Children’s personal narratives reflect where they come from, reveal who they are and predict where they are going
CHILDREN’S PERSONAL NARRATIVES REFLECT WHERE THEY COME FROM, REVEAL WHO THEY ARE AND PREDICT WHERE THEY ARE GOING

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Narration is the linguistic meeting ground of culture, cognition and emotion. Children develop the ability to narrate between the ages of two and six years. Parents who talk extensively with their children about past experiences make their children strong storytellers by the age of five, which predicts literacy skill ten years later. Parents differ individually and culturally in the aspects of the past they choose to emphasize with children, resulting in narratives that are structured in a variety of ways, which require numerous analyses to delineate. Traumatic brain injury, specific language impairment and autism compromise narration. Cultural differences should never be mistaken for deficits and vice versa.

In this chapter, I consider narratives that convey real or pretend memories of something that happened, usually told verbally and usually told in the past tense (McCabe, 1991a), often as a sequence of events. The present chapter will summarize my programme of research on the development of personal narration, a programme begun in 1974 and guided by a social interactionist approach to language acquisition.

Children typically develop the ability to narrate past personal experiences sometime around their second birthdays (Nelson, 1989). We have learned much about this ability, its causes and its consequences in the past 40 years. Narration reflects and affects a child’s cultural, linguistic, cognitive and emotional resources. Only when we are well informed about how narrative develops with age, in particular families, various cultures and children with developmental challenges, will we be able to provide the information families and practitioners need to help all children achieve academic success.

Why narrative?

Scholars have identified many precursors to literacy, especially phonological awareness and letter-level skills (Scarborough, 2001), but have largely neglected narration. However, recent
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Research increasingly demonstrates the importance of narration to literacy acquisition and to other life skills. Children’s ability to narrate at the beginning of kindergarten predicts their first-grade reading comprehension, vocabulary, global language and narrative ability (Dickinson and Kaiser, in progress). The ability of children to produce a narrative at the end of preschool also predicts fourth, seventh and tenth grade reading comprehension (Snow et al., 2007). Moreover, children’s narrative conversations with parents predict their future social problem-solving skills (Leyva et al., 2012); in particular, parental resolution of negative experiences predicts better problem-solving skills at the end of pre-kindergarten.

Narrative is the primary means of making sense of our experiences, a key way in which we form intimacy with others, how we report to medical personnel what happened to us and how much pain we are in, and how we testify to officers, lawyers, judges and juries about what we experienced or witnessed and what role we played in such events (McCabe, 1996). To tell a coherent narrative is to have come to terms with what an experience was and meant to one and is the raw material of therapy.

About narrative

There are numerous types of narrative, although the most commonly collected narratives in the field of child development are stories told in response to story stems or wordless picture books, story retellings and personal narratives. One’s choice of narrative genre should be determined by one’s research goals. My own goals as a psychologist have led me to prefer personal narration. First, personal narratives are used in diverse cultures, whereas fictional narratives are not universal (e.g. Janes and Karmani, 2001). Second, I am interested in studying cultural differences in narration, which are obscured in retelling wordless picture books; wordless picture books obviate the narrator’s choice of story and flowers, animals and other aspects of illustrations have meanings that differ by culture (Slobin, 2011). Third, children with developmental challenges perform better on personal narratives than on narrations of wordless picture books (McCabe et al., 2008); even when the length of what such children say in response to picture books exceeds that of personal narratives, it often consists of present-tense picture description rather than genuine past-tense narration of events (Berman, 1995; McCabe et al., 2008).

About narrative analyses

There are many ways of analysing narrative, and each provides a distinct picture. Just as narratives themselves are our way of understanding experience, narrative analyses are our way of understanding narratives (McCabe, 1991b). To fully appreciate the richness and diversity of children’s narratives requires numerous analyses. In this chapter we present analyses in the context of the narratives they illuminate rather than on their own terms. The most illuminating analyses of children’s narratives include: High Point Analysis (Peterson and McCabe, 1983, adapted from Labov and Waletsky, 1967), Stanza analysis (Hymes, 1982), Narrative Assessment Profile (McCabe and Bliss, 2003) and Africanist analysis (Champion et al., 2003, adapted from Okpewho, 1992).

