The Developmental Progression of Children's Oral Story Inventions

Eugene Geist and Jerry Aldridge

This study investigated stories that children created after being told the Grimm version of selected tales. These stories were told as an instruction to the children on story structure and to familiarize children with ideas of plot, character, and conflict in stories.. This cross-sectional study considered what differences are evident in the oral fairy tales that children tell at different ages. Stories from children in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade were collected and analyzed.

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were asked. These questions guided the research and eventually became the major coding categories.

1) Is there a developmental difference in the type of story (i.e., personal narrative, fantasy, realistic fiction) children tell when they are asked to invent a fairy tale?

2) Are there developmental differences in the content of children's stories among age groups?

3) Are there developmental differences in how children organize the content of their invented fairy tales?

A qualitative research methodology was used for this study. Children's orally invented stories were tape recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using content analysis of the transcripts.

This study indicates that children's orally told invented fairy tales can be used (a) to promote cognitive development, (b) to assess cognitive development, and (c) to identify emotional conflicts that children are experiencing. This study also indicates that second grade is a good time to promote creativity and imaginations as this was the age in which children were most confident in their imaginative abilities.

Few studies have been conducted on children's oral story inventions (Aldridge, Eddowes, Ewing, & Kuby, 1994). Studies on children's interest in folk and fairytales have not touched on children's invented "fairy tales" and how they can reflect developmental issues. There have been many examinations of written retellings of fairy tales (Boydston, 1994; Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Morrow, 1986). However, few works have examined oral stories invented by children. Invented oral stories can give a valuable insight into a child's cognitive, affective, and creative development (Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Markham, 1983; Sutton-Smith, 1985).

This study investigated stories that children created after being told the Grimm version of selected tales. These stories were told as an instruction to the children on story structure and to familiarize children with ideas of plot, character, and conflict in stories. The Grimm (1993) versions were chosen because the literature suggests that they are the closest to the oral tradition (Zipes, 1988). This cross-sectional study considered what differences are evident in the oral fairy tales that children tell at different ages. Stories from children in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade were collected and analyzed (Geist & Aldridge, 1999).

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Method

A qualitative research methodology was used for this study. Children's orally invented stories were tape recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using content analysis of the transcripts. According to Carney (1972), "content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 25).

A semistructured interview format was used to collect data. The children were asked to make up a fairy tale and tell it to the researcher. The researcher prompted the subject if there was a long pause. The researcher also had the child start over if the child was engaging in a retelling of a story that the researcher recognized. The data were then analyzed using a content analysis.

Participants

Convenience sampling was the method used to select study participants. The classrooms chosen were believed to facilitate the expansion of a developing theory because the sample was homogeneous. All subjects were African American and from low socioeconomic families. The subjects for this study were students in four classrooms at an elementary school in a low socioeconomic area of an urban city in the Southeaster United States. The racial make up of the sample was 100% African American.

Data Collection

Each classroom participated in a 45-minute lesson on fairy tales an story structure each day for 4 days. The lesson consisted of reading and discussing the plots and characters of fairy tales. After the 4 days, the children were asked, individually, to make up a fairy tale and tell it orally. The stories were tape recorded and transcribed. A content analysis of the transcripts was performed as described by Carney (1992).

One kindergarten, one first-grade, one second-grade, and one third-grade classroom, each with approximately 15 students, participated in this study. Each classroom was given an identical session on fairy tales and story structure. This session consisted of reading fairy tales to the students and discussing the aspects of the story. The specific description of the 5 days of storytelling and discussion are found in Geist and Aldridge (1999). These procedures were modified from Allan and Bertoia (1992) by Boydston (1994). Allan and Bertoia developed a procedure to initiate the discussion of fairy tales. This outline was used for seventh graders, however, because this study was interested in students in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, a procedure modified by Boydson (1994), was used for this study. Boydston's outline was developed for second graders but is appropriate for the ages targeted in this study.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was generated from the transcripts of the audiotapes. The research questions served as a guide for conducting the analysis. Each question became a major coding category broken down by age. The results of each age were then compared to each other to build a model of children's invented fairy tales. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated that preassigned coding systems are developed when researchers explore particular topics or aspects of the study.

Inter-rater reliability was conducted on this study by having an educational professional with extensive knowledge of fairy tales and their form, function, and uses independently categorize the data. Another rater was trained in content analysis and was experienced in the content analysis method. This researcher had performed qualitative studies on fairy tales and children's storytelling in the past. The two raters participated in two practice sessions of reading and analyzing children's oral invented stories.

The recordings were transcribed and copied. The independent rater and the researcher received identical copies of the transcripts. Because of the three foreshadowed questions were used as a framework for the categories, the independent rater was given a copy of the foreshadowed questions. Each rater read the transcripts as many times as needed and noted themes related to genre, content, and organization. Each rater then independently compared the common themes from each grade and constructed a model for genre, content, and organization.

