

What Story Circles Reveal about Preschool Children's Storytelling

By

Erin Elizabeth Flynn

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Educational Studies)  
in the University of Michigan  
2013

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Mary J. Schleppegrell  
Professor Anne Ruggles Gere  
Professor Susan B. Neuman  
Professor Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar

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## **Acknowledgements**

My path to becoming an educational researcher has been long and winding, beginning 13 years ago when I worked in my first Head Start classroom as an AmeriCorps volunteer. I found myself instantly fascinated by the thinking of young children and the ways that they represent their world. Simultaneously, I was humbled to get to know the women who dedicated their life to educating young children, often overcoming poverty and community violence to further their own education, raise their own children, and offer patient, thoughtful care to the children of their community. My dedication to providing teachers with the resources necessary to simultaneously bring children's thinking to the fore and to strengthen children's capacity to render their ideas with greater precision derives from my early experiences in Head Start and State Pre-K classrooms. In this respect, I am indebted to the children, parents, and teachers that I worked with in the classrooms of Chicago, especially those who welcomed me into their classrooms and shared the stories that inform this dissertation research.

My dissertation would not have been completed without the thoughtful insights of my dissertation committee. I am indebted to my dissertation chair, Mary Schleppegrell, for supporting me in giving my ideas flight – for listening, for carefully reading, for pushing for greater methodological rigor. Your thoughtfulness, care, and support for students' thinking are evident in my work. I am also grateful to my academic advisor, Susan Neuman. Thank you for pushing me over the years to be more than a quiet researcher - to be a confident, savvy, early childhood researcher who owns the experiences, insights, and ideas that give my work power. I also appreciate your willingness to read and reflect on my work, though as researchers we take

different methodological approaches. My dissertation research was improved by the contributions of Annemarie Palincsar and Anne Gere. The insights you offered reverberated throughout my analysis and writing of the study. I consider myself fortunate to have worked with researchers who model such high standards for inquiry, academic integrity, and thoughtful consideration of students' work.

Earning my PhD would not be possible without the support of the numerous faculty members that I have worked with at the University of Michigan. Though my work as a researcher and instructor was indelibly shaped by many different individuals, I need to recognize Elizabeth Moje, Karen Wixson, and Joanne Carlisle for their interest and support, especially during the first years of my time at Michigan. It has been a privilege to learn from researchers who have played such an important role in improving the language and literacy outcomes of students.

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the financial and intellectual support of the School of Education, the Rackham Graduate School, and the Sweetland Dissertation Writing Institute. Support from these three institutions enabled me to take a dramatic leap forward in completing my dissertation. I am particularly grateful to Paul Barron and my fellow dissertation writing colleagues at Sweetland. The physical, intellectual, and emotional space we shared played an important role in the writing of the most daunting sections of my dissertation. Discovering the shared, cross-discipline difficulties in communicating intellectual ideas effectively in writing provided a welcome respite from the angst of solitary writing.

Finally, and in many ways most importantly, thank you to my cohort-mates, friends, and family. Without your continued support and encouragement this PhD would not be possible. To

my cohort, it has been wonderful getting to know such talented people. Though we may not all become academics, I feel confident that we will all do good work that makes a difference in enabling people to fulfill their human potential through education. Thank you to my writing group – Michaela, Kelly, Kasey, and Elaine. I have immensely appreciated our shared commitment to producing high quality writing over the years. Thank you to my early childhood compadre, Rachel. From delicious dinners to demolition derby, I am grateful for the unexpected surprises that come with having you as a valued friend. I look forward to many years of thinking, researching, and writing together. To my family – grandma, mom, dad, Jason, Katey, Laura, and Zoe – I am persistent, patient, and a careful listener because of you. There is no substitute for the support that you have always given me over the years. To Jessica, a long distance relationship, a bike accident and broken back, the death of a good friend, one stolen identity, two prelim exams, and one dissertation later, you still light up every room for me. There are no words equal to the care and support you have provided along my path to becoming an educational researcher. Though so many people have made this work possible, this dissertation is dedicated to you because you constantly remind me that “everything means something.”

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## **Abstract**

Documented disparities in children's facility using language emerge early and hold consequences for children's composition and comprehension of text. Though advocates conceptualize early education contexts as ideal for intervening in language disparities, research demonstrates that the quality of language use in low income preschool settings remains too low to support language development, let alone produce the accelerated learning needed to ameliorate early disparities.

In this dissertation, I explore the affordances of a small group storytelling activity as a way to engage children in linguistically demanding learning. Using systemic functional linguistics, I analyze children's stories in terms of ideational meanings and organizational features. Then, I examine the interactive features of the storytelling activity, analyzing how children's stories constitute rhetorical action in the larger classroom context. Results from this study indicate that children tell stories that are structured, cohesive, and marshal stress and intonation to engage listeners, emphasize parts of the text, and express an evaluative stance on events. Children's stories vary along a continuum of complexity from incipient, single event story turns to multi-event stories. Through their stories, children negotiate aspects of their identity and the culture of the classroom.

This dissertation research holds implications for research by showing story as taking multiple forms and presenting multiple sources of complexity for children to manage, a conceptualization that contrasts with research that elevates true narrative to the exclusion of other forms. By studying children's stories in context, this study moves beyond research that

considers stories only in terms of their textual instantiation. Instead, a study of stories in a small group activity shows storytelling as purposive, rhetorical action through which children mediate private intentions and meet social goals.

This dissertation research informs teaching practice by describing the degrees of language complexity that characterize children's contributions, by identifying developmental trajectories in learning to tell stories, and by recognizing how interactional factors contribute to the ability to present a cohesive story. This linguistic analysis provides the insight needed to reshape early learning contexts into laboratories for language development because it provides the rigorous evidence needed to recommend broader use of storytelling activities.

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Ongoing language development is critical in the early years, in part, because oral language is an essential precursor to learning to read and write (Catts et al, 1999; Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Hooper et al, 2010; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Documented disparities exist in children's facility using language (Biemiller, 2005; Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Huttenlocher et al, 1991) with far reaching consequences for children's academic success, particularly in composing and comprehending written texts (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Head Start and other early care and education classroom contexts have long been conceptualized as particularly well-suited for intervening in early language differences (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Zigler & Valentine, 1979). Head Start, an integral part of the War on Poverty, was conceived on the promise of intervening in environments affected by the "cycle of poverty" in which children and families resided in communities without access to adequate health care, nutrition, and other supportive social structures (Zigler & Anderson, 1979, 5). Support for early interventions like Head Start grew under the popularization of ideas about the "cultural deprivation" of children living in poverty (President's Panel on Mental Retardation, 1963; Reissman, 1962). Advocates for early care and education have sustained support for Head Start, in part, through a growing body of research documenting early emerging differences in language development amongst children of varying SES status (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998; Huttenlocher et al, 1991). Advocates have also identified early childhood classrooms as a key resource for familiarizing English language learners (ELLs) with English

while still supporting children's home languages (English Language Learners Focus Group Report, 2002).

Children are believed to bring differences in facility with language, developed through interactions in the home, with them to school (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Huttenlocher et al, 1991), necessitating an intervention like Head Start to disrupt early patterns of language development. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that the quality of language use in low income preschool settings is often insufficient to support language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Justice et al, 2008; LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2007; Smith & Dickinson, 1994), let alone the accelerated growth needed for educational parity from the outset of kindergarten (Barnett & Frede, 2011). In particular, researchers find a dearth of responsive teacher language that models expansive, advanced linguistic utterances (Justice et al, 2008; Smith & Dickinson, 1994) and limited opportunities for children to engage in extended language use that features the kind of multi-clause utterances associated with language learning (Huttenlocher et al, 2002; Justice et al, 2013; Tomasello, 2000). For teachers to effectively support language development, they need to assess, monitor, and support children's ongoing progress with language. This kind of intentional language instruction is particularly critical for teaching ELLs who need support to develop their facility in two languages, necessitating teachers to strategically plan opportunities for children to use language rather than rely on informal or incidental language use.

Answering the call to develop early care and education settings like Head Start into laboratories for language development involves intervening in a shifting landscape in which the field of early childhood attempts to respond to a rising academic imperative even as evidence of the difficulty of attaining lasting academic gains continues to grow (Puma et al, 2012).

Mounting academic pressure from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) testing regime and new kindergarten standards from the Common Core Standards Initiative (2012) necessitates the field of early childhood care and education to chart a way forward by giving educators guidance about how to create cognitively and linguistically demanding classrooms that are responsive to young children's needs and capabilities (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2012).

One way to chart a path forward lies in harkening back to an imperative in the design of Head Start to position children living in poverty to empower themselves by designing contexts to facilitate their own active exploration (Zigler & Valentine, 1979). In this respect, the design of Head Start contends that children raised in materially and intellectually impoverished conditions thrive when placed in carefully designed contexts that foster active learning despite whatever deficits may already exist. In this study, I marshal this proposition as a way to foster language development in early care and education learning contexts. In doing so, I complicate the notion that young low SES children bring language deficits to their earliest classrooms that preclude linguistically demanding ways of engaging in learning.

Destabilizing a conception of young, low SES children from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds as lacking in the linguistic resources needed for high levels of learning opens possibilities for renewed attention to ways of organizing instruction that place children, their thoughts, feelings, values, and ways of using language at the center. The research presented here offers evidence that in fact young low SES children, including ELLs, are capable of using language in extended turns and in culturally expected forms. It contributes to a deeper understanding of what can support children's language development and allows children's individual and collective social, experiential, and linguistic resources to be recognized as the



engine that drives learning in a dynamic, meaning-focused way. It illustrates how, through a meaning-focused orientation to learning, early care and education interventions like Head Start can fulfill their promise by reinvigorating instructional attention to core communicative competencies like using language.

This dissertation research explores one way of organizing instruction to bring about a dynamic engine for learning with children's ways of using language at the core by studying a recurring, socially meaningful, small group storytelling activity called story circles. In story circles, a facilitator structures opportunities for children to take turns telling a story of their own choosing. There is reason to believe that storytelling may be a particularly powerful way to engage young children in language learning since it is through story that children organize and give meaning to their lived experience (Bruner, 1990). Furthermore, storytelling is a critical predictor of later reading and writing skill (Boudreau & Hedberg, 1999; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Gillam & Johnston, 1992), and brings meaning-focused models of literacy learning often reserved for secondary classrooms (i.e. cultural modeling Lee, 2006) to early care and education learning settings.

In recognition of the diverse, culturally shaped ways that individuals construe experience through story, this study takes place in Head Start classrooms serving a multiethnic, multilingual configuration of children. By analyzing stories in the classroom context, I show the unique affordances of early care and education classrooms as distinct spaces in which children mediate ways of saying, doing, and being learned in the home and from the broader culture. Through this mediation of varied language practices, children support each other in participating in story circles, showing the affordances of the classroom culture as a critical space for storytelling and language development.

## **Overview of the Present Study**

This dissertation includes three separate, but interconnected analyses of young children's storytelling. In the first analysis, I examine the ideational meanings that children construe through story to understand the experiential and linguistic resources that children marshal to tell stories in the classroom. This analysis revealed that children told stories that relied heavily on personal experiences and known stories from books and film to express aspects of their identity. Interweaving home languages and home practices throughout their stories, the children in this sample told stories that cast them as capable, active, and connected to others, demonstrating the way that social, emotional, and linguistic imperatives intertwine in group storytelling activities.

The second analysis looks at the structural, cohesive, and phonological resources that children use to tell stories in order to understand the ways that children use organizational features of language to construe meaning. This analysis showed that children develop along trajectories toward more complete and complex storytelling, coordinating multiple sources of complexity with varying skill. From incipient story turns with the only the most fundamental aspects of story to narrative-type stories with multiple complications, the children's stories exhibit a wide range of textual instantiations. Coupled with an analysis of stories from multiple time points, this analysis illustrates how some children told structurally different story types across the four weeks. Consequently, in investigating the developmental origins of storytelling, researchers must adopt an approach to analysis that captures a broader spectrum of story types and characterizes story as responsive to situation since children do not necessarily tell the same, unitary, type of story repeatedly.

In the third and final analysis I investigate the interactional features of the story circles as a way to see how the ideas, interests, and ways of being already present in the classroom, the interactions in the story circle, and the resulting dialogue of stories informed storytelling. I found that story circles simultaneously shaped and were shaped by children's participation in the activity – their ways of telling stories, of directing other children's storytelling, and of assuming social roles with respect to other children and the activity itself. I conclude that an examination of children's storytelling in the classroom context builds on previous research by revealing that young children's storytelling is fundamentally a relational, meaning-making endeavor through which children realize multiple and varied social goals. In realizing these goals, children negotiate aspects of their identity and the culture of the classroom. This type of negotiation of the self and the social world it inhabits lays the foundation for the development of a literate identity in which children come to tell, value, and evaluate stories in the classroom culture much as more competent readers and writers do in the broader literate world.

This dissertation research informs classroom teaching practice by demonstrating the practical and illuminating potential of story circles as way of organizing instruction to support young children in gaining greater facility with the meaning-making potential of language. Taken together, I intend the three analyses to complement and critique existing research into children's storytelling by showing how stories are more than their textual instantiations. Analyzing children's stories from their most basic constituent parts to coordinated configurations of acts of meaning through which children mediate private intentions shows stories as a powerful form of rhetorical action that classrooms can nurture by making a dedicated space for children's voices. It is in these very spaces where children assume an authorial role in their own learning that a foundation in literacy with meaning at its core can flourish so that early education settings bent

on giving children a strong beginning in language and literacy can begin to live up to the promised outcomes of investing in young children.

This dissertation research addresses the following research questions:

What can we learn from story circles about preschool children's storytelling?

Research Question 1: What do preschool children tell stories about in story circles?

Research Question 2: What features of stories such as organizational strategies, logical connections, and oral language meaning-making features do children employ during story circles?

Research Question 3: What are the affordances of story circles for eliciting ways of participating that acculturate children in the practices of composing, comprehending, and responding to texts?

I answer these questions in six chapters. The first introduces and overviews the study by establishing the present research's fundamental concern with supporting language development in early care and education learning contexts like Head Start that serve predominantly low SES children. In the second chapter, I discuss the theory, literature, and methodological approach of this study, indicating how this study departs from current research in its theoretical conceptualization, exploration of the classroom context, and use of systemic functional linguistics to analyze children's stories. In the third chapter, I answer research question one through an analysis of the ideational meanings in children's stories. In chapter four, I answer research question two by analyzing children's stories in terms of functional stages, cohesive conjunctions, and stress and intonation, showing how children make meaning by coordinating the resources of language. In chapter five, I address research question three, showing how the ongoing and interactional features of story circles support and shape children's storytelling in the

classroom. Finally, in chapter six, I bring the interconnected threads of the three analyses together to speak back to the literature on children's storytelling and demonstrate what story circles reveal about children's storytelling and the affordances of supporting language development by carving out intentional spaces for children to use language to tell about their world.