Development of narration

At approximately two years, children begin to narrate past events, often those just past. For example, a 23-month-old boy’s first narrative was, ‘Hug bow-wow. An’ya hug bow-wow.’
This was a reference to playing with his babysitter and her dog. At 30.5 months, that same boy told the following two-event narrative in conversation:

**Mother:** Did you like the puppy?’
**Child:** He taste my knee.
**Mother:** He tasted your knee?
**Child:** Theth. And puppy chase me.

The subsequent development of narration by children aged four through nine has been documented (Peterson and McCabe, 1983). By four years of age, children string more events together, but they jump around chronologically and leave things out, producing leapfrog narratives, as in the following narrative by a 28-month-old boy:

**Child:** Fall down.
**Mother:** What happened?
**Child:** Hurt face. An’ya wipe it like dat (gestures).
**Mother:** What happened then?
**Child:** Uh. Rocks.
**Mother:** No rocks?

The child’s mother never discovers what the rocks were about. Did the child trip over rocks and hurt his face?

By five years of age, children have straightened out event sequencing, though they tend to end their narratives prematurely at the emotional climax, eschewing resolution, as did the following five-year-old boy.

**Child:** Do you know what? Every single tree fell down on our house. Cause there’s a snowstorm. I picked them up with one, with my pinky. All of them with my pinky. Do you believe that?

**Interviewer:** No.
**Child:** I did.

While this narrative began in fact with the snowstorm, it ended in fantastic evaluation. We never know how the fallen trees were actually dispatched.

At six years of age, European North American (ENA) children produce a classic narrative, in High Point Analysis terminology (High Point categories in bold), as did the six-year-old boy below:

**Abstract**
Hi, Sally, I broke my arm.

**Orientation**
Well . . . the day, two days ago, I was climbing the the tree.

**Complicating Actions**
and I . . . Well see, I went towards the LOW branch and . . . I got caught with my baving suit? I dangled my hands down and they got bent.
Evaluated High Point
Because it was like this hard surface under it. Then they bent like in two triangles. But luckily it was my left arm that break . . .

Resolving Action
My mom was in the shower, so I SCREAMED for Jessica, and Jessica goed, told my mom . . . I had to go to the hospital and get . . . It was much more worser than you think because I had to . . . go into the operation room . . . and I had to take anesthesia and I had to fall, fall, fall asleep, and they bended my arm back. And I have my cast on.

Coda
Do you want to sign my cast?

In this classic narrative, the child begins with a headlining abstract, narrates a series of complicating actions that culminate in a highly evaluated climax, proceeds to narrate actions that resolve the issue and returns the narrative to the present conversation in which it was embedded – a classic narrative.

Although the narratives in this chapter so far have been produced by ENA children, the developmental sequence just described is not limited to that group. A similar pattern has been found for low-income Chilean children (Barra and McCabe, 2013), low-income Californians from Spanish-speaking Mexican heritage backgrounds (Guerra, 2008), Chinese (Zhang, 2013) and Taiwanese children from varied socioeconomic backgrounds (Lai, 2013).

Individual differences in narration: family and culture

Once we notice age differences in the quality of narration, individual differences at each age also stand out. That is, some narrators are vastly better than their peers. Parallel and independent efforts to tie such individual differences to differences in parental input previously documented for non-narrative language production began in the 1980s with two groups: (1) Fivush and colleagues and (2) McCabe and Peterson. Fivush and Fromhoff (1988) recorded conversation about the past from ten white, middle-class mothers of 2½-year-olds and discerned that some were talkative and elaborative, whereas others were less talkative and repetitive. McCabe and Peterson (1991) collected recordings from ten white, middle-class Canadian children and parents every month for 18 months beginning when the children were approximately 25–27 months old. Those authors found what they termed a topic-extending style of conversation (similar to the elaborative style), as well as topic-switching, repetitive and confrontational input about the past. McCabe and Peterson (1991) found that more topic extension provided by parents predicted longer child narratives over time. Since the publication of these studies, many additional studies have reported congruent results; reviewing these studies, Fivush et al. (2006) found that elaborative (topic-extending) reminiscing consistently predicts optimal child narration.

Furthermore, what parents focus on in talk about the past differs in ways that predict children’s future focus. For example, parents who focus questions on orientation (setting information about where and when something occurred) at the expense of plot have children who subsequently do the same in their own narration (Peterson and McCabe, 1992, 1996). Children whose parents ask many questions regarding causation eventually talk more than peers about causality (McCabe and Peterson, 1996). Parents tend to emphasize what was said...
(versus done) in the past with their daughters, and girls end up more likely than boys to report talk (Ely and McCabe, 1993, 1996; Ely et al., 1996; Ely et al., 1995).

