

## GENRE, CONTENT, AND ORGANIZATION OF KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN'S ORAL STORY INVENTIONS<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—This pilot investigation focused on the genre, content, and organization used in the oral story inventions of 10 African-American children from a kindergarten class in an urban school system in the southeastern United States. After four days of instruction in storytelling through the use of fairy tales, the researcher asked each child to make up a story and tell it. The 10 children's stories were tape-recorded and transcribed. Content analysis indicated the children told fantasy stories based on familiar themes, with a parent often playing a role. The organization of the stories was a disjointed collection of juxtaposed sentences. Questions are raised as to the developmental, individual, and cultural variables which contributed to these results.

Before Western civilization had books, the oral tradition served the role of passing on information from one generation to the next. People would listen to stories and tell them to their children. Storytelling was the primary way people passed on traditions and culture. Today, the oral tradition is often viewed as a less salient form of communication (Magee & Sutton-Smith, 1983). In classrooms, writing activities occur more often than storytelling which is not viewed as taking effort or promoting development (Sutton-Smith, 1985); however, children who are engaged in oral storytelling can inform a teacher about their development. Further, storytelling can foster cognitive and affective development, particularly in young children.

Few studies have been conducted on children's invented stories (Aldridge, Eddowes, Ewing, & Kuby, 1994). There have been many examinations of written retellings of stories (Boydston, 1992; Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Morrow, 1986); however, few works have examined the oral stories invented by children. A child's made-up story can provide valuable insight into that child's cognitive, affective, and creative development (Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Markham, 1983; Sutton-Smith, 1985).

This study investigated stories that kindergarten children composed after being told the Grimm (1993) version of selected tales. The Grimm versions were chosen because the literature suggests that they are the closest to the oral tradition (Zipes, 1988).

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### METHOD

This study was designed to assess the genre, content, and organization of kindergarten children's oral story inventions. A semistructured interview was used for data collection. Kindergarten children were asked to make up a story and tell it to the researcher.

#### *Sample*

A sample of 10 African-American subjects (six girls and four boys) were taken from a kindergarten class in an urban elementary school from a lower level socioeconomic area in the southeastern United States. This sampling was convenient as children were chosen from the school where the researcher was completing a year-long doctoral internship in early childhood.

All children in the class participated in a 45-min. lesson using fairy tales each day for four days; however, only those children who had parental permission for this study and also wanted to participate were asked to tell a story to the researcher. After four days of instruction, these 10 children were asked individually to make up a story and tell it orally to the researcher. The stories were tape-recorded and later transcribed. A content analysis of the transcripts as described by Carney (1972) was performed.

#### *Procedure*

The method was adapted from Allan and Bertoia (1992) and Boydston (1992). Allan and Bertoia developed a day-by-day procedure to initiate a discussion of fairy tales, but with seventh grade students. Boydston (1992) used a similar format with second graders. Boydston's outline was adapted and used here.

Some stories that Allan and Bertoia (1992) used in their study with adolescents were found uninteresting to children in kindergarten. They were too long to hold the attention of students and too complex for the children to follow. Allan and Bertoia selected their stories to suit their audience and stated that any fairy tale could be used. Therefore, fairy tales for this study were specifically selected to appeal to children in kindergarten. To ensure the children did not lose interest, the stories selected were not too long nor difficult.

The five days of storytelling and discussion were broken down as follows:

*Day 1:* The researcher introduced the topic to the class and read aloud the fairy tale *The Frog King* (Grimm Brothers, 1993) to the entire class. Parts (introduction, ups and downs, climax, ending) of the fairy tale were discussed.

*Day 2:* The researcher read *The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces* (Grimm Brothers, 1993). The researchers discussed characters, the problems they had, and how they solved their problems. The children were asked to

discuss their favorite character in the story and to tell why they liked that character.

*Day 3:* The researcher read *Hansel and Gretel* (Grimm Brothers, 1993) to the entire class. The class then discussed the characters, setting, problem, and goal of *Hansel and Gretel*. Then, as a group the children made up a story with the aid of the researcher. The class then discussed the characters in the story they invented and told how they were similar or different to the characters in the two previous fairy tales read aloud to the class.

*Day 4:* The researcher read *Little Red Cap* (Grimm Brothers, 1993). The entire class discussed the introduction, ups and downs, climax, and ending of *Little Red Cap*. The researcher told the 10 children who had received parental permission they would be asked individually the next day to make up a story and tell it to directly (one-on-one) to the researcher.

*Day 5:* Each child was taken to a quiet area in the school where the researcher had set up a table with a tape recorder. Each was asked if he was willing to participate. Only those children who had parental permission and who agreed themselves to participate continued. A total of 10 out of 18 children in the classroom completed the pilot investigation.

#### *Analysis*

Analysis was generated from transcripts of the audiotapes. Since the purpose of this study was to examine the genre, content, and organization of kindergarten children's oral story inventions, these three areas served as major coding categories. These categories were preassigned. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), it is acceptable to preassign coding systems when researchers explore specific aspects of the topic. In this study genre, content, and organization were the particular areas investigated.