## **Chapter 2 Stories as Rhetorical Action in the Classroom Context: Theory, Literature, and Methods**

U.S. schools have struggled to prepare all children for the high levels of literacy demanded by an increasingly information based economy. For instance, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that one in three fourth grade students read at below basic levels (NAEP, 2011). Perhaps more troubling, gaps in literacy attainment exist between children of different socioeconomic status (SES) and racial or ethnic identity. Low-income fourth graders routinely score lower than their more affluent peers and white students persistently demonstrate higher levels of reading achievement than their black or Latino counterparts (NAEP, 2011). The achievement gap between ELLs and their peers is even more pronounced than disparities between children living in poverty and children of higher SES (National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), 2011). Furthermore, the risk of difficulty attaining high levels of proficiency in reading and writing is compounded when ELLs lack proficiency with English and are living in poverty (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Recent reforms such as the move for national standards attempt to directly address K-12 schooling's inability to ameliorate these achievement gaps. However, such interventions are not sufficient given that gaps in foundational literacy skills develop prior to kindergarten entry (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Further, children who enter kindergarten without a foundational familiarity with English struggle to achieve high levels of literacy (English Language Learners Focus Group, 2002).

One way to address these persistent gaps in achievement is by developing a better understanding of the language and literacy resources that diverse students bring to the task of reading, writing, and communicating in schools. Specifically, the need for an understanding of different ways of using language and literacy to make meaning has become ever more critical, given the burgeoning population of children from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds in the U.S. The Census Bureau projects that by 2020 nearly half of the school age children in the U.S. will be children of color. Meanwhile, ELLs are the fastest growing population in U. S. schools (Center on Education Policy, 2006). To meet the needs of these students, educators need both detailed knowledge of how literacy practices work and how school-based literacy practices can engage with, support, and extend the literacy practices that students from diverse backgrounds bring to school (Lee, 2006). Armed with these two forms of knowledge, educators will be better situated to make school-based literacy practices explicit and aid children in using their own understanding of language and literacy to access forms of literacy commonly valued by institutions such as schools and the workplace (i.e. The Keep Program, Au & Carroll, 1997). At the same time, detailed knowledge of the ways that students enact literacy practices offers the potential to expand our understanding of what can be valued, possibly changing school-based literacy practices themselves.

Changing national demographics are not the only driving force prompting the need for greater attention to diverse cultural understandings of ways of making meaning in text. The U.S. resides in a larger global context in which the barrier between cultural ways of saying, doing, being, and meaning has grown ever more permeable. In response to growing global interaction, the students of today may need greater awareness of the ways that language and literacy work to make meaning since they will be expected to communicate with diverse markets and audiences.

Though U. S. schools have been slow to develop teaching practices that nurture students' facility with multiple languages, biliteracy and bilingualism are expected to be highly valued skills, particularly in future economies where the geographical barriers of the past will be removed (Severns, 2012).

For students to communicate with diverse audiences, they need to understand how to use language strategically to make different kinds of meanings in different settings and for different purposes. Language in use is socially shaped, interactive, and highly interpretative (Gee, 1999). Different social contexts require different language choices and individuals often interpret language differently depending on their own social position, cultural background, and the context in question (Gee, 1999; Scribner & Cole, 1981).

In order for students to better understand how language works to make meaning, school-based instruction needs to proceed from a new conceptualization of language and literacy; one that treats language as a choice-making system that contains near infinite meaning making potential, but is shaped by situational contexts of actual use. A functional perspective of language offers such an approach (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Instruction that proceeds from this conceptualization requires students to not only read, write, listen, and speak, but examine and discuss meaning making options as well. In this model of literacy learning, students would routinely analyze, compare, contrast, and construct texts, making decisions about how to accomplish meaningful social goals through written and spoken language. Instead of completing tasks that treat reading, writing, listening, and speaking as an end, literacy instruction would position language and literacy as a means to end; students would learn from an early age that individuals always communicate to get things done.



This theory also offers valuable ways for teachers to develop new conceptualizations of what students bring to their learning. Instead of dismissing unexpected contributions from children, teachers can understand students' language and actions as choices drawn from a larger set of options learned through particular experiences. These choices can be fruitfully incorporated into the classroom context as meaningful options in a larger system of ways of using language and literacy to get things done as teachers build a "productive common ground between the institutionalized culture of school and the various cultures of the students served by schools" (Kamberelis, 1999, 408).

Like all conceptualizations of literacy, educators need to lay the groundwork for this model of language learning in the early years of schooling. The foundations of literacy are set in early childhood as young children quickly glean ways to get things done in their social world. Children learn to use language, view the world, and orient to print through daily social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Through these early experiences children learn very different ways of using language and literacy to accomplish social goals (Heath, 1983). For many children, common literacy activities in preschool, such as storybook reading, provide an early initiation into expected school-based literacy interactions. For example, children might learn that reading is a group activity, that questions need to be saved till the end of the story or not asked at all, and that the teacher initiates and controls interaction with text from text selection to topic of discussion. In another classroom, children might learn that stories can be told orally, with gesture, and through songs, rhymes, and books. In both these classrooms, children are being prepared to conceptualize and use literacy in particular ways; ways that closely match how language and literacy are enacted in K-12 schooling, but may align more or less closely with children's experiences in the home.

For some children, school-based question and answer routines (Heath, 1983), stories (Michaels, 1981), and behavior (Boykin, 1978) closely match early interactions in the home. These children are believed to experience a more seamless transition to school-based literacy instruction. In contrast, children who do not share the largely Western, European American cultural traditions that inform instruction in U.S. schooling may need additional savvy, demonstrating the ability to “code-switch” (Craig & Washington, 2006) between home and school contexts.

For children whose home and school experiences are not closely aligned, effectively navigating school may require the ability to say, do, be, and mean in different ways in different settings. Moving between contexts that value different ways of saying, doing, and being is no easy matter since ways of using language are intimately connected to children’s experience of identity as well as their place in their community and their place in learning contexts (English Language Learners Focus Group, 2002). Accordingly, this dissertation research hypothesizes that opportunities for child-initiated discourse offer important spaces for children to navigate the contrast between home and school expectations for language use.

School instruction that makes ways of using language and literacy transparent could aid children not only in making sense of school-based literacy instruction, but in instilling a different and more effective conceptualization of literacy from the outset for both children and teachers. However, creating instructional contexts that support children from diverse cultural and linguistic heritages is complicated as well, in part, due to the heterogeneity which characterizes children of diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, particularly ELLs. ELLs learn language in a broad spectrum of individual contexts with differing levels of exposure to and experience with their home language and the language of the majority culture. By the age of

three, young children demonstrate differing proficiency in their first and second language which can be characterized along a spectrum from monolingualism in the child's home language to monolingualism in the language of the majority culture (Tabors & Snow, 2002). In the U. S., children with differing profiles of linguistic strengths in their first and second language attend early care and education settings that provide three distinct types of language environments – first-language classrooms, bilingual classrooms, and English-language classrooms. In the U. S., the majority of children receive their earliest instruction in English-language classrooms (Tabors & Snow, 2002).

Early care and education learning settings such as Head Start, that typically serve children from diverse backgrounds, offer an ideal context for establishing a meaning-based orientation to literacy that focuses on language as a choice-making system for construing experience. Nationwide, children enrolled in Head Start programs speak more than 140 different languages. 27% of the children served by Head Start speak a language other than English at home (English Language Learners Focus Group, 2002). Head Start and other early care and education classroom contexts that serve children that represent diverse linguistic profiles as ELLs and monolingual speakers have long been conceptualized as particularly well-suited for intervening in the early language differences associated with differential literacy attainment (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Zigler & Valentine, 1979). These gaps in facility with the functional potential of language develop early (Biemiller, 2005; Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Huttenlocher et al, 1991) and establishing a basic foundation in English before kindergarten can make a critical difference in children's literacy outcomes (English Language Learners Focus Group, 2002).

In this study, I propose that developing intentional teaching practices (Barnett & Frede, 2011) to foster language learning amongst children in their earliest classroom contexts offers an ideal way to close disparities in language learning by giving children the opportunity to construe meaning through language. Storytelling, a culturally shaped way of construing experience, affords the kind of extended language turns associated with language learning (Huttenlocher et al, 2002) while bringing diverse meaning-making strategies to the fore. In this respect, storytelling is an ideal form of rhetorical action for fostering classroom learning that aims to close gaps in educational attainment by strategically harnessing the knowledge and experience that children bring with them from the home.

In the sections that follow, I outline the theory and literature that inform this dissertation research into what a recurring, socially meaningful storytelling activity, called a story circle, reveals about preschool children's storytelling. I demonstrate how this study contributes to our understanding of a particular educational context – the urban, multicultural Head Start; sites where teachers routinely serve children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This research provides insight both into what children bring to school in terms of storytelling abilities that might not currently be recognized, and also what classroom teaching that understands children's storytelling abilities in new ways can do to engage children in more effectively taking on ways of narrating that are valued at school. Though this research cannot be generalized beyond the particular classrooms studied here, this study suggests what may be possible from researching and teaching children through activities that intentionally attend to the social context of learning.

## **Theory**

This section briefly highlights the theoretical assumptions underpinning this work. For this study, three theoretical conceptualizations inform the design and interpretative methodology: a sociocultural theory of learning, a functional perspective of language, and a developmental conceptualization of children's meaning-making repertoire.

This study proceeds from a sociocultural perspective that recognizes that the learning of young children takes place in socially and culturally situated environments. Young children develop new understandings through interactions with the environment, peers, and more knowledgeable adults (Vygotsky, 1978). This study assumes that young children construct conceptual understanding, drawing on the unique contributions of prior experience, cultural background, and on-going interaction with multiple environments and learning partners. Though the role of the adult as a scaffold for young children's learning has been well documented, an often overlooked aspect of a sociocultural approach to learning is the capacity of children to support and shape one another's learning. This study attempts to leverage this capacity through a research design that uses story circles as a way for children to work closely in small groups over the course of a four week unit.

A sociocultural perspective positions language and literacy as socially, culturally, and historically situated tools (Vygotsky, 1978). Individuals use these tools to accomplish social goals such as enacting particular identities, engaging in social practices, and establishing relationships with audiences (Gee, 1999). Language allows individuals to say, do, and be different things in different contexts for different purposes (Gee, 1999). Essentially, language helps individuals navigate and negotiate social life, expressing aspects of identity while shaping their social world.

It is important to go beyond acknowledging that language and literacy work as contextually situated tools and examine more closely how these tools are structured to express social and cultural meanings. For this reason, this study relies on a functional perspective of language outlined by the theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 2004). SFL describes language as a social semiotic system in which individuals construe meaning through lexical and grammatical choices. In this linguistic system, each choice is interpreted in terms of the other available choices in language. For instance, when a preschool teacher calls a student *chicita* or little girl in Spanish, this nomination stands in contrast with all the other choices available in language. If the teacher herself is Latina, *chicita* might suggest a kind of insider status. If the teacher is not Latina, *chicita* might simply signal an acknowledgement of the child's status as a member of the Latina community. Such a designation also might signal a kind of endearment and familiarity that for a Latina preschooler, the word *girl* or *little girl* may not. *Chicita* can also be contrasted with a number of other possible lexical choices such as student, child, preschooler, imp, or sweetheart. Each designation carries different shades of meaning and positions the child differently in relation to the speaker.

SFL also highlights the way that language simultaneously makes three types of meaning – ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Ideational meanings consist of how individuals represent experience in text. Ideational meaning is what the text is topically about. What does the author assign significance to? How are things related to one another? In contrast, interpersonal meanings are how individuals express relationships or how they engage in social action through texts. This may include enacting one's identity or building relationships in text with significant others or the reader. Textual meaning consists of how texts hang together, and enable the

ideational and interpersonal meaning-making. What cohesive elements unite elements of the text? What kinds of relationships exist between parts of a text?

All communicative activity is constituted by and mediated by genres (Bahktin & Holquist, 1981). Genres are “staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture” (Martin, 1984). Written and spoken interactions proceed in fairly predictable formats that allow individuals with shared cultural knowledge to understand one another quickly and effectively. For example, common interactions such as ordering food in a restaurant, buying items in a store, and interviewing for a job proceed in highly predictable ways for members of a shared culture. Though predictable, generic activity remains malleable because genres give shape to social action, even as we continually shape genres through use in social contexts. This leads to a kind of on-going relationship where social actions are guided by typical ways of saying and doing, even as they constitute what is considered typical (Bawarshi, 2000).

In this study, I examine a particular social activity – the story circle – as an instance of genre. In this way, I aim to investigate the potential of story circles as a recurring social activity that elicits “typical rhetorical action” from participants (Miller, 1984). By studying both the situation – story circles – and the texts that arise from the situation, I will better understand the potential of this storytelling activity. For, as Bawarshi notes, “A genre is both the situation and the textual instantiation of that situation” (2000). By examining what an activity “gets people to do with one another and what they do with it” (Miller, 1984) we can better understand how activities in particular contexts shape and are shaped by patterns of rhetorical action.

Finally, this study proceeds from the theory that children’s understanding of language and literacy is developmental in nature. Thus, the study of early language becomes the study of a “child’s progressive mastery of a functional potential” (Halliday, 1975, 5). As children use

language to accomplish everyday social goals, they gather ever more information from others in their environment about how language and literacy works. This learning leads the gradual, though episodic, development (Vygotsky, 1978) of increasing facility with language and literacy as meaning-making resources. In this way, children, as learners in socially and culturally situated environments, develop into increasingly full participants in socially meaningful activities. They develop along trajectories of improved performance from legitimate peripheral participants to increasingly full members, steeped in the practices deemed important in their cultural group (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

As legitimate peripheral participants, children's use of language and literacy may not adhere to adult standards, but still reflects ever-growing competency construing meaning through linguistic resources. From this perspective, all sign-making is meaningful and intentional, however tentative some productions may be (Kress, 1997). This is a critical notion when considering the language and literacy production of young children who at the age of three or four years old use language and literacy in ways that reflect their social experience (i.e. using paper and pencils to create menus, tickets, and grocery lists), but demonstrate much less mastery of conventional literacy practices (i.e. invented spelling). In keeping with a developmental perspective, this study focuses on children's current capabilities as potentially untapped sources of strength, instead of emphasizing the way that child productions do not conform to mature forms of literacy production.

