September and October but then had attended only intermittently for several months, began attending regularly again (along with her younger sister, who was one of the new girls). The new children were integrated into the classroom peer culture over time, but some after-effects of this disruption were apparent through the end of the school year. However, the more striking feature of this phase, beginning around the end of February, was the emergence and consolidation of a shared narrative genre, based on the Power Rangers cartoons, that came to be dominant among the boys and affected the classroom peer culture as a whole.

The new children quickly began to participate in the storytelling/story-acting practice, both as storytellers and as actors, and their participation clearly helped integrate them into the class. On the other hand, their storytelling skills were limited. Unlike the younger children in the fall, they did not go through a period of telling first-person stories about personal experiences, but for some time their efforts to construct fictional stories were rudimentary. Often, in fact, they did little more than list disconnected characters, with minimal or nonexistent descriptions of actions for the characters to perform; instead, they used much of their storytelling time to indicate which children would take which roles in the story enactment. At the beginning, their concerns with the socialrelational aspects of the storytelling/story-acting practice seemed to take priority over the mastery of narrative skills, and it took some time for their narrative efforts to develop beyond these primitive proto-stories.

The other children in the class continued their ongoing process of narrative experimentation and cross-fertilization, and at the end of February a cluster of them began to converge on a shared story paradigm that could serve as a framework for constructing relatively coherent multi-episode stories. This genre centered on the Power Rangers, a team of cartoon characters who were also familiar to the children as toy figurines. The crystallization of this genre involved both continuities and discontinuities with previous tendencies. As mentioned earlier, the children's stories had increasingly drawn characters and other elements from cartoons, and since December this had sometimes included putting one or more Power Rangers into stories with a different focus. But it was not until the end of February that children began to compose stories that used the Power Rangers and their actions, chiefly fighting monsters and other bad guys, as an organizing framework. It is also worth noting that although elements of violence and conflict were present in some stories from the beginning, the boys in this class had not developed a storytelling genre with a heroic-agonistic focus. Now, with the emergence of the Power Rangers genre, they did so.

The initial crystallization and diffusion of the Power Rangers storyline emerged from a process of collaboration, mediated by the storytelling/storyacting practice, between three boys who had been in the class from the beginning of the school year. On February 28, Taylor dictated a proto-story that essentially listed the Wild Force Power Ranger characters without assigning them any actions. Later that day, Theo told a coherent fictional story with a multi-episode plot involving a series of conflicts between Power Rangers and some monsters.

Once upon a time there was a <u>red Power Ranger</u> and then there was a <u>blue Power Ranger</u> and then they killed the <u>monsters</u> and then they were done and then the monsters were dead because the Power Rangers fighted them. And then the Power Rangers changed back into people. There was a <u>yellow Power Ranger</u> too and the yellow Power Ranger was a girl, and then there was the <u>white Power Ranger</u> and they changed back too. And then they eat food, and they went out to see if there were monsters outside and there were. So they changed back into Power Rangers and then the Power Rangers fighted them and then they were done. The end. (Theo, February 28, 2007)

Theo himself did not immediately return to the Power Rangers theme, but during March, the Power Rangers storyline was taken up and re-used, with variations and elaborations, by Taylor and another boy, Tobi. At the beginning of April, Theo told another Power Rangers story, and thereafter all the rest of his stories were in this genre. By April, in fact, this storyline was consolidated as the dominant narrative model among the full-year boys, and in April and May four of the boys told stories exclusively in this genre. Furthermore, this storyline became a shared point of reference even for many stories of other types, including stories by some of the full-year girls and narrative efforts by the new

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children. In February only 13 percent of all stories in the class included some mention of Power Rangers, even in a peripheral or inconsequential manner. This proportion increased to 22 percent in March, 47 percent in April, and 48 percent in May. In short, this story paradigm became the common property of the classroom peer group, and Power Ranger elements became widely diffused in the children's storytelling.