Both raters discussed the method for analysis before beginning. When a theme or thread was identified, it was highlighted by a colored marker that identified it with other items that belonged with that thread. The rater wrote notes in the margin next to this highlighted text. Then all of the text passages with the same color highlight were collected by grade. The rater then reread the passages and came up with a phrase or word that best described the common characteristics of those passages. The descriptive phrases were then compared to the phrases for the other grades to determine if a model could be constructed. Often, there was more than one model that was evident in each of the categories.

These themes and models were then compared. The themes and models that were consistent between the two raters were retained and clarified. The themes and models that were not consistent between the two raters were not included. Each story was then categorized independently by each rater into the rough model that had been developed.

Results

Findings from this study suggest a developmental shift in the genre, content, and organization of children's oral invented stories. The genre of the children's stories moved from the fantastical to stories based on personal experiences. Kindergarten children told mostly fantasy stories, first and second graders told mostly realistic fiction, and third graders told mostly personal narratives.

The content of the children's stories showed development in two areas. First, there was development in the basis of their stories. Kindergarten children based their stories on previously heard material, first graders based theirs on familiar surroundings, second graders based their inventions on their imagination, and third graders tended to base their stories on personal experiences.

Second, there was development in how parents were depicted in the stories. Kindergartners, first, and second graders depicted parents as heroes and comforters. Third graders depicted parents as authority figures.

The content of the stories of all the grades contained reflections of the children's fears and concerns from everyday life. Fears about being kidnaped or other stresses, such as performance anxiety and social pressures, were reflected in their stories.

The organization of the stories moved from disjointed sentences to a coherent whole story. States that could be delineated were (a) disjointed, (b) phrase disjointed, (c) short-utilitarian, (d) sidetracked, and (e) coherent whole.

Genre

The development of genre moved from the fantastical notions of kindergartners to the realistic personal narratives of third graders. Kindergartners told fantastical stories of talking umbrellas, flying to Mars, magic,

and evil witches that turned children into food. First and second graders told realistic fiction stories about hunters, kings, queens, and an occasional witch; however, almost all of the actions of the characters were in the realm of possibility.. Third graders tended to tell personal narratives that related directly to their life experiences; they were simply retelling events that happened to them or to someone they knew.

The study suggests the genre was influenced by 3 things. First it was influenced by the classroom context. In the kindergarten classroom, the researcher observed a lot of fantasy literature. Children heard stories daily about talking animals and fantastical actions in the books the teachers read to them. However, as the grades progressed, the researcher observed that the teachers provided more realistic literature and less fantasy. This, in turn, affected the genre of the stories that the children told. Second was the children's developing understanding of the difference between fantasy and reality. As children begin to understand the concept of causality and move into concrete operations, the concept of what is possible and logical versus what is illogical, magical and impossible becomes more delineated. The second and third grade stories reflect this move toward reality based stories. Third, was the base material that children chose. As we have already mentioned, children tended to choose more personal material as they got older until at third grade, they tell personal, true to life personal narratives. Obviously this shift is going to effect the genre of the story that they tell. This will be discussed further in the examination of the content of the children's stories.

Context

There were two developmental themes that could be delineated in the content of the children's stories. The first was the basis that the children used to construct their stories. The second was the role of parents in the children's stories. Third, the content of all the grades contained reflections of children's fears and concerns.

Children in kindergarten based their stories on previously heard material. They did not appear confident in their ability to be successful in making up a story on their own, so they used stories that they had heard or read recently to build their story around. First graders were a little more sure of themselves so they did not need specific stories on which to base their inventions. However, they still needed to base the settings and characteristics on things that were familiar to them. This gave them the framework for their stories. By second grade, the children did not need outside structure on which to build their stories. They could rely on their imagination completely as the basis for their stories. In third grade, the surge of imagination noted in second grade appeared to be gone. Either by discouragement or development, children had given up on imagination as the basis of their stories. These children told personal narratives that used personal experiences as the basis for their inventions. These types of stories required little or no imagination.

A second developmental theme evident in the content of the children's orally invented stories was that at around third grade children began to consider peers, rather than parents, as their primary social contacts. This transition was reflected in their stories. In kindergarten and first grade, children were still primarily dependent on their parents for social and emotional interaction. However, around second grade they began to bond with peers, and the peer group became their primary social group with many third graders.

Before third grade, parents in children's stories were heroes and comforters. It was they who rescued the child from the grasp of the monster. A major shift had occurred in the third graders' stories, when parents were depicted as strict authority figures who were present to judge and punish. Third grade

children's stories showed a common theme of fear of parental reprisals in this sample.