## **Literature**

In this section, I situate storytelling in the larger context of emergent literacy knowledge and skills. Then, I argue that the current understanding of children's storytelling has been



shaped by both researchers' means of eliciting stories and conceptualization of story. Next, I describe the current knowledgebase about young children's storytelling, highlighting two distinct approaches to studying story: 1) as evidence of shared or universal features of storytelling and 2) as culturally specific, but cross-culturally comparable features of storytelling. Finally, I outline the ways that this dissertation study into young children's stories deviates from previous research, filling a need in understanding young children's storytelling as a culturally shaped rhetorical activity through which children carry out social goals, not just in the home, but in the culture of the classroom as well.

### **Emergent Literacy**

The importance of early literacy instruction has become more apparent as recent research demonstrates that gaps in foundational literacy skills develop prior to kindergarten entry (Center for Educational Statistics, 2011), particularly in core language domains such as vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 1995). Preschool literacy instruction plays an important role in developing early language skills because early literacy-focused interventions can have large, statistically significant effects (ex.  $ES = 1.29$ ,  $P = .009$ ) (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). These effects set the stage for later literacy attainment because children who experience early success in reading are advantaged by more opportunities to read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Meanwhile, their slower-starting counterparts often read less and are more likely to experience frustration as they encounter texts above their reading level with greater regularity. In this way, a strong start down the pathways to literacy provides a critical advantage for children's successful engagement with written language.

Establishing this strong beginning involves strengthening the precursors to conventional reading and writing. These precursors include knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Lonigan,

Burgess, & Anthony, 2000) that develop prior to formal instruction and have been shown to critically predict later literacy success (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Often referred to as emergent literacy, the precursors to conventional literacy reflect the continuous nature of literacy learning, whereby children gather considerable information about how language and literacy work to make meaning through social interactions in the home, school, and community.

Studies of emergent literacy have revealed that children differ in their facility with language (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003), print knowledge (Sulzby, 1985), and phonological sensitivity (Adams, 1990) even before kindergarten entry. Despite the important contribution of all of these factors to successful reading and writing, oral language plays a particularly critical role in enabling children to successfully make sense of text. Oral language is the tool children use to mean, refer, communicate intentions, and accomplish social goals. Critically linked to cognition, language maps “the conceptual structure of the world” (Bruner, 1983) for children as interactions with people, places, and texts allow for ever expanding understanding.

Facility with oral language underlies and supports reading, writing, speaking, and listening - four deeply intertwined and mutually supportive meaning making processes critical to literacy (Clay, 1979; Bissex, 1980; Sulzby & Teale, 1985). Research on young children’s emergent literacy knowledge suggests that experiences reading and writing text propel children’s understanding of how written language works (Clay, 1979). Further, the same coordinated knowledge that allows a child to write a message using invented spelling enables young children to decipher the print they encounter in their environment. In this way, reading and writing function as reciprocal and mutually supportive processes in which children gain new information about how written language works as they gain experience encoding and decoding information in text.

In this study, I propose that an important way to develop children's emergent literacy skills lies in using oral language to acculturate young children in the practice of composing and comprehending text. In doing so, children's earliest initiation into literacy proceeds from a meaning-based perspective which complements efforts to develop children's knowledge of the sounds and symbols needed to read and write. Developing children's facility with the functional potential of language affords opportunities for children's first classrooms to set the foundation for literacy on the imperative to construe meaning, situating knowledge of sounds and symbols as fundamentally concerned with this endeavor.

### **Storytelling as a Core Communicative Competency**

Storytelling is a core communicative competency with a critical role in young children's emerging literacy knowledge. Storytelling may be one of the most important literacy practices for the budding reader. Story is discourse that relates or explains events removed from the immediate context and consists of at least two events (McCabe, 1991). Stories offer an explanation of both what happened and why it happened (Bruner, 1986).

Children learn ways of telling stories in the home (Bruner, 1990) where ways of relating events vary according to cultural expectations (Curenton, 2010). School builds on this early initiation into ways of relating events as much of young children's early writing takes the form of story (Donovan, 2001) as do many of the texts read in school (Christie, 1986; Kress, 1994; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; Duke, 2000). Since much of social life is communicated through story, "our capacity to render experience in terms of narrative is not just child's play, but an instrumental form of making meaning that dominates much of life in culture" (Bruner, 1990).

**Methods of Studying Young Children's Storytelling.** Given the universal presence of story as a way of recapitulating experience across cultures (Bruner, 1990), considerable research

has been devoted to understanding the development of story across the lifespan. Much of this research begins with children in kindergarten or elementary school (Donovan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002; Kamberelis, 1999; Newkirk, 1987; Pappas, 1993; Sulzby, 1985), though a smaller cadre of researchers has explored the origins of storytelling amongst toddlers and preschool age children (e.g. Nelson, 2006; Halliday, 1975). Two main approaches to analyzing story predominate in studies of young children's storytelling: highpoint analysis (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) and story grammar (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Before outlining these two approaches to story analysis, I briefly discuss the conditions under which stories are typically elicited in studies of young children's storytelling.

The primary way that researchers analyze stories occurs in conversational settings that elicit a dialogue between a researcher and a child or a parent and a child. Stories stimulated in conversational settings draw on two separate sources. The first source of inspiration comes from the field of linguistics, using a method developed by Labov (1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) to encourage storytelling by conversationally prompting the storyteller with a compelling topic such as a near death experience. The child equivalent of this is a time the child was injured (Minami, 2002; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Researchers who employ this method for eliciting stories have developed a number of story prompts deemed appropriate for children such as describing a birthday party (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). A related method of story elicitation relies on a researcher provided story stem such as "One day a fox . . ." (Stein & Albro, 1997). A central feature of occasioning stories through conversational interviews is the researcher's role in prompting stories through queries such as "What happened?" or "Tell me more."

One challenge of such methods lies in analyzing stories that do not necessarily unfold in a monologic fashion (Plum, 2004). For instance, a storyteller may provide a single statement

that functions as an orientation to events before being prompted for additional information which stimulates a longer story turn. The researcher, then, has to determine the boundaries of the story. Does the story begin with the initial orientation? Or, with the longer monologic utterance that storytellers produce after researcher prompting (Plum, 2004)?

In addition to the challenges of marking the boundaries in story, this method of eliciting stories shapes children's storytelling because their contributions occur in a dialogic, one-on-one context, removed from the meaningful, social spaces that animate children's lives. Researcher and child interviews depart from the everyday situations in which children tell stories to navigate their social worlds, and in doing so obscure the purposes young children fulfill through story as well as the social contexts which give rise to children's rhetorical action. Though ideal for standardizing the conditions in which children's stories occur, the result of such methods is a privileging of a conceptualization of story as text rather than as rhetorical action through which children meet social goals.

A second conversational approach to encouraging young children's stories relies on interactions between a parent and child (e.g. Fivush, 1991; Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Minami, 2002; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Snow & Dickinson, 1990). In these studies, stories occur in the context of conversations in which parents prompt, encourage, and point children's attention to particular aspects of storytelling such as accurately retelling events (Heath, 1981, 1983), descriptively orienting events (Peterson & McCabe, 1991), or rapidly shifting between related, but distinct topics (Peterson & McCabe, 1991) in similar fashion to the quick and ready responses needed to participate in interactive, conversational contexts (Au, 1998; Heath, 1981).

Research that studies children's storytelling in the context of parent child interactions aims to understand how children are socialized into particular ways of construing experience

through interactions with more capable members of the culture. Unlike researcher and child dialogues, parent and child conversations do not rely on preset story topics or predetermined prompts to encourage a child to tell more. Instead, this method of story elicitation aims to capture the dynamics of parent and child interactions in a naturalistic context in order to understand the various ways that parents encourage, support, shape, and sometimes curtail the development of storytelling amongst young children (Peterson & McCabe, 1991). Stories collected in this manner are dialogic like those elicited in researcher and child interactions, but occur in a socially meaningful context that plays a prominent role in children's everyday lives, the home.

A third approach to collecting young children's stories gathers monologic stories with the support of a wordless picture book. This type of prompt aims to provide children with a support and privileges fictional storytelling over stories of personal experience. The most well-known of instance of this type of story collection is a study by Berman and Slobin (1994) which features a cross-cultural, developmental study of stories in response to the wordless picture book *Frog, Where are you?* (Mayer, 1969). This text, along with its precursor and sequels, is commonly used as a way to elicit stories in young children for analysis. One advantage of standardizing the method of eliciting stories through a common text like this lies in the ability to compare across groups; although as Berman and Slobin note (1994), the Mercer Mayer story, though wordless, codifies several Western assumptions through the illustrations such as chronological story and the presence of a problem to be solved. Further, this story draws on several aspects of shared knowledge and shared viewpoints amongst European Americans about home life, and so may be constraining for children who do not share these lived experiences and assumptions about storytelling.

As noted, two main analytic approaches to understanding stories predominates the analysis of children’s storytelling. Both approaches, though distinct, have close parallels with what has been termed the “classic” story structure (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), true narrative as outlined by Labov and Waletzky (1967). In a true narrative, the story unfolds in a series of stages – orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and an optional coda that brings the story into the present moment and rounds off events. The most closely aligned analytic approach, highpoint analysis (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), categorizes stories along a trajectory toward true narrative on a continuum from disoriented, impoverished, chronological, leap-frog, end-at-the-high-point, and the classic structure.

**Table 2.1**

*Description of Highpoint Analysis Story Classification (Peterson & McCabe, 1983, 37)*

<b>Story Classifications</b>	<b>Description</b>
Disoriented	Too confused or disoriented for the listener to understand
Impoverished	Consists of too few sentences for a high point pattern to be recognized, or reiterates or evaluates only two events
Chronological	A simple description of successive events
Leap-Frog	Jumps from one event to another within an integrated experience, leaving out major events that must be inferred by the listener
Ending at Highpoint	Builds up to high point and then ends; there is no resolution
Classic	Builds up to high point, evaluatively dwells on it, and then resolves it

Using a highpoint analysis in a sample of children from two to four to nine years old, Peterson and McCabe (1983) found that the number of true narratives increased with age. Chronologically organized stories remained a prevalent form of storytelling until the age of nine when this type of story structure declined slightly. Notably, largely chronological stories, elsewhere termed recounts, have been found as a prominent story structure in both elementary (Martin, 1984) and adult storytelling (Plum, 2004) in other samples. In Peterson and McCabe’s research (1983), impoverished stories remained evident from age four to six. Stories

characterized as impoverished included only one or two events and so could not be analyzed in terms of structure. However, the authors' noted that the youngest children's performance may have been affected by a lack of knowledge regarding researcher proposed story topics.

A second prominent approach to analyzing young children's stories relies on the notion of story grammar developed by Stein and Glenn (1979). Story grammar is a psycholinguistic approach to story analysis in which the researcher parses stories into episodes which can be deployed in near infinite configurations. The equivalent to a classic structure as described by Peterson and McCabe (1983) and Labov and Waletzky (1967), consists of an initiating event that leads to an internal response in the protagonist. The protagonist formulates a plan or goal and then engages in overt actions to achieve the goal. This overt action has consequences which result in either successful or unsuccessful completion of the goal. Finally, the protagonist responds to the goal in some way. This structure closely mirrors true narrative structure in that the overt action of the protagonist leads to an outcome that "either blocks the attainment of important goals or results in the presence of unexpected circumstances" (Stein & Albro, 1997, 5) – the very definition of a complication in a true narrative conceptualization of story.

**Table 2.2**

*Description of Story Grammar Episodes (Peterson & McCabe, 1983, 69)*

<b>Story Episodes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Settings	Internal states, external states, or habitual actions that introduce the characters and social and physical environment
Events	Natural occurrences, actions, or environmental states that result from actions
Motivating States	Internal states such as affects, cognitions, or goals that motivate the protagonist
Attempts	Actions initiated by an event or motivating state
Consequences	Actions which achieve or fail to achieve a goal
Reactions	Internal states that are precipitated by events, attempts, or consequences and do not motivate behavior; or, they are purposeless actions that are precipitated by events, attempts, or consequences



Proponents of story grammars assume that this basic story structure reflects the way that individuals cognitively process events (see Cortazzi, 1993 for a review of psycholinguistic approaches to story analysis).

The story grammar approach to story analysis may be limited in its utility for understanding the earliest developmental trajectory of storytelling since stories without causal or temporal links are characterized as structureless or atemporal, descriptive episodes (Stein & Albro, 1997), potentially obscuring the productive potential of the earliest beginning instantiations of story structure. Stories characterized as having no structure, like stories characterized as having impoverished structure in highpoint analysis, remain prevalent throughout kindergarten (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Stein & Albro, 1997). Story grammar analysis also demonstrates that children continue to tell largely descriptive episodes in equal number from kindergarten through fifth grade (Stein & Albro). Despite the presence of descriptive stories in other samples of elementary school children's (Martin, 1984) and adults' storytelling (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997), story grammar does not conceptualize descriptively-focused storytelling as stories since these accounts do not conform to the goal-based model of story elevated by story grammar.

Critics of the story grammar method to story analysis note that the approach is largely intuitive in that it does not draw on the grammar of language to determine episodes (Cortazzi, 1993). Furthermore, goal directed, problem solving behavior is not the only underlying pattern found in processing and producing stories. For instance, individuals include evaluative responses and reactions more consistently than goal directed behavior in stories (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), suggesting the prominence of reasoning about events and stance taking over setting and carrying out goals.

Different cultural groups have evidenced what in story grammar terms would be thought of as different underlying patterns of thought. For instance, some groups have demonstrated patterns of storytelling that privilege indirect storytelling that circles around a point as evidences amongst some Indian American speakers and Asian cultural groups (Minami, 2002). In “talk story,” a Hawaiian speech event, individuals tell stories of personal experience through joint performance with other community members, interjecting humor and teasing throughout (Au, 1998). Other studies have documented storytelling where events are implicitly or metaphorically related, instead of developing a single idea in one extended story (Michaels, 1981, 2006). Storytelling practices like those described above suggest that a story grammar approach to analysis may privilege an individualistic, linear conception of story over approaches to storytelling that rely more heavily on communal knowledge and assumptions. This communal knowledge is widely shared amongst the group who inhabit a so-called “sea of information” that guides ways of making meaning and understanding (Hall, 1989, 39).