As noted, the majority of the work in this section showing how parental input predicts children’s narrative productions involved ENA children. In addition to individual differences in narration within a particular age group in a particular culture, pronounced cultural differences in the ways parents talk to children about the past have been reported. Japanese mothers (Minami and McCabe, 1995), for example, value brief turns by their children and succinct narratives that consist of several similar experiences instead of lengthy accounts of one experience; they do not wish their children to embarrass themselves by telling listeners things that those listeners could be expected to figure out for themselves. Spanish mothers, in contrast to both ENA and Japanese mothers, employ what Melzi (2000) calls a ‘conversation-focused’ rather than a story-focused strategy, a strategy to avoid silences. Latino parents also emphasize the importance of family, including extended family (Cristofaro and Tamis-LeMonda, 2008). Emotion words and, especially for girls, diminutives figure prominently in Latino mother–child narrative conversations (King and Gallagher, 2008).

Chinese immigrant parents more often mention where events were held and the people involved, actions involving others and negative behaviours performed by their children compared to ENA parents during mealtime conversations (Koh and Wang, 2013). Unfortunately, we have little information regarding parent narrative input in many cultures.

**Cultural differences in narration**

As a result of differential parental interest in various aspects of the past, children develop discourse styles valued by their culture of origin, and, in the case of bilingual children, regardless of which language(s) they speak.

Minami and McCabe (1991) employed a stanza analysis based on Hymes (1982) to analyse personal narratives of five- to nine-year-old Japanese children that revealed a pattern in which such children regularly combine two or three similar experiences in one coherent narrative, and each narrative comprises sets of three verses; almost 60 per cent of the stanzas produced by the children showed this pattern of three verses per stanza – a numerical regularity not found to be as pronounced in narratives from other cultures so far. The narratives are quite succinct, in keeping with cultural values to avoid verbosity, which is considered insulting to listeners, a sign of poor manners and stupidity. Note that the stanzas below are groups of sentences more tightly related to each other than to other sentences in the same narrative.

This is an example by an eight-year-old Japanese boy:

1. As for the first shot,
2. (I) got (it) at Ehime.
3. (It) hurt a lot

4. As for the second shot,
5. (I) knew (it) would hurt.
6. (It) didn’t hurt so much.

7. The next one didn’t hurt so much either.
8. As for the last shot, you know.
9. (It) didn’t hurt at all.
Chang and McCabe (2013) analysed personal narratives of Taiwanese children focusing on the evaluative component of High Point Analysis and compared them to those in the Peterson and McCabe (1983) ENA corpus. Whereas 50 per cent of the ENA children’s narrative comments were at least partially evaluative and there was no significant age difference between four and nine years, only 25 per cent of the oldest Taiwanese children’s comments (nine-year-olds) were evaluative and this represented a significant increase from the age of three. Wang (2013) has also demonstrated many ways in which Chinese narrators downplay evaluation in comparison to ENAs. In fact, Wang (2013: 52) speaks of an ‘emotional muteness’ to be found in Chinese autobiography. A key result of such a contrast is that native and overseas Asians, compared with European and ENAs, have later onset of autobiographical memory, remember fewer childhood memories and report fewer specific details about those memories (Wang, 2013). Evaluation evidently functions as a mnemonic device in autobiographical narration (McCabe and Chang, 2013). Consider the following narrative (translated from Taiwanese; evaluation underlined) from a girl, aged six years four months:

**Interviewer:** Yesterday when I cleaned my room, a cockroach crawled up my leg. I was frightened ... Have you ever been frightened by anything?

**Child:** I was frightened (by a cockroach) before too but I forgot. Once when I already was having a bath ... My older saw ... My older saw ... Saw a caterpillar on me.

**Interviewer:** (laughs) Then what?

**Child:** (laughs) When I took a bath last time. Then washed then touched a ... When my older sister saw the caterpillar on me, I did not know I did not know what that was.