*Genre* for this study referred to the type of story a child tells. There could be any number of classifications of genre; however, for this research, the following three classifications were used: (a) *personal narrative*, which is a story based on real life events of the storyteller; (b) *realistic fiction*, which is a story that is fictional but in which nothing physically impossible happens; and (c) *fantasy*, which is a story that contains physically impossible actions, magic, or character types such as dragons or talking wolves. *Content* was the introduction, the plot, the characters, action, and ending of the story. Finally, the type of story *organization* referred to how children organize their stories. Children organize stories in one of five ways. (1) *Disjointed* is a story in which sentences are not related to a purposeful whole. Each sentence is a story of its own. The story is a collection of add-on sentences. (2) *Phrase disjointed* is a story in which the sentences combine to make phrases that stand on their own. The story is a collection of add-on phrases. (3) *Sidetracked* identifies a story that has a beginning and a coherent end but

the storyteller gets sidetracked in the middle. (4) *Short whole* is a story that moves smoothly from beginning to end, with no sidetracks; however, the stories are very short. (5) *Whole* is a story which has an identifiable beginning, middle, and end.

Analysis was completed by the researcher and an independent rater, selected because she had experience in content analysis and had performed qualitative studies on fairy tales and children's storytelling in the past. Each rater independently read the transcripts and noted themes related to genre, content, and organization using the above definitions. Both raters discussed the method for analysis before beginning and participated in two practice sessions of reading and analyzing children's oral invented stories before analysis began.

During analysis, when a rater identified a passage indicative of a category it was highlighted by a colored marker that related it to other items which belonged to that category. The rater wrote notes in the margin next to this highlighted text to explain why it belonged in a specific category. Then all of the text passages with the same color highlight were collected. After each story was categorized independently by each rater, the raters met to compare their analyses. Disagreement on categorization between the two raters was discussed until consensus was reached. Only those items which were categorized alike by both the researcher and the second rater were included. Agreement between the two raters was 91.7%.

#### RESULTS

##### *Genre*

Of the 10 children, eight told fantasy stories and two told realistic fiction. None told a personal narrative. The eight fantasy stories incorporated magic and characters who performed physical impossibilities. For example, one child told a story of how a father turned his children into bread and cheese. They were later turned back into children by a magic pebble. Another child told a story of a boy who was sucked into a vacuum cleaner. The following is an excerpt from his transcript:

And as soon as he got in the vacuum cleaner, he said, "Where am I?" and he um... umm... then he thinks he saw a lion and then the lion and a tiger came and he got out of the vacuum cleaner... He ride [sic] out of the vacuum cleaner with the motorcycle. Then the lions started chasing him. The lion came from the tree and jumped on the boy.

##### *Content*

Although the content of the children's made-up stories varied from child to child, three common themes emerged from their stories. (1) Children based their stories on other material; (2) parents were prevalent in their stories; and (3) children incorporated their everyday fears and concerns in their stories.

Examples of the children's made up stories based on other material included the children's book *Miss Nelson Is Missing* (Allard & Marshall, 1987). One child told the following which is similar to the book's content.

Once upon a time there was this old school. The teacher said to sit down but they didn't. So they solved their problem by hitting their teacher and said, "She's no teacher!" and the teacher got mad and she solved her problem by making a mess and being mean. And the next day, the teacher was a witch and they said, "Where is my teacher?" and they had to do all their work.

The second common theme in the content of children's stories was that parents were prevalent, being depicted as the heroes, main characters, or side characters in six of the 10 stories. In one story the mother character went into the water to save the child which had been eaten by a shark. In none of the stories were parents depicted as authority figures.

A third theme which emerged from the content was a concern about everyday fears. One child told a story of a stranger who kidnapped and killed a child. (This was considered an everyday fear in this classroom because a child in this class had died.)

#### *Organization*

The type of organization observed in the kindergartners' stories was disjointed as all except one told disjointed stories. Their stories did not have a coherent or ordered beginning, middle, or end, but were a series of juxtaposed sentences. The following is an example from one child's story.

Vampire! Eats people up. When a butterfly was flying a vampire ate it. Then a little girl came and it was her butterfly and the vampire said he was sorry. Then they fell in love. Then she had a new baby. Then the baby grewed [sic] up. Then she went to school. Then the car pool ladies said, "Oh no! I got to pick up my babies, my children."

#### DISCUSSION

The results of this preliminary investigation of 10 African-American kindergarten children cannot be generalized; however, some of the findings were consistent with previous work. In this discussion the similarities of this study with previous writings on young children's discourse are noted.

The fact that children used elements heard from other stories in their made-up stories is consistent with work of Bearse (1992) who found that children incorporated elements they had heard in other stories into their own inventions but were often unaware of the specific story from which their material originated. Similarly, Barton (1986) noted children incorporated ideas from other stories into their own.

As reported here, Bettelheim (1976) remarked on the role and prevalence of parents in children's storytelling. He believed that children's own fairy tales reflected their feelings about members of their family. The way in which kindergarten children portray their parents is indicative of their feelings toward their parents.

All the children in this study except one told a disjointed story. The students did not think about the parts of the story and the whole simultaneously. According to Piaget (1952), this is a cognitive developmental characteristic of this age. Also, Dewey (1959) suggested "the child's life is an integral, a total one. He passes quickly and readily from one topic to another, as from one spot to another, but is not conscious of transition or break" (p. 93). Phillips (1994) pointed out that this is not only a developmental phenomenon but also represents the discourse of many young African-American children who often move from topic to topic. Their oral sharings have no beginning, middle, or end, which Phillips referred to as topic chaining.

Much more research is needed on children's storytelling. Researchers should consider how children's made-up stories change over time as well as identify individual and cultural variations in the discourse and oral inventions of young children.

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