Current approaches to collecting story samples, in an attempt to support children and standardize conditions, shape storytelling by constraining the ideas and interests that children can tell about. Prevalent ways of collecting stories also obscure the purposes which prompt children to tell stories (Donovan, 2002), by capturing children’s stories removed from the everyday, meaningful social contexts in which children meet social goals. The studies that do attend to natural contexts for storytelling focus on the home, providing little insight on the other social contexts, such as early care and education classrooms, that may play a meaningful role in informing children’s storytelling. Finally, current approaches to collecting children’s stories rely on dyadic interactions to the exclusion of larger group contexts, potentially missing the way that

stories are more than their textual instantiation. Stories are forms of rhetorical action through which children meet goals in the social contexts that influence their lives.

Prevalent approaches to analyzing young children's stories elevate structure as the sole marker of complexity and cast stories in relation to a unitary, linear model of story. By privileging a single model of story structure, studies that rely on highpoint analysis and story grammar may misrepresent culturally specific ways of construing experience as lesser instantiations of story rather than as evidence of valid, diverse approaches to organizing and sharing experience. Further, a single model of expert performance in storytelling leads to prescriptive, rather than descriptive ways of understanding the functional potential of language to construe meaning, disguising the ways that individuals' use of language is simultaneously shaped by and shapes expectations for story in a shared culture.

**The Early Development of Storytelling.** Ultimately, the challenge for studies into the earliest instantiations of story lies in delineating developmental trajectories toward improved storytelling while attending to variation in what constitutes expert performance amongst different discourse communities. To meet this dual challenge, some researchers have emphasized shared modes of storytelling across cultural groups elevating true narrative as an almost universal way of structuring stories (Berman, 2001; Bruner, 1990; Gee, 1999; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Insights from this research suggest that children as young as two years old demonstrate knowledge of story (Halliday, 1975; Nelson, 2006), although young children demonstrate a less well-developed conception of story than older children and adults (Stein & Albro, 1994). Proficiency in casting experience in true narrative form develops over time (Donovan, 2001; Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

As children learn to tell stories in culturally expected forms, they develop growing proficiency contextualizing events and including a complicating occurrence. For instance, children often provide some kind of orienting information for their stories, though the amount and level of detail can be highly variable (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) and, in part, dependent on ways of being socialized into storytelling in the home (Peterson & McCabe, 1991). Children age three to five usually tell stories about an animate protagonist, a critical central feature of the goal-directed story model proposed by story grammar (Liwag & Stein, 1995; Stein & Albro, 1997; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Young children have also been shown to provide a complicating event with some regularity – the hallmark of true narrative stories (Labov, 1972) –, but demonstrate less proficiency at offering resolutions to those complications (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Stein & Albro, 1997; Umiker-Sebeok, 1979).

Part of what makes a story work is the cohesive elements that signal the relationships between events and help form a more coherent story. Young children use cohesive elements in their stories, but use a more constrained range of cohesive conjunctions than older children (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Children in third and fifth grade tell more cohesive stories than children in kindergarten (Stein & Albro, 1997). Though it was long believed that young children did not adequately understand causal relationships (i.e. Piaget, 1930 / 1972; see McCabe & Peterson, 1997 for review of the development of the use of causal conjunctions), we now know that children as young as one and half years old demonstrate an understanding of basic causality (Gopnik, 2009). Though preschool children use causal conjunctions with less frequency, they are no more likely than adults to employ these conjunctions incorrectly in their stories (McCabe & Peterson, 1997).

Recent evidence suggests that skill presenting interpersonal features of story such as evaluation and character motivations and intentions may be the mark of advanced storytelling and higher cognitive ability amongst preschool children (Curenton, 2011), though children as young as two and half have included elements of evaluation in their stories (Miller & Sperry, 1988). Children can often tell what happened in a story, but they demonstrate less proficiency attending to psychological causality. This ability, which is closely related to a child's understanding of theory of mind (Bruner, 1990), improves with age as five year olds show a marked increase in inclusion of psychological detail when compared to four year old children (Curenton, 2004). Nicolopoulou and Richner characterize this transition as shift from describing characters as actors, agents, and then persons as children move from age three to five and gain increasing insight into the internal psychological states that inform everyday action (2007).

Finally, young children have been shown to attend to the needs of the listener when relating personal experiences. For instance, children use simpler language (Shatz & Gelman, 1973) and relate different information (Fivush & Hammond, 1990) depending on the age and relationship shared with the listener. Analysis into the stories of kindergarten through fifth grade storytellers demonstrates that attention to audience begins early and shapes the ways that children report telling stories (Donovan, 2002). Taken together, these findings support the need to situate children in peer contexts to analyze storytelling in order to understand more fully how non-parental relationships and group contexts inform young children's storytelling.

**The Role of Culture in Storytelling.** A second approach to understanding both the developmental trajectory of children's storytelling and the diverse models of expert performance toward which children are continually building focuses not on uncovering shared, or universal storytelling capacities, but on highlighting and comparing local and culturally distinct ways of

developing as storytellers. When coupled with research on shared or universal features of storytelling, studies on culturally specific patterns of construing meaning reveal a more complete picture of how children develop as storytellers in relation to models of expert performances.

Young children enjoy an ongoing apprenticeship in social, cultural, and linguistic knowledge shared by members of their culture. Stories constitute a critical feature of this knowledge. Evidence suggests that children gain an understanding of preferred storytelling modes in the home (Bruner, 1990; Curen-ton, 2010; Caspe & Melzi, 2008; Michaels, 2006). Some researchers further speculate that some modes of storytelling may better prepare children for story expectations in school (Curen-ton, 2010; Michaels, 2006). In particular, ways of telling stories that make explicit links between events (Michaels, 1981) and effectively communicate enough orienting detail for listeners who did not share the event to understand what transpired (Peterson & McCabe, 1994; Snow, 1983) are believed to best prepare children for school-based literacy tasks. Researchers view these skills as especially important because of the decontextualized nature of written language (Snow, 1983; 1991; Snow & Dickinson, 1990). In order for children to communicate effectively through written language, they must learn to anticipate the needs of the reader who does not share the same knowledge and assumptions as the writer.

Some researchers have pointed out that not all racial, ethnic, linguistic, or economic groups socialize children into the same ways of using language (Heath, 1981; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Hasan et al, 1996; Schleppegrell, 2004; Henrichs, 2010). For instance, in a study of sharing time in a first grade classroom (1981, 2006), Michaels noted differences in use of prosody and story structure between black and white children. She argues that the differential use of prosody and story structure does not, in of itself, pose a disadvantage for children, but that

the value of instructional interactions around story diminished when children's stories did not conform to the teacher's expectations. In particular, the teacher in this study had difficulty recognizing links between events that were not explicit when children employed a more "topic associating" style of storytelling in which events were implicitly or metaphorically linked.

Other researchers, investigating the role of child-parent interactions (McCabe & Peterson, 1991) and storytelling amongst Japanese elementary school (Minami & McCabe, 1995) and Japanese preschool children (Minami, 2002) have uncovered similar patterns in storytelling. In these studies, researchers note that some parents encourage quick shifts rather than extended discursive turns (Peterson & McCabe, 1991). Eisenberg (1985) illustrates through an analysis of two children's conversations in the home how the Latino parents in her study were not focused on temporal accuracy. Instead, Latino families may emphasize description and evaluation (Silva & McCabe, 1996). An analysis of parent-child talk in 23 families with children age four suggests that some Latino parents employ a storytelling style similar to the topic associating style employed by children in Michaels' study (1981) in that links between events were often implied and temporal ordering seemed less important than rich description of a more loosely connected theme or themes (Sparks, 2008). Further, Japanese children identified as members of a cultural group that places a heavy emphasis on the value of listening, intuiting, and empathizes told stories in brief three clause recounts of related events rather than extending a single story (Minami & McCabe, 1991; Minami, 2002). Findings such as these have led researchers to call for thematic analysis as a complement to solely structural accounts of storytelling since children across cultural groups demonstrate a shared attention to theme even when patterned ways of structuring story differ (Champion, 2002). By tracing the themes that children develop,

researchers can uncover patterns in how children develop ideas through story in ways that suggest alternative models of coherence.

An ongoing concern for researchers studying variation in young children's socialization into storytelling is making diverse patterns in meaning-making known so that children's contributions can be understood, valued, and supported in the classroom. A resurgence in studies of young children's storytelling attempts to address this need by delineating the storytelling development of a growing population in the U. S., young Latino children. Though research on young Latino children's storytelling remains limited as does information about their socialization into story (Sparks, 2008), evidence suggests that Latino children tell stories strongly focused on family members and relationships in the home (Silva & McCabe, 1996; Sparks, 2008), although this is common amongst young children in general and may not reflect a unique pattern characteristic to Latino children. Other documented differences in storytelling include the use of grammatical patterns influenced by bilingualism among low SES, Latino preschoolers. For instance, Munoz et al documented a common pattern of dropping the subject once it had been previously stated, an allowable feature of Spanish grammar (2003), but a feature that teachers from different cultural groups might not recognize.

Believing that ways of telling stories are culturally shaped, researchers have turned to the home to account for demonstrated differences in storytelling among young children. As Heath's ethnographic study of three discourse communities suggests, early interactions in the home provide a kind of rehearsal for storytelling enactment (1981). However, even amongst homogenous economic and cultural groups, parents use different conversational patterns to elicit and shape young children's storytelling (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). For example, Fivush and Fromhoff (1988) analyzed parent-child conversations and determined that parents exhibited



either an elaborative or a repetitive style of engagement with children around common events. Parents who exhibited an elaborative style asked open-ended questions and invited children to provide ever more detail. In contrast, parents with a repetitive style tended to ask close-ended questions, did not encourage children to add more detail, and tended to repeat the same questions, viewing storytelling as a kind of “memory test” (Peterson & McCabe, 1992, 301). McCabe and Peterson demonstrated that the children of parents with an elaborative style of engagement showed more extended personal narratives at three and half years old (1991).

Findings to date document that different families have different ways of socializing children into the larger language community. However, predictably, variation exists even within economic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups. Given that there are fewer studies of diverse preschool age children’s storytelling skill (Feagans & Farran, 1993), let alone how children of diverse backgrounds and home experiences work together in classroom spaces, additional research is needed to fully understand the heterogeneity that exists within groups before cross-cultural comparisons can be fruitfully made (Guerra, 2008). Further, it may be that characterizations of children’s storytelling ability based on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic standing may be too broadly generalized. As Heath notes:

Different social legacies and ways of behaving can also be found between villages or communities located only a few miles apart. Members of such social groups may not differ racially, but their respective histories, patterns of face-to-face interactions, and ways of adjusting both to the external environment and to individuals within and outside their groups have shaped their different patterns of using language (1981).

In acknowledgement of the role of local contexts, researchers may be better served by illuminating language use in particular contexts instead of attempting to make more generalized claims about socioeconomic or racial and ethnic groups since these groups have considerable variation.

**Filling the Gap: A Critical Need in Understanding Storytelling in the Classroom.**

One context in need of further study is the multicultural, urban Head Start classroom. Research on language use in this classroom context is needed to complement research centered on the home since a growing number of children attend Head Start and participate in discourse communities with other children and teachers who introduce new ways of saying, being, and doing. The classroom is an important social space because, for young children, social life consists of an ever growing capacity to connect with others. As children move from life in the home to school, they encounter an expanding social circle of children and adults with whom to share social life. In order to connect with this expanded social circle, children must relate experiences in ways that other members of their classroom discourse community can readily understand.

Current research often overlooks the classroom as a space with distinct ways of using language. As Nicolopoulou (2002) has noted, sociocultural interpretations of children's storytelling ability have remained largely confined to dyadic relationships, instead of exploring larger social contexts and peer group relationships. A small body of research takes up the intersection of play, storytelling, and emergent literacy, studying storytelling in the classroom (McNamee, 1990; 1992; Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006; Paley, 1984; 1986). These studies all use the same storytelling method which combines teacher-child dictation and play acting. Under this method, the teacher writes down the dictated stories of individual

children who choose to tell a story. The teacher prompts the child to tell more in dialogic fashion if needed. Later, the teacher reads each child's story while the storyteller and a few designated companions act out the story. Insights from this research note that children's stories have a beginning, middle, and end, are lyrical and imaginative, and become a central part of classroom life (McNamee, 1990; 1992; Paley, 1984, 1986), creating a "powerful matrix for learning and development" (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006, 129). Through this activity children tell longer stories (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006) and develop growing literacy awareness (McNamee, 1990; 1992; Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006; Paley, 1984; 1986).

Research into storytelling in the classroom has provided compelling portraits of children learning together with story as a focal point in classroom community life. However, this body of research lacks the kind of detailed linguistic analysis needed to understand children's language development in these social contexts. In this study, I provide an analysis of children's stories in terms of ideational meanings, meaning-making resources of language, and interactional features of a group storytelling context that might occasion co-construction, providing a detailed linguistic account of how children inform one another's understanding of what constitutes valued forms of meaning-making. What kinds of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings do preschool children make for an audience of children? How might these meanings shift or find reinforcement from peer interaction? Recent research on children writing in elementary school suggests that these questions might be particularly salient given evidence that early writing is not a solitary endeavor, but one in which children create jointly produced texts through social interaction over time (Bourne, 2002).

Research into the storytelling of ELLs can illustrate the promise and challenges of using storytelling to support children in effectively using two languages in the classroom (English Language Learners Focus Group Report, 2002; Severn, 2012). This dissertation research fills a critical gap by describing a particular type of classroom context, one in which multilingual and multiethnic children learn together. ELLs bring varied language profiles to classrooms that require additional teacher attention to cultivate children's proficiency in two languages. However, ELLs also possess linguistic and cultural resources that enrich the learning environment by introducing alternate ways of saying, doing, and being. This research aims to make the distinct linguistic and cultural resources of children manifest by providing the space for children to express aspects of lived experience that are important to them in the classroom context.

One way to better understand the potential of particular classroom contexts as sites for language development is to study children's storytelling ability in the context of recurring, social activities like story circles. Story circles are small groups where individuals take turns sharing a story around a common theme. Story circles have been used in therapeutic settings (Williams-Clay et al, 2001), in preschool and community settings (Bonissone et al, 1998), and as part of literacy instruction for high school students displaced after hurricane Katrina (Randels, 2005). In a story circle, each member shares their own story, building on the stories previously shared. This technique is particularly useful for building community through shared experiences. Often members of the story circle are reminded of similar experiences, points of connection, and shared emotional responses (Randels, 2005).