Nevertheless, this genre remained clearly and distinctively a boys' genre, and was recognized as such by the classroom peer culture. Almost all of the fully developed stories in the Power Rangers genre, as distinct from stories that merely mentioned Power Rangers or included Power Rangers themes in other frameworks, were told by full-year boys. The exceptions were three stories that Grace, one of the most ambitious and prolific storytellers in the class, told in April and May. And even then, her Power Rangers stories suggested a lack of full enthusiasm for this genre, or even some ambivalence about it. This story, for example, begins with a nicely compact presentation of a typical Power Rangers scenario, but then veers off into themes more characteristic of the girls' preferred storylines, including family life, babies, and romance.

Once upon a time the Power Rangers fight the monsters. The monsters just dead. There were more monsters and then the Power Rangers said "Power up" and swung back up. And then they just cut the <u>monsters</u>. And they come back out and they looked fat. The Power Rangers had a gingerbread baby and they put him to sleep and gave him a good night kiss and they told him a story and they rocked him to sleep. And the <u>pink Power Ranger</u> said "You're a nice boy" to the <u>red Power Ranger</u>. The green Power Ranger says "You're a nice one" to the pink Ranger. The <u>yellow Power Ranger</u> says "You're a nice one" to the green Power Ranger. The end. (Grace, April 16, 2007)

One feature of the Power Rangers story framework, and the way that the children made use of it in the storytelling/story-acting practice, helped to link it even more firmly to the structures of peer group life in the classroom. The Power Rangers characters are distinguished by color and gender: the red, blue, green, white, and black Power Rangers are identified as boys and the pink, yellow, and purple Power Rangers as girls. In assigning roles for story enactments, different Power Rangers were always matched with actors of the same gender. What was more unusual was that the Power Ranger roles treated as central in the children's stories, red and blue, were consistently reserved for two specific boys, even if another child was telling the story. The red Power Ranger was always acted by Tobi and the blue Power Ranger by Taylor. For example, in the story just quoted, Grace assigned the role of red Power Ranger to Tobi and named herself the pink Power Ranger. The roles of monsters and bad guys were almost always given to younger boys or girls, who tended to be less choosy about which characters they portrayed. Thus, the enactment

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of the Power Ranger stories could be used to symbolically mark, and perhaps help to construct and consolidate, the evolving social boundaries and relational structures within the classroom peer culture. In this respect, it appears that one function of this storytelling/story-acting practice was to do social-relational work in the classroom.

Why did the Power Rangers genre, in particular, take hold so strongly among the boys in this class? Most likely there is no definitive answer to that question, but at least part of the appeal of this story paradigm for the boys was probably that it offered them an effective and readily usable generative framework for their storytelling that allowed them to construct increasingly complex, coherent, and satisfying narratives informed by themes that especially interested and engaged them - including, of course, violent and competitive (that is, agonistic) conflict. In our previous studies of young children's spontaneous storytelling we have often found that when boys begin to move beyond disconnected individual conflicts, they are often drawn to teams or coalitions of cartoon heroes (Power Rangers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Batman and Robin, etc.). These teams or coalitions provide a set of interconnected characters that can run through the story and help give it coherence, but the theme of conflict remains dominant. The possibility of repeated conflicts between good guys and bad guys can also help to structure the plot and maintain temporal coherence across various episodes. At all events, as the Power Rangers genre became consolidated as a shared framework for storytelling and for narrative cross-fertilization, the boys' stories became (on the whole) stronger, more complex, and more sophisticated. The boys also composed stories more frequently than before, and the overall proportion of stories by boys increased.

It may not be surprising that the girls were less eager than the boys to adopt the Power Rangers genre. But why did they fail to develop or maintain an equally strong shared narrative genre of their own? The fact that they did not is especially puzzling given that from October through January their storytelling was generally stronger, more ambitious, and more sophisticated than the boys'. And as early as the first phase the older girls had introduced a family genre that might have served, as it has in other preschool classes, as a powerful generative framework for further narrative collaboration, cross-fertilization, and development. But rather than being further enriched and elaborated, the girls' family genre largely faded away during the third phase, no shared genre emerged to replace it, and – if we overlook the proto-narrative gropings of the new children who entered the class in February – the frequency of storytelling by most of the girls actually tended to decline. At this stage of the analysis, we can only speculate about possible reasons for this outcome. It seems likely that at least part of the explanation is linked to the social

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dynamics of the classroom peer culture. The girls' peer group seems to have been more disrupted than the boys' by the population turnover in February, and thereafter the girls never managed to achieve as much cohesion and solidarity within their subgroup as the boys. This weakened their capacities for narrative sharing and collaboration – which, in turn, made it harder for them to use their narrative activities to help consolidate and strengthen their collective identity and group life.