**Interviewer:** Then what?

**Child:** And my older sister saw (that). then she was frightened.

**Experimenter:** (laughs) Your sister was frightened.

**Child:** Then my mom took a piece of toilet paper. Then she caught the caterpillar (and) threw (it) away. Then there were a bunch of ants in my house. I was frightened one time.

**Interviewer:** What happened?

**Child:** I was frightened ... there were a bunch of, a bunch of, super many ants in my house ... Then (she) took a that ... A tape ... Then took a tape when (she) took a tape to stick, then (my) mom took my tapes.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Child:** (She took a tape) to stick (the ants) and then (she) took another tape again. Older sister did not help at all because she was drawing.

First of all, there was relatively minimal evaluation in this narrative, and what there was was repetitive (‘frightened’). Also, similar to their Japanese peers, about one-third to half of Taiwanese six- to eight-year-olds narrated at least one story that consisted of a collection of experiences. In contrast, of the 1124 personal narratives in the original Peterson and McCabe (1983) ENA corpus, only 33 (2.93 per cent) were narratives that included mention of more than one experience, whereas 54 of 596 (9.1 per cent) narratives in the Taiwanese corpus related collections of experiences, a significant difference.

Labov and Waletsky (1997/1967) required one sequence of two specific past-tense events in order for any discourse to be called a narrative, a definition I strictly adhered to at first (Peterson and McCabe, 1983). However, when we began studying Latino children’s
narration, we were forced to re-examine this definition. Fully 49 per cent of one sample of Latino narratives (Silva and McCabe, 1996) contained only one event and would not have qualified as worthy of further study. In a sample of Dominican American seven- to eight-year-old children and Costa Rican six- to nine-year-old children approximately 20 per cent of the narratives also consisted of minimal events (Cuneo et al., 2008). Fewer than 10 per cent of the Dominican American and Costa Rican sample narratives were complete episodes in Story Grammar (i.e. goals, plans to meet those goals, consequences) revolving around planning (Stein and Glenn, 1979). In fact, in some samples of Latino narration, a key feature of the narration is a relative de-emphasis on linearity or temporal sequence, especially in comparison to ENAs (Sparks, 2008; Uccelli, 2008). Also, Latino children incorporate their parents’ emphasis on including extended family members in their narratives (Silva and McCabe, 1996). Both an abundance of family members and a lack of linear sequencing (leading to low High Point and Story Grammar structure codes) are obvious in the example below:

Yes, to grandma (to visit in hospital). My mother wanted to take her to the hospital, but grandma didn’t want to go, but we took her. They didn’t do anything to her. And another old lady was there. We looked at her but she was not grandma. The old lady was just talking and talking with my mom and with my sister A. Big sister who lives in Riverside (. . .) And we took her home. But she wanted to go to another house, which was my aunt’s house, but that house was very ugly, and my aunt had too many dogs and the house was dirty. And then we took her . . . to my aunt’s. And now grandma says that my sister and my aunt keep the house clean and that it has a new roof. And today we are going to visit her. At her school.  
(Mexican American girl, seven years)

There is only one event here – so a strict Labovian High point analysis would not classify it as a narrative; modified High Point Analysis would classify it as a minimal, one-event narrative (McCabe and Rollins, 1994): ‘Then we took her to . . . my aunt’s.’ Yet clearly this was an important experience to the child, and she gives many descriptive details that figured in the planning regarding placement of the grandmother (Story Grammar Analysis would classify this as a Descriptive Sequence – the most primitive kind of narrative). The story is all about four members of her family and herself. No regular stanza pattern has been discerned for any Latino group examined so far. But rather than seeing such narratives as lacking desired characteristics, Uccelli (2008: 201) suggests that in much Latino narration ‘temporal organization [is] subordinated to . . . evaluative purposes’. In contrast, other groups of children subordinate evaluation within the limits of linear sequencing.

African American children tell diverse forms of narratives (Champion, 2003), but two kinds predominate: (1) They often produce a classic, topic-centred narrative of the sort ENAs age six years and up produce at their most sophisticated. In fact, African American children produce classic narratives at a higher rate than their ENA peers (Champion et al., 1995). (2) Alternatively, African American children sometimes produce a performative narrative (Champion and McCabe, in press) that consists of multiple related events (like Japanese and Taiwanese children’s narratives). Below is an example of both:

Classic Narrative produced by a ten-year-old African American:

Orientation
No but my little brother, He . . . was real young. I think he was two years old. An’ my mother was drivin’. An’ my uncle was in fron’ seat. An’ me an’ my younger cousin dat
lives in Baltimore – she’s eight years old. Her name is Whitney. An’ my little brother was sittin’ next to us. An’ we was lookin’ aroun’. An’ he started playin’ with da door. An’ the door was unlocked.