Though story circles have a facilitator, this technique emphasizes the role of the participants as creators of their own community. The facilitator ensures equal time for

participation, prevents disruptions from other participants, and handles unexpected events as needed. Ultimately, the storytellers determine how the shared space develops within an individual story circle and over time as the same group of participants meet again. As Nicolopoulou suggests, “Certain types of peer group activity can serve as especially powerful contexts for promoting development” (2002). The story circle offers such a context by positioning children to determine what to tell and how to tell it.

This participation structure may be particularly useful because it creates space for children’s voices and varied ways of construing experience through story. Research into multilingual classroom contexts suggests that children need the opportunity to express more extended discourse than the short turns that teacher child interactions typically afford (Wedin, 2010). Story circles provide this space without forcing children to compete with other children or adults for the floor because each participant receives equal, uninterrupted time to tell their story. As a storytelling activity, story circles provide both social and personal motives for students to gain “facility with language and literacy (Bonissone et al, 1998), especially given the community focus of the activity (Williams-Clay et al, 2001). Through this activity, children can express their identity and see themselves as shapers of “the ways we communicate in this classroom.” Such a deeply social activity offers a different research perspective on children’s stories; one that acknowledges that language in use always reflects the context in which the language was produced, and, in turn shapes our understanding of what is possible for classrooms as social contexts for learning and development.

Though not currently a regular part of early childhood literacy instruction, story circles offer potential as a methodology for collecting stories from young children. By placing children in a social context that more closely mirrors the kinds of authentic contexts in which individuals

actually tell stories, story circles position children as authors situated in a highly social and supportive environment. This stands in stark contrast to typical ways of eliciting stories for research; ways that place children in one-on-one contexts, provide a story topic or wordless text to narrate, and draw on a single story as evidence of storytelling ability. In contrast, story circles situate children in an ongoing, small group context in which children tell stories that are important to them. As a methodology, story circles offer the potential to not just understand the rhetorical patterns that emerge in this context, but to understand how the context of story circles themselves may operate to shape stories as children interact with one another on a weekly basis. By examining story circles as a socially meaningful activity, this methodology allows for more than just a text-based analysis of storytelling. Instead, storytelling can be conceptualized and described as a social activity through which children fulfill meaningful social goals in a peer context.

Shifting the context for storytelling also suggests the need to expand the concept of story as well. Research to date typically privileges true narrative over other forms of story even though analyses of adult storytelling reveal that individuals are as likely to produce alternative types of stories in response to the same story prompt (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; Plum, 2004). Similarly, elementary school children utilize a range of story types during writing tasks in school (Martin, 1984). Despite evidence that narrative does not hold a monopoly on ways of telling story, true narrative continues to be elevated in ways that may marginalize other legitimate modes of meaning-making. As Bailey et al (2008) note, common analytical story frameworks may fail to capture the true range of stories that children produce. In this study, a number of children produced stories that were largely descriptive in nature, a finding that echoes insights provided by Peterson and McCabe as well (1983). By shifting both context and concept of story,

research can both build on and expand current understandings of the development of storytelling in young children.

This study thus fills several gaps in the current research on preschool children's narratives. First, the sample included in the study represents a less well-known context for storytelling – multiethnic, multilingual configurations of children in urban Head Start centers. Second, this study employs a storytelling technique intended to maximize social interaction, children's input, and community building amongst participants. This pedagogical technique may prove especially useful in classrooms like those studied here, where children hail from different cultural backgrounds and may be socialized into different modes of storytelling. Third, this study draws on a functional perspective of language and a developmental orientation to young children's language. As such, this study will highlight the strengths that children bring to meaning-making, considering children's stories on their terms instead of as a lesser form of mature production. Finally, by including multiple story types, this study captures young children's storytelling as it is, rather than as teachers or scholars believe it should be.

In order to better understand young children's storytelling, this study examines story circles as a meaningful social activity that elicits particular rhetorical patterns. This study asks: What can we learn from story circles about preschool children's storytelling?

- What do preschool children tell stories about in story circles?
- What features of stories such as organizational strategies, logical connections, and oral language meaning-making features do children employ during story circles?
- What are the affordances of story circles for eliciting ways of participating that acculturate children in the practices of composing, comprehending, and responding to texts?

## Method

The design of this study acknowledges the sociocultural nature of children's learning by positioning children to work with one another on a four week unit of storytelling. In terms of design, this study uses both a micro and a macro analysis of story circles as an activity. This study moves from a micro level analysis of the ideational meanings that children construe through story to an examination of the organizational features employed to coordinate complete and cohesive stories. On the macro level, I illustrate the dialogic power of story in the larger classroom culture, analyzing patterns in ideational meanings and ways of making meaning in the context of individual story circles and classrooms. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how children's stories respond to other children's stories and to ideas, interests, and ways of being present in the larger classroom culture. In the sections that follow, I outline the context for this study, the methods for data collection, and the data analysis procedures.

## Sample

**Context.** This study focuses on preschool students from the large urban school district of Chicago. Chicago Public Schools serve predominantly low income students with 86% of students served coming from low income families (Chicago Public Schools, 2010). Before many children reach kindergarten classrooms, they participate in early childhood care and education programs such as Illinois Preschool for All and Head Start<sup>1</sup>. Income eligibility for Head Start requires children and families to be living at or below the federal poverty level, currently set as \$22,050 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Though children in the study come from families living at or below the federal poverty level, both centers in this study reside in areas characterized as mixed in terms of income and race and ethnicity

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<sup>1</sup> Recent estimates indicate that approximately 40% of Illinois 4 year olds attend either Preschool for All (28%) or Head Start (12%) classrooms (Barnett, 2012).



(City of Chicago, 2013). Since less is known about the early storytelling of children living in poverty, this provides an ideal setting for filling an existing gap in the literature on the language resources of low SES preschoolers who present diverse linguistic profiles as ELLs. In doing so, this study also draws pedagogical implications for basing instruction on the experiential, linguistic, and social resources which low SES children bring to Head Start classrooms.

**Community Centers and Classrooms.** I conducted this study in two community based Head Start centers. Though the centers were located in different Chicago neighborhoods and operated by two separate private, nonprofits, the community centers had several central features in common. First, both centers participated in the community partnerships program through which Head Start funds local community agencies to operate a federally funded and shaped educational intervention. In other words, these Head Start classrooms were not located in local public schools, but in community centers that offered a number of services ranging from afterschool programming, parent education, and food distribution. As such, both centers attended to broader community needs, especially the need for high quality child care that extends beyond public school hours. Second, both community centers attained the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation, a mark of quality in the field of early childhood care and education.

Each community center served a mixed-age, multiethnic, and multilingual population of children. As mixed-age classrooms, children age three through five attended the same class. In mixed-age classrooms, children learn in the same classroom until reaching the appropriate age for kindergarten entry. So, many of the children spend two years with the same teachers and cluster of similarly aged peers. During the first year, younger children are paired with children preparing to leave for kindergarten. In the second year, these same children become the older

classmates who know and share the routines of classroom life with a new younger cohort of peers.

Though all four classrooms served children with multiple home languages, the majority of the children were Latino. To meet the needs of these students, three out of the four classrooms had one teacher who spoke Spanish. Despite this resource, all four classrooms followed a largely English immersion model of instruction in which classroom interactions proceeded almost uniformly in English. This type of instruction has been described as the most common condition in which ELL preschoolers learn in early childhood care and education settings in the U.S. (Tabors & Snow, 2002). The centers in this study acknowledged the diverse range of languages spoken in the classrooms by providing labels to different classroom spaces in multiple languages. For example, in a classroom serving children who spoke English, Spanish, and Ukrainian, teachers printed the label for the house area in all three languages.

Beyond these shared features, the teachers in these centers supported ELLs in different ways that ranged from English only interactions to small efforts to incorporate children's home languages. For example, in a classroom that offered English only interactions one teacher commented to another teacher when a child's language shifted from English to German, acknowledging that the child was not speaking English, but not attempting to engage the child to understand what was said. At the same center, a teacher in the second classroom had learned some simple phrases in Ukrainian such as "calm down" and "don't hit." She used children's home language when possible, especially when intervening in classroom conflicts. This teacher also solicited assistance from an older child in the classroom who spoke English and Ukrainian fluently. In one observed instance, the teacher asked the child to remind a small group of Ukrainian boys of appropriate classroom behavior at the lunch table. The child spoke to the

other children and they complied, quieting down and finishing their meals. In instances like these, we can see how even within a single community center differences existed in the classrooms' acknowledgement of and support for children's home languages.

*Curriculum.* The classrooms operated by these two community centers shared common, interrelated instructional features. Both community centers followed The Creative Curriculum (Teaching Strategies, 2013) and organized the classroom space into distinct areas that reflect the diverse instructional imperatives associated with social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Briefly, The Creative Curriculum aims to build a balance between teacher- and child-initiated learning. One mechanism for maintaining this balance lies in teachers identifying, developing, and extending children's interests by populating the classroom environment with materials related to content area study so that children can explore and invent with these materials on their own. Under The Creative Curriculum, teachers use material resources like books and manipulatives to engage children in ongoing, theme-based studies. For example, in one classroom in the study, teachers transformed the house area of the classroom into a shoe store, setting up different pairs of shoes on a shelf, introducing tools used for sizing shoes, and working with students to create a shoe store sign. The teachers complemented this area designed for child-initiated play by holding whole group explorations into shoes, including the examination of a cross-section of a tennis shoe.

Instances like this exemplify The Creative Curriculum approach toward strategically using the classroom environment to enhance young children's learning in a way that balances child-initiation and teachers' responsive input. This type of instruction provided the guiding curricular emphasis in classrooms at both community centers in this study. Though all four classrooms used the same curriculum, the curriculum called for teachers to pursue children's

interests as the source of classroom studies. Consequently, all four classrooms engaged in ongoing studies that reflected the concerns of each local configuration of children and teachers. As a result, the content of these studies varied across classrooms during children's engagement in story circles.

*Physical Classroom Space.* Each community center operated two Head Start classrooms. Though there was some variation in available materials in each classroom, all four classrooms contained a similar layout in terms of designated areas for learning. Each classroom had a small house area with kitchen supplies and dress up clothes and shoes. The classrooms had three tables situated near shelves with puzzles, games, and manipulatives. These tables served a number of purposes. Children ate meals there, played games alone or with classmates, and completed teacher-led art projects. Each classroom contained a sensory table which teachers filled with sand or water and two computers where children played academically-focused computer games. Each classroom had a large rug area that served multiple functions. Children and teachers gathered for whole group instruction like the morning meeting where the teacher took attendance, reviewed children's assigned classroom jobs, and completed calendar related activities. This large rug area also served as the block area, designated for building with small and large blocks as well as housing cars and other transportation related play materials such as street signs.

Within this larger classroom space, I conducted story circles in the same quiet area in each classroom. Each classroom had a small library area with a small rug, book shelves, and child-size, comfortable seating like a small couch-like seat for two. In this area, children read independently, sat and listened to teacher-read stories before nap time, danced, and played. Story circles were conducted in this small library area since it offered an ideal space for a small

group activity and comfortable seating on the small rug. The library area also provided relative quiet during free play periods in which block towers fell, computer games parsed word sounds when prompted by children clicking the mouse, and children engaged in back-and-forth banter about taking turns and sharing resources while they played.

*Instructional Activities.* The classrooms at both community centers organized the school day around several activities – mealtimes, morning meeting, circle time, story time, free play, and outdoor time. Each classroom provided breakfast, lunch, and snack, serving family style meals. In family style meals children and teachers sat and ate together. Children served themselves from bowls at each individual table with teacher assistance as needed. Family style meals are intended to recreate the interactional norms present at family mealtimes, especially the use of extended, conversational discourse (See Snow & Beals, 2006 for review of the literature). Conceptualized as an informal language learning opportunity, mealtimes offer the potential for rich language use, though research demonstrates that the amount and quality of language use during mealtimes varies widely (Cote, 2001). In the four classrooms in this study, children and teachers were observed engaged in both silent and conversation laden mealtimes, demonstrating one of the potential pitfalls of informal language learning opportunities: when teachers are not intentional about taking advantage of opportunities like mealtime, the opportunity for language learning is missed.

Each classroom began its day with a brief morning meeting in which children gathered in a whole group on the large rug. At this meeting, teachers and children engaged in several routine activities, including marking attendance and noting children who were absent, completing a calendar activity in which children identified the month and day of the week, and identifying classroom helpers for the day. In each case, teachers and children focused attention on a brightly

colored board which contained the calendar and different systems for noting absent children. The morning meeting typically lasted less than 10 minutes and served a dual purpose of orienting children to the day's activities and responsibilities as well as providing exposure to letters, numbers, and counting through predictable routines. Routinized interactions of this type are believed to be particularly supportive of children like ELLs who may initially struggle to make sense of ongoing activities and expected ways of participating in a language other than their home language (English Language Learners Focus Group Report, 2002). Interaction in this activity occurred largely between the teacher and an individual child whose designated job for the day was to mark the calendar or take attendance, though other children chimed in and gave whole group, choral responses to teacher questions such as, "What day is it today?"

A second whole group instructional activity occurred later in the day when children gathered for circle time. Circle time typically lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. Circle time unfolded differently in the two centers. At one center, teachers engaged children in an interactional routine in which a designated child identified the letter, number, shape, and color for the day. Then, the child, with teacher assistance as needed, led the class in naming all the shapes and colors on the board by pointing at the shapes while the child and class said the name of the shape in unison. At this center, in one classroom this daily routine was followed by dancing and singing to a familiar song, many of which called for children to carry out designated motions in response to the lyrics, a recommended practice for building children's receptive language skills. In the other classroom, teachers engaged children in a review of ongoing studies, writing children's responses to queries that ranged from open-ended questions aimed at establishing children's existing knowledge to close-ended questions that elicited a specific piece of knowledge such as the number of sides of a triangle. The teachers in this classroom went

around the circle calling on children one at time to give a response. Each child was encouraged to provide an answer, even if only to repeat answers already offered by the group.