The stories also show a reflection of children's fears and anxieties. Children are surrounded with stress that is often not released. Stories offer children this release. The stories of all the grades contained personal reflections of fears and stresses. Especially prevalent were fears of kidnap and murder. The children in this particular school had experience with a classmate being kidnaped and murdered so it is not surprising that this fear appeared in their stories.

Organization

Three developmental aspects of children's organization of invented stories were determined in this study. These included:

1) There was a clear developmental sequence to the way children organized their stories.
2) Egocentrism decreased through interactions in the social environment.
3) The distinction of the difference between fantasy and reality developed with age.

Even after the children were involved in the 4-day workshop on fairy tales, a developmental pattern still emerged. This suggests that there are aspects to children's understanding of story structure that is developmental and cannot be totally directly taught. The workshop focused on the characters, settings, plot, and organization of fairy tales. The children were instructed that fairy tales have a clear beginning, middle, and end; the beginning contains an introduction of the characters, setting, and problems; the middle of the story discusses how the characters go about solving the problems; and the end of the story contains the resolution. Thus, the children were familiar with the parts of the stories, and still a majority of the children were unable to use the information gen in the workshops to construct a coherent whole story. This suggests that the progression through stages of organization is developmental and not based on training.

There was a cognitive developmental sequence in the organization of children's oral invented stories. So distinct were the differences, a developmental model can be proposed based on the data. The first stage can be characterized by the children's being unable to form a coherent ordered whole story. They told stories that disjointed stories in which individual thoughts were juxtaposed. This is consistent with the findings of Piaget (1958) that children could not order a story into a coherent whole until about the age of 8.

In the second stage, the children could string a series of thoughts together into coherent phrases, however, the phrases of about two or three sentences were juxtaposed against other phrases to which they had little relationship. In the third stage, children told short, utilitarian stories that just included the basics of a story with no elaboration. The children were attempting to keep their stories ordered and coherent and, if there was too much information, they got confused.

The fourth stage showed the result of this confusion. Children got sidetracked because they included more elaboration and lost track of the original story line. Eventually, they got back on track, and ended the story on the same theme with which they started. The final stage was characterized by children telling a coherent, elaborate story from beginning to end without getting sidetracked.

Conclusions and Implications

This study showed that literacy is not totally in the domain of social knowledge. The learning of words, letters, and rules of language must be passed down through the culture; these aspects of literacy cannot be invented by children without help. However, there are aspects of literacy that involve what Piaget deemed logico-math-

ematical knowledge. This study suggests that story structure is, at least partially, logico-mathematical knowledge. The part-whole relationship (Piaget, 1970) plays a part in the structure of children's stories. The children in this study all received direct instruction on story structure, but still a developmental sequence was evident. Children's understanding of story structure is dependent on more than direct instruction.

Story structure is learned through interaction with text and words rather than through direct instruction. Children will invent story structure by telling and writing stories. The reactions from the audience and from their rereading or listening to other students' stories cause disequilibrium, which according to Piaget (1970), leads to development.

This study indicates that children's orally told invented fairy tales can be used (a) to promote cognitive development, (b) to assess cognitive development, and (c) to identify emotional conflicts that children are experiencing. This study also indicates that second grade is a good time to promote creativity and imaginations as this was the age in which children were most confident in their imaginative abilities.

Orally invented stories can be used to promote cognitive development. Each time children tell a story, they must attempt first to order it mentally. This mental activity promotes the construction of knowledge. A developmental sequence to the organization of orally told stories appears evident from the stories children told in this study. To promote the movement through these developmental stages, children must be provided with the opportunity to tell stories to an audience and receive social interaction. Each time the child tells a story, the reaction from the audience causes disequilibrium. If the audience does not understand the story, the child must examine why the audience did not understand it. This type of construction through social interaction was also described by Kamii (2000) in math development. This works just as well for storytelling. The feedback from peers helps the child to overcome the limitations of egocentrism and egocentric thought.

Orally told invented fairy tales can also be used for assessment of children's cognitive abilities. This can give a teacher an idea of the areas in which a child might need work. This study was consistent with Piaget (1952) with regard to developmental sequences through which children must progress. This sequence can be used to assist in screening students who might need assistance.

These stories can be used to identify emotional differences or possible traumas in children's lives. As this study and others have shown (Allan, 1988; Allan & Bertoia, 1992), children include stressful events and emotional problems they are dealing with in their stories. These orally told stories could help screen for physical and sexual abuse, fears and concerns, and emotional problems.

While this study showed promise for identifying developmental changes in children's oral storytelling inventions from kindergarten through third grade, much more research needs to be done. Researchers should also seek to "identify individual and cultural variations in the discourse and oral inventions of young children" (Geist & Aldridge, 1999, p. 822).

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