Complicating Action
An’ he opened the door an’ fell out the car. An’ he was flippin’ back. An’ he his head was busted open an’ he had to get stitches.

Evaluative High Point
An’ me an my cousin Whitney was sittin’ in the back o’ the car cryin’. Because he fell out the car. My mother kep’ goin.’ An’ he did

Resolving Action
Then my uncle Al said, ‘Rhonda stop the car because he fell out the car.’ An’ she got out the car. An’ she was actin’ crazy. An’ she got out the car. An’ she was actin’ crazy. An’ she got ‘im, like she like OH MY GOD she like MY BABY! And he got a cast around his head, An’ he got stitches an’ we brought him home.

Here is a Performative Narrative (displayed below in stanzas of approximately four lines each) produced by an eight-year-old African American girl called Vivian:

We went to the dentist before and I was g’tting’ my tooth pulled and . . . the dentist said, ‘Oh, it’s not gonna hurt.’ and he was lying to me.

It hurt. It hurted so bad I coulda gone on screamin’ even though I think some. (I don’t know what it was like.) I was, in my mouth like, I was like, ‘Oh that hurt!’

He said no, it wouldn’t hurt . . .

The narrator describes in vivid detail several more dental experiences, concluding:

And so my cousin, he wanted to take out his tooth, and he didn’t know what to do, so I told him. ‘I’m a Pullin’ Teeth Expert.

Pull out your own tooth, but if you need somebody to do it, Call me, and I’ll be over.’

Such performative narratives are more frequently told to audiences of peers than to adults. The narratives of Haitian American children (Champion et al., 2003), like those of Haitian American adults (Champion et al., in press), require yet another analysis, as there is no apparent patterning in stanzas of specific line-length, nor forms adequately described by either Story Grammar or High Point Analysis. The following narrative would be classified as a two-event (minimal) narrative in High Point Analysis (and a primitive descriptive
sequence in Story Grammar (Stein and Glenn, 1979, after Propp, 1968/1928). To depict the strength of such a narrative requires an Africanist analysis derived from the work of Okpewho (1992) in analysing African oral literature. In particular, note the singing and gesturing and poetic use of repetition (rep), parallelism (par: i.e. contrasts within similar grammatical structures) and detailing (det: piling up descriptive detail) in the following narrative told by a seven-year-old Haitian American girl (in English):

And once when I was in this wedding,
I was a flower girl.
And my friend Isadora too was a flower girl. rep, par
And I was wearing this dress.
Can I show the dress? rep
It was a long dress with a ribbon around it.
It was a blue dress.
It was a long dress.
And they stuck something on it.
I think it’s still there.
And it was a pretty dress. rep, par, det
And I was sooo lucky. rep, par, det
Because there was a flower girl with curly hair
—the same thing as me—
at this other wedding.
This flower girl—they wore ugly dresses.
They were green. det
And my friend said it was ugly dress.
And my friend said it was ugly dress. rep, det
Their hair was ugly. rep, det
This girl had, her hair was like this, like that (demonstrates). det
And it was up det
And curled up rep, par, det
And curled. rep, par, det
I was like ewww!
I was glad I wasn’t that flower girl!
Because, and her hair was like, did she wake up in the morning?
And these other flower girls—their hair was different from my hair. rep, par
Cause theirs was curly too,
But it was different. rep, par, det
It was skinny curly. rep, par, det
But I don’t like the dress
And I don’t like their hairs,
But they had this same flower girl from at the wedding.
It wasn’t different. rep, par, det
And the reception: Ghetto superstar.
And I like ‘Ghetto Superstar’ rep
It goes (singing), ‘Ghetto superstar, that is what you are.’ rep
Yeah, Maya sings it. det
Maya and Pras from the Fugees. rep
Can I show you the dress now? rep
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**Differences in narration due to disorders**

Narration is a complex process neurologically, and thus it is affected in different systematic ways by different disorders.