Circle time at the second center lacked the consistent instructional routine of identifying letters, shapes, and colors. Instead, teachers and children talked informally, sang familiar classroom songs according to both teacher plan and child prompting, engaged in teacher-led explorations related to ongoing studies, and read stories. In all, the majority of activity during circle time supports language development. However, children's opportunities to use language remained limited to short responses to routine activities or teacher prompts.

In the final whole group activity of the day, children and teachers gathered to read a story before naptime. Story time lasted approximately 10 minutes. Like other instructional activities, story time unfolded differently in each classroom. In one classroom the teacher had a routine in which she reviewed the parts of a book – front cover, back cover, spine – while children responded in chorus, repeating the name of each part. Then, the teacher read the book while children were dismissed individually to brush their teeth and prepare for naptime. In another classroom, the teacher read a story and asked informational questions about the story after the conclusion, calling on children who had raised their hand to give responses. An important part of this interaction involved children listening quietly, waiting, raising their hand, and offering input only when called upon by the teacher. In a third classroom, the teacher typically read the book and dismissed children without discussing the story. In this classroom, children also repeatedly listened to an audio recorded telling of a favorite story, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, while a teacher turned the pages of the book. In the fourth classroom, the teacher carried out story time in a highly interactive fashion with children shouting out reactions, questions, and comments throughout. In this classroom, children also sang familiar chants,

rhymes, and short songs during story time and the teacher used felt finger puppets, on one occasion, to orally tell a story.

Children engaged in largely child-initiated activity during free play. During free play children played in the different activity centers in the classroom. During this time, children played with cars, played in the small house section, used the computer, built with small blocks and manipulatives, and drew pictures with markers, pencils, and crayons. In each of the four classrooms, one teacher led an activity during free play. In three of the classrooms, this teacher-led activity consisted of a daily art project in which children combined and painted teacher-prepared materials. For example, in one classroom children constructed a flower for spring by gluing two paper leaves, a paper stem, and pre-cut colored flower petals together. In one classroom, the children participated in teacher-led science activities in addition to art activities. In these science activities children observed phenomena, drew a picture of their observation, and dictated a statement. For instance, children looked through prisms to see the color spectrum and with teacher assistance recorded what they saw through a drawing of a rainbow and a single sentence-length statement. In a representative example, one child said, "I saw the rainbow in the window." Though teachers in the other classrooms were not observed collecting dictated statements, all four classrooms had pictures hanging in the classroom with brief teacher-written dictated statements from the children. The following is a representative example of a dictated statement present in the classrooms.



## Image 2.1

*Sample Picture with Dictated Statement from Classroom D*



“This Erin. That is me. I’m telling my story.”

The final largely child-initiated activity for the day was outdoor time. During outdoor time children played individually or with small clusters of children on the playground, playing chase, using balls, riding bikes, writing and drawing with chalk, and using buckets and shovels to dig holes and find bugs. Teachers served a supervisory role, ensuring child safety and helping to settle disputes during this highly active time. Though children engaged in activities that supported academic learning during outdoor time, the focus of the activity remained on physical exercise.

**Children.** As we will see throughout the analysis, despite the many shared features described above, each classroom constituted a unique learning space with different configurations of children, interactional norms, and ongoing learning interests. The different ways that teachers acknowledged and supported children’s diverse home languages offers the first hint of how deeply small interactions might shape a larger classroom culture. In acknowledgement of each classroom as a distinct local context, I attend to larger, cross-

classroom shared patterns and specific classroom contexts throughout. Accordingly, I describe the sample as a whole across the four classrooms as well as in terms of each individual context.

Overall, the children in these four classrooms represent seven ethnic groups<sup>2</sup>: European American (29%), Latino (57%), African American (4%), Arab American (4%), Filipino (2%), Nepalese (2%), and African American / Latino (2%). The parents of this sample characterized 67% of the children as speaking a language other than English as their primary home language. I refer to these children as English Language Learners (ELLs). An additional 6% were characterized by parents as speaking English and another language as their home language. I refer to these children as bilingual. Finally, 27% of the children were parent-reported English home language speakers.

This sample of children averaged 54.2 months old ( $SD = 6.8$ ). 49% of the sample were female. 16% of the sample had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in speech and language at the time of the study. In the subsections below I briefly describe the configuration of children present in each of the four classrooms.

*Children in Classroom A.* At the time of the study, Classroom A consisted primarily of children of Latino and Ukrainian descent<sup>3</sup>. Though parents reported that only 13% of the children spoke English as their home language, English was the primary language of instruction in the classroom as well as the primary language of play for children in the classroom. A small cluster of four children frequently spoke Ukrainian while playing and another three children

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity and home language characterization are based on parent report.

<sup>3</sup> Parents identified most of the European American children in terms of their specific country of origin, perhaps reflecting their recent immigrant status and residence in a Chicago neighborhood known as Ukrainian Village, a small community comprised of individuals of many different Eastern European origins, but most especially Ukrainian immigrants. Children henceforth identified as European American in the sample were not recent immigrants and spoke English as their home language.

spoke Ukrainian if prompted by a teacher or addressed in Ukrainian. Otherwise, these three children interacted in the classroom, speaking English.

**Table 2.3**

*Classroom A Demographics*

<b>Children (N=15)</b>	<b>Mean (SD) / Percentage</b>
Ethnicity	
Ukrainian	53%
Latino	40%
Latino / African American	7%
Home Language	
Ukrainian	53%
Spanish	33%
English	13%
Age (months)	56.5 (6.9)
Gender (female)	46%
IEP	20%

Three children in classroom A had an IEP in speech and language at the time of the study. These children received additional support for language development once a week, working with a speech therapist.

*Children in Classroom B.* In the same community center as Classroom A, Classroom B served a more diverse range of children in terms of ethnic and linguistic background. A higher percentage of the children in this classroom spoke English as their home language than in Classroom A. Teachers and children exclusively spoke English in the classroom with the exception of one child who would alternate between English and German when attempting to relay information.

**Table 2.4***Classroom B Demographics*

<b>Children (N=10)</b>	<b>Mean (SD) / Percentage</b>
Ethnicity	
Ukrainian	10%
Latino	70%
Polish	10%
German	10%
Home Language	
Bulgarian / Ukrainian	10%
Spanish	30%
English	30%
Polish	10%
German	10%
Bilingual	10%
Age (months)	54.3 (7.9)
Gender (female)	50%
IEP	10%

*Children in Classroom C.* At the second community center, Classroom C served a diverse range of children, parent-identified as European American, Latino, African American, Nepalese, and Arab American. Half of the children in the classroom spoke English as a home language. The children in the classroom spoke English exclusively with the exception of two boys who spoke Spanish together during play. The teachers in Classroom C attempted to incorporate children's home languages in small ways such as singing a Spanish language song with children during circle time.

**Table 2.5***Classroom C Demographics*

<b>Children (N=10)</b>	<b>Mean (SD) / Percentage</b>
Ethnicity	
European American	20%
Latino	50%
African American	10%
Nepalese	10%

Arab American	10%
Home Language	
Spanish	30%
English	40%
Nepali	10%
Arabic	10%
Bilingual	10%
Age (months)	51.2 (6.1)
Gender (female)	60%
IEP	30%

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Classroom C served a younger group of children than other classrooms in the sample. Half of the children were under 48 months old at the time of the study. Three of the children in the classroom were receiving services for an IEP in speech and language at the time of the study.

*Children in Classroom D.* In Classroom D, the children were parent-identified as primarily Latino with a home language of Spanish. The children were observed using English as the language of play. Instructional interactions proceeded in English with the exception of the lead teacher who addressed individual children in Spanish on some occasions. On one occasion, I observed teachers talking with the parent of a little girl, identified as Arab American, about her English language development. During the exchange the teachers and parents discussed the meaning of the word “shy” and the parent offered a homonym for the word in her home language. Though the teachers in classroom D were not able to speak the child’s language, interactions like this suggest sensitivity to children’s language backgrounds.

**Table 2.6**

*Classroom D Demographics*

<b>Children (N=14)</b>	<b>Mean (SD) / Percentage</b>
Ethnicity	
European American	7%
Latino	71%
African American	7%
Filipino	7%

Arab American	7%
Home Language	
Spanish	57%
English	29%
Arabic	7%
Bilingual	7%
Age (months)	53.9 (5.7)
Gender (female)	43%
IEP	7%

Classroom D consisted of an older group of children compared to Classroom C. Only two of the children in Classroom D were younger than four years old. One child in classroom D had an IEP in speech and language at the time of the study.

*Storytellers Described in the Study.* In order to highlight patterns in language use present across the four classrooms as well as ways of participating present in particular classrooms, I trace the storytelling of a portion of the children in the sample across the three results chapters. These children are briefly described below.

**Table 2.7**

*Storytellers Described in the Study*

Classroom	Story Circle Group	Child	Age (Years, Months)	Race / Ethnicity	Home Language	IEP Status
A	1	Karla	5, 2	Latino / African American	English	
A	1	Alex	5, 0	Ukrainian	Ukrainian	
A	2	Andriy	5, 4	Ukrainian	Ukrainian	IEP
A	2	Pablo	5, 0	Latino	English	
A	3	Adriana	4, 7	Latino	Spanish	IEP
A	3	Alejandra	4, 7	Latino	Spanish	
A	3	Vitya	5, 2	Ukrainian	Ukrainian	
A	3	Tereza	5, 4	Ukrainian	Ukrainian	
B	4	Francisco	4, 3	Latino	English	
B	4	Maria	4, 0	Latino	English	
B	4	Araceli	5, 2	Latino	Spanish	
B	5	Elena	4, 8	Bulgarian /	Bulgarian /	

B	5	Joel	4, 9	Ukrainian	Ukrainian	
B	5	Krzysztof	4, 6	Latino	English	
B	5	Daniel	5, 2	Polish	Polish	
C	6	Sarah	4, 0	Latino	Spanish	
				European	English	
				American		
C	6	Marcus	3, 7	Latino	Spanish	IEP
C	7	Sunita	4, 2	Nepalese	Nepali	
C	7	Inez	4, 0	Latino	Spanish	
C	7	Jada	4, 4	African	English	
				American		
C	7	Michael	5, 3	Latino	English	
D	8	Diamond	5, 1	African	English	
				American		
D	8	David	4, 4	Latino	Bilingual	
D	8	Maricruz	4, 1	Latino	Spanish	
D	8	Carlos	5, 2	Latino	Spanish	
D	9	Ana	4, 3	Latino	Spanish	
D	9	Eric	4, 4	European	English	
				American		
D	9	Marta	4, 4	Latino	Spanish	IEP
D	10	Adan	5, 2	Latino	Spanish	

I selected children in order to evenly represent the whole sample in terms of classrooms, story circle groups, age of participants, ethnicity, home language, and IEP status. This enabled me to describe a range of ways of participating in story circles. It should be noted that each classroom has one story circle where I have selected all, or nearly all, of the participants as exemplars in order to show the kinds of story circle interactions that took place as children told stories, commented, and responded to one another.

### **Data Collection**

This research is not an intervention study. Its purpose was not to measure the impact or efficacy of story circles as an instructional technique, but to elucidate children's storytelling in classroom contexts in which story circles structured participation in storytelling in particular

ways. I collected data for this study in four classrooms that constituted distinct, but related classroom contexts. This dissertation study aims to elucidate these contexts and the stories that children told in the space and time in which this study took place. In doing so, this study contests existing conceptualizations of young children's stories by showing that stories are more than isolated texts. Stories are inextricably connected to the situations that occasion them.

**The Role of the Researcher.** I designed this study, negotiated access to the four classrooms, and collected data for this study, spending five weeks in each community center, two days a week in each classroom. For the first week, I observed and participated in activities, focusing on getting to know children. An important part of this time involved building rapport and familiarity with children so that they would feel comfortable sharing stories in the story circle with a person who was new to their classroom.

*Researcher as Participant Observer.* During the five weeks, I acted as a participant observer in the classroom, assisting teachers in many aspects of classroom management like helping children transition between activities, leading the classroom line, and leading the children in a family-style lunch at one table in each classroom. Throughout the day, I immersed myself in children's activities, reading stories and engaging in classroom play.

As an observer, I carried a small notebook with me throughout the day. In this notebook, I recorded observations throughout the day, alternating between interacting with children and recording details of their play, classroom interactions, and instances of language. I wrote notes midday during the children's naptime and at the end of the day after leaving the classroom.

Children in the classrooms demonstrated considerable interest in my role in the classroom, my observational activity, and my status as the story circle facilitator. For instance, in the first week in Classroom C a child asked, "You're a teacher?" To which I responded, as I



did in all four classrooms to similar queries, “I am a teacher helper. I am here to help your teachers, but I am just visiting.” In the final week of the study, the same child asked the same question. I gave the same response. The child then said, “You’re a teacher.” Across all four classrooms, children asked similar questions, perhaps trying to make sense of my role in the classroom since I assumed the role of a teacher in activities like leading the lunch table and made an effort to adopt similar language as the teachers when intervening in disputes and carrying out routines. Yet, I carried a notebook, sat back and observed, and only attended school on certain days.

The children in the classrooms also asked about my notebook and audio recorder. When children asked what I was doing, I said that I was writing down about how they played and what they said. Just as children tried to figure out my role in the classroom, they were interested in what I was writing and did not always accept my explanation of my presence as descriptive and innocuous. For instance, I observed a child in Classroom A writing on a sign-in sheet that the teachers had placed at the writing table for children to use. This sign-in sheet had each child’s first and last name with a blank space to the right of it where parents would typically sign and write down the time of their child’s arrival. At the writing table, the child went down the list of children, placing a checkmark to the right of each name and using pretend writing to make notations. She asked me to read a name that she was unsure of. Then, she said, “I’m pretending to be the teacher. I do that all day. Marcus didn’t did it right. Oh, he did. He did a story about McQueen. [Looking at the next name] She did a story about the queen in the castle. [Looking at the next name] Alexei didn’t did it. I can’t even think about it. He didn’t do a good job.” She continued down the list, marking who did or did not tell a story and occasionally evaluating their performance even though she had not directly heard the stories of most children. At times, other

children asked me to read to them what I had just written and seemed pleased to hear their words recorded. In all, children noted and questioned my place in the room and my activities, trying to make sense my role as a participant observer, someone who adopted many of the interactional norms of the classroom, but engaged in activities that were quite distinct from the classroom teachers.