Conclusions and reflections

The study reported in this chapter, which built on and extended a long-term line of research, explored the operation and effects of a narrative practice combining spontaneous storytelling and group story-acting in a preschool class of children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. By comparison with children in middle-class preschools we have studied, these children began the school year with weaker narrative skills and less familiarity with the conventions and narrative resources for constructing free-standing fictional stories. But over the course of the year, the quality of their stories, as well as their narrative and narrative-related skills, improved significantly. Without recapitulating our analysis of the processes by which this occurred, we will highlight some of the theoretical and practical implications.

This storytelling/story-acting practice, which integrates individual spontaneity with peer group collaboration and mutual support, provides a concrete example of how a peer-oriented narrative practice can serve as an effective matrix for promoting children's narrative development - not through expert-novice interactions between individuals but by serving as a socially structured opportunity space that offers participants both resources and motivations for narrative activity and development. And the public performance of the children's narratives in the story-enactment component of this practice plays a critical role in that process, not least because it helps to generate and maintain a shared public arena for narrative communication, appropriation, experimentation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization. At the same time, it helps to enmesh the storytelling/story-acting practice in the sociocultural fabric of the children's everyday peer relations and group life. On the one hand, this practice 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, reciprocally, this practice is shaped, supported, and energized by its embeddedness in that peer group culture. There is thus a complex ongoing interplay between the evolution of the classroom peer culture and the transformation of the children's storytelling.

In the process, the children become increasingly attentive to each other's stories and influence each other extensively – in ways that are mediated by friendship ties, subgroup formation, gender, and so on. But the potential for fruitful narrative collaboration and cross-fertilization between them is itself a developmental achievement that children need to master. Through their participation in this storytelling/story-acting practice, the children are helping to constitute and enrich this field of shared activity as a context for their own socialization and development and, at the same time, are building up the skills and orientations that enable them to benefit most fully and effectively from their participation.

This chapter argues against a one-sided focus on the role of adult-child relations and other expert-novice interactions in children's socialization and development, but of course it would also be foolishly one-sided to overlook their importance. Even with respect to predominantly peer-oriented activities like this storytelling/story-acting practice, adults can make important contributions - not only through their direct role in facilitating the practice itself, but also by helping provide resources and foundations for the children's narrative activity in various indirect ways. For example, one notable feature of the children's stories in this classroom was that they became increasingly infused, not only with characters and other specific elements drawn from cartoons, but with a more general cartoon sensibility - emphasizing strings of disconnected actions and startling images, often humorous or destructive, at the expense of continuity and coherent plot development. What was rare, by contrast with corresponding middle-class preschool classrooms, was the presence of characters, plotlines, and other influences drawn from children's books. This conspicuous absence was probably linked to the fact that low-income children usually enter preschool with dramatically less experience of bookreading by parents and other caregivers than middle-class children (Nicolopoulou 2002: 140). And although there was some bookreading in this classroom, it was too infrequent to overcome this gap effectively. There are good reasons to expect that if children are provided with extensive background experience of interactive bookreading, to supplement the elements of popular culture they get from electronic media, that could significantly strengthen and enrich their narrative activity in this storytelling/story-acting practice and enhance its benefits for those involved.

This study adds further support to an accumulating body of research which argues that children's peer interactions and peer group activities can contribute to their socialization and development in ways that usefully complement – without displacing – the role of adult–child interactions. Both narrative research and educational practice should recognize the significance of peer group life as a developmental matrix of prime importance, rich complexity, and great potential.

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NOTES

1 Pseudonyms have been assigned to the children. Characters acted in the stories are marked by underlining.

Children's Peer Talk

Learning from Each Other

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