Biddle et al. (1996) interviewed children and adults with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and compared them to age- and ethnicity-matched individuals without such injury. The narratives were analysed using what is now known as the Narrative Assessment Profile (McCabe and Bliss, 2003). Narratives of individuals with TBI were significantly more dysfluent (more false starts, internal corrections, filled and unfilled pauses), more redundant and placed a strikingly greater burden on listeners to make sense of what was told. Note the repetitiousness (e.g. finding the pig, getting lost, thinking they would not make it) and the many key omissions (e.g. what happened to the pig, why they got lost, how they found their way home) in the following narrative by a ENA adult male with TBI, aged 31 years:

(Long pause). About the only really good time I can remember getting lost was in West Virginia. Me and my brother had been walking into the woods one day and we found a pig in the woods. A pig. Pig got out of my uncle’s . . . pig, uh . . . So we found a pig around. And then we found out that we did get lost. So we went walking through the woods for about two hours, until it got really dark. Then we found a house and went back home. But during the time that we were lost, we were really scared cause we didn’t think we were going to make it back. And I got all upset and started crying like a little wimp. And I didn’t think we were goin make it back. But we did. It was a little traumatic for me . . . cause I didn’t think we were going to make it.

Specific Language Impairment (SLI) affects narrative profoundly. ENA eight- to ten-year-old boys with SLI narratives were compared to both an age-matched and a language-matched sample (Miranda et al., 1998). All six dimensions of the Narrative Assessment Profile (McCabe and Bliss, 2003) were impaired in these children. Specifically, Topic Maintenance, Event Sequencing, Explicitness and Referencing were severely impaired, while conjunctive cohesion and fluency were somewhat impaired. The following narrative by an eight-year-old ENA boy with SLI exemplifies these issues:

I had a X-ray because they’re checking on my leg. And I was scared that I was goin’ up there and they gave me a balloon. And I went to, um, Toys-R-Us and gave me a toy. But I never, I, uh, I just broke my leg and I just fall down on my bike because I got hurt and my Band-Aids on me, put their off. And I jumped out of my bike and I . . . I fled and then I jumped down. And I um um our grandma, um she died. She was getting older, our grandma. And she died and the, uh, our grandma. And she died and the, uh funeral, my ma and dad went to the funeral. And the, Aunt Cindy was there too. And we, uh, they, um, uh, everybody was sad that um, a that died and on my birthday I went on my bike . . . And I jum . . . I just jump on my bike and I just balance on my, and I did it with a, I did do it with only my hands . . .

Individuals with High Functioning Autism Spectrum (HFASD) Disorder also show impaired narration. McCabe et al. (2013) interviewed ENA young men with and without HFASD and found that the narratives of men with HFASD were greatly impaired in one of two ways. Many were quite minimal – the sort of narrative produced by two- to
three-year-olds with typical development, such as the following – the longest narrative produced by an ENA man, 19 years old, with HFASD:

**Participant:** I got stung on a trampoline.
**Interviewer:** Oh wow, on your foot
**Participant:** Not on my foot
**Interviewer:** Where was it? (this specific question is a departure from protocol by a graduate student in trying very hard to get the man to talk)
**Participant:** Right here

The other way in which men with HFASD displayed impaired narration was by producing rambling narratives that left things out and jumped around in time – the kind of narrative produced by four-year-olds with typical development:

**Participant:** Ummm, let’s see ahhh, well it started off. I went up to Vermont. I was supposed to go to Vermont like um, on Friday evening. But then my mom decided to go so, we ended up going on Saturday morning. And then we um, well the whole reason we were going to Vermont was so I could go up to one of the Vermont places because I have a couple friends who play airsoft up there.

**Interviewer:** Oh cool.
**Participant:** Yeah. And um, we were gonna meet up because we have a group that does Vietnam reenactments kinda thing.

**Interviewer:** Oh cool.
**Participant:** And so like we do military shows and dress up in like the Vietnam gear and do all the like reenactment kind of thing with the airsoft guns. And the airsoft guns are like little 6mm plastic pellet guns, but not really like a pellet. It is more like a paintball gun, but looks like more realism . . .

The participant talks on and on for half an hour on the same general subject until the tape runs out. Unfortunately, he leaves listeners with no understanding of why he told the story. In both these cases, the men with HFASD showed poor awareness of social cues, avoidance of processing emotional information and general pragmatic problems typical of individuals with ASD. Although High Point analysis was sufficient to distinguish narratives of individuals with HFASD from those with typical development, the various dimensions of Narrative Assessment Profile (McCabe and Bliss, 2003) were also examined; conjunctive cohesion of individuals with HFASD was the key dimension that was significantly impaired.