*Researcher as Story Circle Facilitator.* In addition to my role as a participant observer in the classroom, I acted as the facilitator for the story circles in each classroom. I assumed the role of story circle facilitator in order to keep story circles consistent between groups and classrooms. This enabled me to begin and end story circles the same way across classrooms, ensure consistent retelling of the facilitator example story, and respond to events in a similar way across classrooms. For instance, children often looked at me while telling a story, perhaps checking on the appropriateness of their performance. In order to keep adult acknowledgement and encouragement consistent across storytellers, I smiled and nodded throughout each child's story, but offered no verbal feedback. Given that teachers directed existing group activities primarily through teacher and child interaction, remaining quiet and listening while children held the floor for extended turns without teacher input represented a shift in ongoing classroom practice. Assuming the role of the facilitator allowed me to ensure that children led the activity with relatively little adult feedback shaping the interaction. I only intervened if directly addressed by a child. For instance, in one story circle a child commented to me that they could not hear the story. I in turn asked the storyteller to speak up.

Just as the children commented on my role in the classroom and observational activities, they demonstrated an interest in my role as the story circle facilitator and recorder of stories. Children demonstrated their interest in the facilitator role through pictures like that in Image 1,

through requests to tell and hear stories on the audio recorder at different times throughout the day, and through their play. For instance, in Classroom B one child reenacted the story circle, enlisting two other children in the house area to tell stories. She picked up a small block and said:

This is the phone recorder. You just have to talk into it and tell a story. [Looking at the researcher] Like your thing is for telling stories. Kids, come hear my stories. [Two children stood next to her] I'm a teacher. Okay. I'm going to tell my story first and then you can tell yours.

She then told a story and passed the small block to the next child who told a story as well.

In my role as a researcher I aimed to fit seamlessly into the classroom contexts as a helper, observer, and story circle facilitator. However, my presence in the classroom injected new ways of participating and, at least temporarily, changed the space because being observed, being recorded, and telling stories represented new happenings in the four classrooms.

**Story Circle.** The main source of data for this study comes from audio recorded story circles conducted in each classroom for four weeks. Children in this sample were divided into story circle groups that consisted of four or five children. The groups remained consistent across the four weeks of the activity. I formed story circle groups to purposely pair children of diverse home languages, ages, and IEP status so that each group was mixed in terms of background and potentially diverse developmental ranges. I also solicited feedback from classroom teachers about forming the groups.

The story circles occurred during the free play portion of the day. As noted above, story circles were conducted in the small library area of each classroom with participants sitting in a small circle on the rug. An audio recorder was placed in the middle of the circle and ran for the

duration of the story circle, capturing both children's stories and comments to one another before, during, and after individual stories. I used a small notebook to take notes during the story circle as needed. These notes included details such as gestures that children made while telling stories.

The first story circle began with an example story told by the facilitator. I told a brief narrative as the model story since it conforms to many of the expected conventions of story, and because my own pilot study suggests it elicits interesting child stories in response.

### **Text 2.1**

#### *Facilitator Story Example*

This is a story about when I was young.

*Abstract*

One time, I went hiking with my family on a mountain trail.

*Orientation*

*Suddenly*, when I put my foot down, it began to move in a zigzag from side to side.

*Evaluation / Complication*

I was so scared.

*Evaluation*

When I looked down I discovered that I had stepped on a small snake. The snake's body moved in a zigzag on the trail, so my foot moved that way too.

*Events*

I lifted my foot and it slithered away.

*Resolution*

But I was *still so* scared because I was afraid of snakes.

*Evaluation / Complication*

Nothing happened though.

*Resolution*

The snake kept moving and I continued to walk with my family.

*Reorientation*

After concluding the story, each child took a turn telling a story in response to a prompt meant to elicit a story of the child's choosing: "This is a story circle. In a story circle you can tell a story about anything you want." Data collected during a pilot study suggests that this method provides an optimal context for collecting stories from young children while still keeping them in a collaborative, social context that closely represents typical classroom instruction.

During subsequent story circles, the facilitator did not tell an example story. Instead a child volunteer began the circle by telling a story of their choosing. The order of participation alternated from week to week in each story circle so that each child had an opportunity to take advantage of the different levels of support offered by other positions in the story circle. No child had to repeatedly begin the story circle, nor did a child have the advantage of hearing the other children's stories before participating each week. Occasionally, a child refused to tell a story during their initial turn, but told one before the story circle ended after hearing the stories of peers. Every effort was made to keep the order of storytelling consistently alternated, but instances like this made this type of researcher control imperfect.

Children in this study often ceded the floor after telling a story with a direct statement of conclusion like "the end" or "I'm finished." In some cases, children paused while telling a story to think of what to say next. Similarly, some children stopped telling a story somewhat abruptly, leaving it somewhat unclear whether they had concluded their turn or not. If a child stopped talking without directly stating that they had concluded their story, the facilitator waited six seconds and asked, "Are you finished?" The child then either completed their turn or indicated that they had, indeed, concluded.

I transcribed all story circles and organized individual stories by child, story group, classroom, and whole sample. This allowed me to analyze stories for patterns in ideational

meanings, organizational features, and interactive engagement in relation to individual and group performance.

**Field Notes.** I complemented the story circle data with observational data collected during the school day. I carried a notebook with me in the classroom for writing down observations of children's play, impromptu stories, and quotes from conversations, especially ones that extended stories told during the story circle activity. I wrote detailed notes about children in the classroom, ongoing classroom studies, and observed interactions between children, teachers, and parents, especially as related to language learning. For example, I paid particular attention to which children played together, how language was used in this play, and how ideas and interests were fostered and taken up across the classroom day. These notes were intended to support an understanding of the story circle activity, and cannot offer more than a window into classroom life during a brief moment in a much larger year of learning together.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of story circles proceeds from an SFL perspective. SFL highlights the way that language simultaneously makes three types of meaning – ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In this study, I analyzed children's stories in terms of ideational meanings, the organizational features employed to realize those meanings, and the stories, themselves, as dialogic activity through which children negotiated aspects of identity and the culture of the classroom. In doing so, I examine how the children in this sample construed experiences of the self through ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Below, I briefly highlight the focus of analysis for each results chapter. I provide a more in-depth explanation of the analytic method in each individual results chapter that follows.

**Ideational Meanings.** In the first results chapter, I examine the ideational meanings that children make through story by analyzing stories as configurations of participants, processes, and circumstances. Such an analysis highlights who does what under what conditions. For example, the facilitator's model story began with the orientation, "One time, I went hiking with my family on a mountain trail." Orientations set the context for what is to follow. Here, the participant is a first person narrator. The process is a material action, "went hiking." There are several circumstances in this orientation: a circumstance of time, "one time;" a circumstance of accompaniment, "with my family;" a circumstance of location, "on a mountain trail."

Analysis of stories in terms of ideational meanings involves parsing clauses such as this into its constituent parts of participants, processes, and circumstances. Then, after each story in the sample has been parsed line by line, patterns in terms of ideational meanings can be discerned. The advantage of an analysis like this lies in setting the foundation for an understanding of young children's storytelling on its most fundamental parts. Later, we will see how the children in this sample extended particular ideational meanings by continuing or elaborating on a particular ideational thread like "when I was young," a circumstance of time from the facilitator story. In this way, the most elemental parts of story reflect larger patterns in ideational meanings made across the sample as well as playing an instrumental role in maintaining a larger dialogue through story.

**Organizational Features of Language.** In the second results chapter, I extend the analysis, showing how the children in this sample used organizational features of language to construe meaning. Specifically, I analyze children's stories in relation to the structural organization of known story types, for their use of cohesive conjunctions which establish

relationships between events, and with respect to phonological resources which construe textual and interpersonal meanings.

*Structural Organization of Different Story Types.* An analysis of stories in terms of story types entails identifying the stages through which young children's stories unfold. The facilitator model story (See Text 2.1) presented earlier shows the story in terms of functional stages. Each functional stage serves a purpose in its own right and in relation to the other stages. For example, the purpose of an orientation stage is to set the context for events. This often occurs by indicating the time, location, or conditions for events as well as introducing relevant participants. In the first results chapter, I parsed individual clauses in the stories into constituent parts that made up the clause and constituted configurations of ideational meanings. In the second results chapter, I present findings from parsing stories into functional stages, determining the purpose that each clause, or cluster of clauses, fulfills in the story.

Once I parsed stories into functional stages, I followed a family resemblance approach to classify stories in relation to known story types (Pappas, 2006). Such an approach acknowledges the dynamic element of rhetorical activity wherein speakers' and writers' work can be shaped by convention, but in turn also shapes what is typical for a particular social purpose. The result, demonstrated in samples of adult storytellers (Plum, 2004), is that structural variation exists even amongst stories of the same basic type.

This study considers children's stories in relation to three main story types found amongst samples of adult (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997) and elementary school storytellers (Martin, 1984): narrative, recount, and observations. In terms of functional stages, a true narrative follows a basic pattern of realization that includes: orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and an optional stage of coda which brings the story into the present



moment (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). A typical recount unfolds through a pattern of realization that involves: orientation, event(s), and reorientation (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Some variation has been observed in terms of ending recount type stories (See Plum, 2004 for discussion). Possible endings include a final ending that provides a natural conclusion to events, a reorientation that brings the listener experientially back to where the story began, or a coda that brings events into the present moment, sometimes offering a kind of moral perspective on the occurrence. The final story type, an observation, prototypically consists of an orientation, a description, and an extended evaluative stage (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Unlike narratives and recounts, the emphasis of observations is on the description of entities or events, rather than a retelling of the events that constitute an occurrence. Finally, speculating that story circles as an activity may capture new ways of telling stories, I coded the stories open to new patterns and the possibility of hybridity.

*Cohesive Conjunctions.* In this study, I analyze young children's use of cohesive conjunctions to understand the types of relationships that children construct between parts of a text. Cohesive elements like conjunctions are important to text because they convey logical relationships that move the text forward in a more or less focused manner. Cohesive conjunctives are instrumental in signaling the logical relationships expressed by different types of story such as the temporal succession of recounts, the deep descriptive focus of observations, and disruption of events typical of narratives. For this analysis, I move beyond just examining the types of cohesive conjunctions children use in order to show how children use structural, cohesive, and phonological resources in a coordinated way, employing multiple organizational features of language to construe meaning.

*Phonological Resources.* In this study, I analyze children's stories in terms of stress and intonation patterns, examining how children emphasize different parts of their stories by elongating words and shifting intonation. Stress and intonation helps establish the rhythm of language as well as make textual and interpersonal meanings. Textually, rising or falling intonation activate joint understanding for members of a shared culture as intonation such as rising intonation conveys a meaning in of itself. In many discourse communities in Western cultures, rising intonation communicates incompleteness, uncertainty, or more to come. Alternately, falling intonation signals completeness, certainty, and finality in terms of information. So, in terms of textual meaning, one might expect this type of intonational pattern for a complex clause: "When I put my foot down, it began to move." The rising intonation of the dependent clause communicates the incompleteness of the message; that there is more to come. The falling intonation that ends the complex clause signals that in terms of information the message is complete. Interpersonally, intonation can serve an evaluative function by conveying the speaker's stance toward events such as feeling certain, excited, or scared. Intonation also helps manage the listener's expectations and keeps the listener interested and engaged. In this respect, intonation acts as a critical meaning-making resource which even very young children have been shown to employ effectively (Halliday, 1975). An analysis of intonational resources has been largely ignored in studies of young children's stories despite its critical role facilitating understanding amongst members of a shared culture (Michaels, 1981, 2006).

**Storytelling as a Dialogic Activity.** In the final results chapter, I contextualize children's stories by identifying ideational threads in the stories that derive from the culture of the classroom, from the facilitator's story, and from other children's stories. I describe children's comments during story circles. Finally, I present exemplars of different ways that

children participated in story circles over time to demonstrate how children shaped story circles as an activity through diverse ways of participating. All three of these analyses demonstrate how children's stories are more than the textual instantiation. Instead, this chapter shows how the ideational meanings and organizational features of story constitute rhetorical action in the culture of the classroom.

This results chapter builds on the analyses in the previous two chapters by showing how ideational meanings construed through participants, processes, and circumstances extend beyond individual children's stories to work as a kind of rhetorical action through which children engage in a larger discourse intimately concerned with negotiating conceptions of the self and shaping the culture of the classroom to which children relate. I achieve this by identifying lexicalized ideational threads which consist of individual participants, processes, or circumstances. As noted earlier, one such thread is the circumstance of time, "when I was young." Then, after identifying particular threads, I analyzed stories across the four weeks, within story circle groups, and within classrooms in order to identify and trace the way that children took up and extended particular ideational threads.

The final results chapter also develops the analyses in the previous chapters by demonstrating how children told different types of stories across the four weeks as a way to participate in story circles in different ways, and in doing so, to shape the classroom conception of what story circles as an enterprise are about. This entailed discerning patterns in ways of participating that included listening, telling a story, and entertaining others.

Finally, I complement the previous results chapters' analyses by showing how children directly shaped story circles by making comments about each other's stories. I describe patterns in comment-making such as who makes comments and who receives comments. I also analyzed

comments in terms of the story turn that prompted the remark in order to determine features of story related to circle-mate comments. In this way, I am aimed to understand what features of story prompted peer interaction as well as how these interactions shaped instantiations of story.

### **Chapter 3 Ideational Meanings in the Story Circle: Construing the Self**

In this chapter, I set the foundation for the analysis of young children's storytelling by examining the experiences that children construe through story. In the chapters that follow, I expand on this analysis by investigating how children tell these stories as well as how the story circle context shapes and is shaped by children's ongoing participation in a reoccurring storytelling activity. Throughout, I treat storytelling as a fundamentally meaning-making activity through which individuals continually negotiate the meaning of their everyday lived experience. This negotiation occurs in socially situated, local contexts that sit within and in relation to other contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Further, individuals present multiple portrayals of self as they reconcile an ever changing identity through participation in functional activities. In a perpetual state of becoming (Wenger, 1998), one way that individuals navigate this transformation is through story.

Through stories, individuals recapitulate experiences, simultaneously expressing aspects of identity and relationships to others. The stories that people choose to tell are often based on "personal interest determined by a stimulus in the social context in which the narrative occurs" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Like in other activities, individuals pursue private interests, occupy different social positions, and fulfill different motivational imperatives through their engagement in a group storytelling activity. In this way, individuals mediate private intentions through participation in activities shaped by social imperatives (Miller, 1984).

Young children have already begun to develop their ever evolving identity, to develop a theory of the world and their place in it (Gopnik, 2009). The development of their identity is

mediated by participation in activities in the home and the community. Through these activities, children develop along trajectories of increasingly full participation (Wenger, 1998).