**Difference versus deficit**

Once we are familiar with cultural differences in narration as well as differences due to individual challenges, we are in a position to discern difference and deficit. Identifying cultural difference as deficits involves falsely assigning labels to children that may in fact become self-fulfilling prophecies of failure, while mistaking individual deficits for cultural differences involves denying children who deserve them services that could be beneficial – neither one an acceptable mistake. For example, Champion and McCabe (in press) present examples of the two kinds of African American children’s narratives – classical and performative – that show impairment.
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Classic narrative with impairment

My daddy. Him, my, our car. And him got it back. Him car got stolen and him got it back. Him got it back. It, it was a hole. When him got it back, there was a hole. When him got it back, there was a hole. Him got it back. He took the speakers in their hole. There was a hole for the speakers. Bigger. It was . . . it was a speaker right here and a speaker right there. And when it got stolen now, him got speakers back. Go through here.

(4;8 African American boy with SLI)

Performative narrative with impairment

When I get some pets, they be, they be using it in our house. Because we be taking them outside and they don’t be move because they don’t need to move. Ain’t no need to use the bathroom though. When they come in there, they use it. We be going outside quickest. We be running outs . . . out the door. We be on the door, and we run out through it.

And our pappy in the back, uh, and she, uh, he use it. He got a big cage for all of them. We got lots of dogs. Once when we have five dogs and none ran away . . .

(4;7 African American boy with SLI)

In the first narrative, we see underlined constructions that are not acceptable in African American English, as well as considerable repetitiousness. In the second, we see an underlined construction also not typical of African American English, along with the general appropriate performative characteristics of talking about multiple experiences pertaining to pets.

While bilingualism may confer benefits and need not result in problems acquiring language (McCabe et al., 2013), some children who are bilingual nonetheless do also suffer language impairment, and narrative is one facet of language that is often impaired. Bilingual eight- to eleven-year-olds, half with SLI, half Typically Developing (TD), produced a personal narrative in both English and Spanish (McCabe and Bliss, 2005). Children classified as TD produced longer narratives in both languages. For both groups, there were also significant correlations between English and Spanish narratives in utterances, orientations and actions.

In a follow-up study, bilingual (Spanish–English) children aged 7;0 to 9;9 with language impairment produced personal narratives and narratives in response to a wordless picture book (McCabe et al., 2008). Narratives were analysed using High Point Analysis (Peterson and McCabe, 1983). High-point ratings of personal narratives significantly exceeded those of wordless picture books. There was only a modest significant correlation between performances on the two genres of narrative, accounting for 9 per cent of the variance. While 14 per cent of the personal narratives did not contain even one past tense event, 44.4 per cent of the fictional, wordless picture-book narratives contained no past tense event and, therefore, consisted entirely of picture description – not narratives even given our relaxed definition.

Improving narration at home and at school

While longitudinal investigation of parents talking with children allowed us (e.g. McCabe and Peterson, 1991) to discuss the kind of parental input that predicted child narration, a
random assignment intervention was required in order to discuss what caused child narrative prowess (Peterson et al., 1999). Low-income mothers of ENA three- to four-year-olds were randomly assigned to a topic-extension narrative intervention or a control condition. Intervention mothers were shown transcripts taken from the previous longitudinal study, one of which displayed an exemplary topic-extending, elaborative narrative style that we wanted the mothers to emulate. Mothers in the intervention group took turns reading these exemplary conversations aloud with other mothers, who played the child; pairs then switched roles. Mothers were encouraged to do the following:

1. Talk to your child frequently and consistently about past experiences.
2. Spend a lot of time talking about each topic.
3. Ask plenty of ‘wh-’ questions (who, what, when, where, why) and relatively fewer ‘yes/no’ questions (e.g. ‘Was Grandpa wearing a red coat?’). Ask questions about where and when events took place – the setting of the experience.
4. Listen carefully to what your child is saying and encourage elaboration.
5. Encourage your child to say more than one sentence at a time by using back-channel responses (e.g. ‘I see’ or ‘Really?’) or simply repeating what your child has just said.
6. Follow your child’s lead. That is, talk about what your child wants to talk about.

Every month we reminded parents by phone of the importance of reminiscing with their children about past events. At the end of one year, intervention children had significantly increased receptive vocabularies compared to control children despite no explicit attention to vocabulary. At the end of two years, intervention children’s narrative skills surpassed those of their peers. Reese and Newcombe (2007) similarly trained mothers of 1½- to 2½-year-olds to engage in elaborate reminiscing (very similar to topic extension, but focused on memory instead of language) and found that one to two years later intervention children had richer and more accurate memories so long as they had high levels of self-awareness to begin with. Reese et al. (2010) assigned low-income white Hispanic and non-Hispanic black parents (half of whom were bilingual) to one of three conditions: (1) elaborative reminiscing, (2) dialogic reading or (3) a control condition. Those authors found that training in elaborative reminiscing boosted the quality of narrative skills compared to dialogic reading and supported story comprehension significantly more than the other two conditions.

A variation on the interventions described in this section was also implemented in preschool classrooms that served high-risk low-income, primarily bilingual four-year-olds of mixed ethnicity. Children in these classrooms were compared to children in similar classrooms in the same school district who received a standard preschool curriculum. Each child in the intervention classroom received approximately 26 one-on-one sessions in which volunteers elicited, extended (by asking open-ended questions) and took dictation of their narratives, which were also read back to the child on four additional occasions. At the end of a year, children in the intervention programme had significantly higher receptive vocabulary and narrative quality scores.

Conclusion

A keen appreciation of the complexity of a child’s narrative confers many benefits upon literacy educators and policy-makers. Knowledge of the typical developmental sequence children follow in narration enables us to determine whether particular children are performing typically for their age, lag behind or excel. Knowledge of how parents influence
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children’s narration, derived from random assignment experiments, not only explains narrative excellence but also offers a route to advance the skills of children who lag behind their peers in this important ability – preferably before these children finish preschool. Parents have been and can be easily informed about the importance of developing their children’s ability to talk about past events at length and the means by which to do so. Classroom aids (parent volunteers, paraprofessionals) can easily be taught to do the same with vulnerable children at school (during drop-off and pick-up times, lunch, etc.). Past interventions with personal narrative have demonstrated that it takes a year or two of concentrated, heightened input to improve a child’s narration. Thus, attempts to intervene with children who lag in this respect may require recruiting adults both at school and at home. After all, parents have abundantly more access to their children than even the most dedicated professionals. Just as parents will usually speak more and more complexly in their native language than in a second language, and are encouraged by numerous researchers to speak their native language with their children (see McCabe et al., 2013, for review), educators should support parents to encourage their children to narrate in ways family members understand and appreciate. Early childhood educators should thus also be familiar with cultural differences in preferred narrative style.

An appreciation of cultural differences in narration might lead savvy educators to include authentic published stories from children’s cultures in their classrooms (see McCabe, 1996, for a full treatment of this endeavour). As noted at the outset, to tell a narrative is to make sense of experience. We understand the narratives we hear and read by means of mapping these on to the kind of narratives we tell. Bilingual students perform better when they are provided with culturally relevant materials in either of their languages, but especially in their native language (Goldenberg et al., 2006). Snow (2006) underlines this fact as key for the success of bilingual students and for understanding how what a student brings to school from their country of origin contrasts with what is expected of such students at school.

One final caveat regarding children’s narration. Although parents, other family members and teachers can and usually do encourage a child’s ability to narrate, children themselves provide the content of such narration. Parents differ individually and culturally in the extent to which they value asking children to reflect on the meaning of what they have experienced. But when children are carefully listened to, they are the ones who determine that meaning. To demonstrate this issue, consider my informal collections of narratives about children’s favourite times at Disneyworld© and Disneyland©. Parents typically take their preschoolers to these parks and spend large sums of money to provide exciting experiences of meeting favourite characters, take thrilling rides, buy toys or delicious food, only to find that when they ask their children to tell their grandparents, say, about their favourite moments, those children reply, ‘Two sinks. Our hotel room had two sinks!’ or ‘blue lights on the floor of the airplane!’ or ‘crystal rocks in the flower bed’ or ‘peeing my pants’ (and getting a change of clothes). To listen carefully to children’s narration of their own lives is to be continually surprised, as well as far more effective, in working with them to succeed.

References


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