Accordingly, language learning activities, like story circles, strategically harness children's capacity to make meaning, and in doing so, negotiate identity, offering fertile ground for learning. Activities like story circles capitalize on children's own interests by providing a space for them to tell about the experiences which they deem worthy of sharing with peers. An analysis of what children tell stories about sheds light on the kind of experiences that children draw on as well as the linguistic resources they marshal to make meaning. It offers a window into the ongoing concerns of children at this point in the life span and suggests how storytelling, as a core communicative competency, develops over time.

Knowledge of what children tell stories about holds interest for researchers and educators alike. This study illuminates the role of story circles in eliciting stories from young children in contexts serving multiethnic, multilingual configurations of children. It complements existing literature on young children's storytelling by shifting research methods from one-on-one assessments that rely on outside story supports like wordless picture books to a socially situated story context that asks children to generate stories from their own experiences. An assumption of this shift is that even young children deemed at risk for school failure have experiences and linguistic resources that offer a strong basis for language and literacy instruction. As such, this chapter offers insight into how early childhood educators might capitalize on the experiences that young children bring and how researchers can further develop a more complete and nuanced understanding of children's storytelling.

## **Analytic Method**

From a systemic functional linguistics perspective, language simultaneously expresses three metafunctions – the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual. The question of what preschool children tell stories about in story circles is primarily concerned with the ideational meanings that children construe through language. Ideational meanings refer to what language tells about; it is the function of language through which individuals represent and refer to happenings, experienced both internally and in the world (Halliday, 1975).

In order to discern patterns in the kinds of ideational meanings present in children's stories, I analyzed each story in terms of participants, processes, and circumstances. For instance, consider the opening statement to one of Maricruz's stories (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish): "Whe, when I was a, a little girl. I would go to the park with my daddy and my sister." Maricruz began her story with two opening clauses in which she told about a particular event. She gave information about a particular person (participant) who goes (process) to the park (circumstance of location) with family members (circumstance of accompaniment). In this way, children construed their experience of reality through configurations of participants, processes, and circumstances.

### **Participants and Processes**

Experiential meanings are manifestations of the linguistic system of transitivity with grammatical choices about process types the central realizations of the transitivity of each clause (Eggins, 2010). There are six main process types: material, mental, verbal, behavioral, existential, and relational (See description drawn from Eggins, 2010 in Table 3.1). Each process type has associated participant roles.

**Table 3.1***Description of Process Types and Participant Roles*

<b>Process Type</b>	<b>Process Description</b>	<b>Associated Participant Roles</b>
Material	Construes processes of doing or undertaking some action	Actor – participant who performs the action Goal – participant at whom action is directed Range – restatement of the process or extent of the process Beneficiary – participants which benefit from the process
Mental	Construes processes of thinking or feeling, including processes of cognition, affection, or perception	Senser – conscious being who thinks, feels, or perceives Phenomenon – that which is thought, felt, or perceived
Verbal	Construes processes of verbal action	Sayer – participant who initiates verbal action Receiver – one to whom verbal action is directed Verbiage – nominalized statement of verbal process
Behavioral	Construes processes of psychological and physiological behavior such as crying	Behaver – conscious being who performs the behavior Behavior – restatement of the process Phenomenon – participant at whom behavior is directed
Existential	Construes processes that state the existence of something	Existent – that which exists
Relational	Identifying (intensive) – construes processes that define	Token – that which is being defined Value – that which defines
	Attributive (intensive) – construes processes that ascribe or classify	Carrier – participant described by attribute Attribute – quality, classification, description
	Possessive – construes processes that express ownership	Possessor – one who owns something Possessed – that which is owned



Through process choices, individuals construe meanings about experiences in the world, experiences in which individuals do, say, think, feel, and behave in particular ways. Participants in processes of different kinds construe people and things that also have particular qualities and are defined in particular ways. Analyzing children’s stories in terms of processes and associated participants, offers a window into the way that children experience and construe their world by highlighting about whom and what children talk. For instance, in the excerpt from Maricruz’s story she relayed a first person experience in which she went somewhere.

### **Circumstances**

Each type of process can be accompanied by circumstances which provide more information about the conditions under which processes occur. Circumstances include information about the extent, location, manner, cause, accompaniment, matter, or role associated with events (See description drawn from Eggins, 2010 in Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2**

*Description of Types of Circumstances*

<b>Circumstance Type</b>	<b>Circumstance Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Extent	How long, how far	I played <i>all day</i>
Location	When, where	I went <i>to the park</i>
Manner	How, with what, what like	I rode my bike <i>quickly</i>
Cause	Why, for what, for whom	My mom got a bike <i>for me</i>
Accompaniment	With whom	I go to the zoo <i>with my mom</i>
Matter	About what	This story is <i>about Goldilocks</i>
Role	As what	I dressed up <i>as a princess</i>

As the examples in the table illustrate, circumstances are expressed through adverbs or prepositional phrases. In conjunction with participants and processes, circumstances construe experience, highlighting important aspects of events such as the time, location, and accompanying participants.

## Participants, Processes, and Circumstances Analysis

For the analysis presented in this chapter, I coded children’s stories in terms of processes and their associated participants and circumstances in order to discern patterns in ideational meaning. First, stories were transcribed with commas representing short pauses and periods marking longer pauses or a full stop. Then, I divided each story into clauses which contain a nominal and verbal group. I used the length of pause, short versus full stop, as evidence of a clause simplex (a single clause), or a clause complex (more than one clause chained together). Clause boundaries are indicated by a light grey rectangle. Next, I labeled each part of the clause in terms of its role in the transitivity system – types of participants, processes, and circumstances. For example, in one story Diamond (Age: 5 years, 1 month old; Home Language: English) said, “When I was a little girl, I liked to play with my mommy. Um, we go to the park. And we both go on the slide. I go on her lap. And I was one.” An analysis of this portion of Diamond’s story in terms of participants, processes, and circumstances demonstrates how children encode experiential meaning through the transitivity system:

When	I	was	A little girl	I	liked	to play	with my mommy
Circ: time	Carrier	Pr: intensive	Attribute	Senser	Pr: mental	Pr: material	Circ: accompaniment

um	we	go	to the park
	Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location

and	we both	go	on the slide
	Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location

I	go	on her lap
Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location

and	I	was	one
	Token	Pr: intensive	Value

In this story, Diamond orients the audience by indicating the time and place of events as well as who the characters are in her story. She narrates events through material processes in which she does things like “play” and “go.” Diamond also uses relational processes to describe herself as “a little girl” who is “one.”

After coding each individual story in terms of transitivity, I analyzed the stories for evidence of patterns in participant type, process type, circumstance type, as well as common participants, processes, and circumstances expressed in the stories. For example, when considered amongst other stories in the sample, Diamond’s story reflects several larger patterns, including the use of first person participants, the prevalence of material processes, and the shared experience of being young. This story also echoes ideational meanings made within Diamond’s story circle as several children in her story circle told stories about “being young” or going places like the park. In order to capture patterns within story circles, stories were compared with circle-mates’ stories. In this way, the analysis shows ideational meanings shared in the context of individual story circles, classrooms, and across the sample.

## **Results**

For the children in this study, story circles offered an occasion to tell about things ranging from experiences as a baby to retellings of favorite classroom stories from books and films. Though the children told unique stories that reflected their personal experiences with family and friends, their stories were responsive to the initial example story, to the shared interests and on-going conversations of their particular classroom context, and to the stories shared in their story circles.

In this section, I outline shared patterns in ideational meanings made in the story circles in these classrooms. First, I describe common participants, processes, and circumstances as a way to understand both the experiences that children draw on and the resources of language which they marshal to construe meaning. Then, I consider the ways that children's stories express aspects of identity, suggesting how an induction to literacy that begins with children's own experiences can offer social, emotional, and motivational supports for learning.

### **Common Participants**

Children in this sample predominantly told stories with more than one participant. Of the 141 stories in the sample, 114 (81%) of the stories included more than one entity as the actor, senser, sayers, or behavior. In the majority of the stories, children told stories in which participants interacted with other individuals and with the material world. Consider this story by an ELL in Classroom D:

#### **Text 3.1**

*Maricruz (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

Whe, when I was a, a little girl. I, I would go to the park with my daddy and my sister. And then, ah, ah my doggie. Ah, ah there were. He was going to go. Ah, on the slide. But I would not let him go. I'm finished.

In this story, Maricruz relayed an experience at the park, accompanied by her family and her pet. The story began with Maricruz as the actor, but shifts to tell what her dog did and how she responded. In the end, Maricruz prevents the dog from going on the slide. This is a rare instance in this sample in which one participant initiates the action by making another participant carry out some activity. By looking at a transitivity analysis of the story, you can see how the story shifts from Maricruz's actions to her dog's and back again.

Whe	when	I	was	a	a little girl
	Circ: time	Token	Pr: intensive		Value

I I	would go	to the park	with my daddy and my sister
Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location	Circ: accompaniment

And then	ah ah	my doggie
		Actor

Ah	ah there	were

he	was going to go
Actor	Pr: material

ah	on the slide
	Circ: location

but	I	Would not let	him	go
	Agent	Pr: Causative	Actor	Pr: material

I	'm	finished
Carrier	Pr: intensive	Attribute

In the majority of the stories, multiple entities interact, demonstrating how the children attended not just to their own actions, but to the interactions which give reason and purpose to their activities as well (See Table 3.3).

**First Person Participants.** The children in this sample predominantly told first person stories about their experiences in the world. 73% of the stories included a first person participant.

**Table 3.3***Common Participants in the Story Circle*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of Stories (N = 141)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
I	103	73%
mom	44	31%
an animal	29	21%
dad	23	16%
we	21	15%
book, tv, or movie character	18	13%
sibling	11	8%

\* Participants mentioned one or more times in a story.

In a representative example, Jada, an African American student in Classroom C, relayed her experience playing at the beach with her sister and mother.

**Text 3.2**

*Jada (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle 2*

Um, my mommy. I was at a beach, with my mom. And then. And I was playing with my ball. And I, I was in the water. And I, and I was playing with my sister, at the beach. And then, and then I went back home. I'm done.

Here, Jada told about her experience, saying "I was at a beach," "I was playing," "I was in the water," and "I went back home." Though Jada included information about who she goes with and plays with, the emphasis remained on Jada's experience of the event as she presented herself as the main participant in each clause (a main participant is the Actor, Senser, etc.). In similar fashion, Alejandra, an ELL in Classroom A, told a story about visiting her grandmother which focused on her own activity during the visit.

**Text 3.3**

*Alejandra (Age: 4 years, 7 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 4*

One time, I go to my grandma's house. But I go sleep. Um, then I go, um, I see

the TV. Um, con my grandma. And then, our dog go to sleep. And then, I go to my house. I'm all done.

Like most of the stories in the sample, the action in the story is driven by the storyteller herself as she relayed what she did on a particular occasion. Stories like these relay experiences through a single perspective.

Though the children in this sample told predominantly first person stories, most stories captured the dynamics of sharing experiences with other people, especially family members. For instance, in one story circle in Classroom D the children told stories about spending time with family, particularly when they were young. A member of this story circle, Carlos, told a series of stories about his experiences as a baby.

#### **Text 3.4**

*Carlos (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

When I was a little baby (laughs), I was la da da (laughs). And I was do do lo lo do da (laughs). When I was raaaaaa (raises voice, leans back head, and lets out loud cry). And my papi say “brrr brrr brrr” (making mock talking sound and shaking finger in a scolding fashion). And I eat all my milk. And go in my pants. And be a baby with my dad. The end.

In this story, Carlos emphasized his own experience as a baby – crying, eating, going to the bathroom, and “be[ing] a baby.” Carlos inserted his father into the action by having the father respond to the crying. He shook his finger and said, “brrr brrr brrr.” Carlos further indicated that this story was not just about him, but about being a baby with his father, concluding his story by saying, I “be a baby with my dad.” In stories like this, more than one participant drove the action forward through their thoughts, speech, and action. In this respect, stories with interaction

like this reflect a more advanced form of storytelling in that the storyteller coordinates multiple participants' interaction in events.

The preponderance of first person stories reflects the extent to which young children draw on their own experiences to tell stories. These experiences offer fertile ground for literacy learning by allowing children to draw on what they already know to hone their skill sharing experience with individuals who did not share the events. Imparting unknown information (Halliday, 1993) is a key literacy skill. Further, language used to convey novel information to listeners without shared background knowledge constitutes a form of language use that uniquely predicts later literacy attainment amongst preschool-age children (Snow, 1991).

**Family Member Participants.** Across the sample, family members, especially parents, interacted with children in their stories, demonstrating children's capacity for relaying not just their own actions, but the actions of others as well. Family members played a prominent role in children's stories, accompanying children on trips, caring for children, and playing. In 15% of the stories, children told stories which involved coordinated action, reflected by the use of the participant, 'we.' For instance, Diamond, an African American student in Classroom D, told stories about spending time with her mother when she was young. In the first story, (analyzed on page 75) Diamond relayed an instance where she and her mother went on the slide together, shifting from a first person participant, "I," to "we," signaling the shared action of going down the slide together. In similar fashion, Diamond told about playing in the snow as a little girl saying, "I liked to play with my mom in the snow. We made a snowman and a snow angel. And um, and, we went inside to get hot coco." Here, Diamond relayed experiences shared with her mother, moving from information about herself – "I liked to play with my mom in the snow" – to shared actions – "We made a snowman and a snow angel." This highlights an aspect of choice



in language. Diamond might have said, “I liked to play with my mom in the snow. I made a snowman and a snow angel with my mom.” This configuration emphasizes Diamond as the participant or the individual who does things under certain circumstances. Instead, by using ‘we,’ Diamond emphasized her relationship with her mom as the two did things together, acting in coordination.

The children in this sample did not just describe their experiences with family members. Family members assumed a central role as the main participant in stories as well. In Classroom A, children in one story circle described family members and shared events across the four weeks. For example, during the second week of the story circle, Tereza, an Ukrainian ELL, told a story about her mother.

### **Text 3.5**

*Tereza (Age: 5 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Ukrainian); Story Circle Time 2*

Today, I’m going to tell a story about my mom. My mom is staying home, cause Victor is too little. And mommy’s all, doing all the home work. She always clean ups, makes food, and doing everything in the kitchen. She’s always cleaning up and doing stuff.

Here, Tereza described her mother who takes care of her younger brother and the house. Like several of the stories in the sample, Tereza’s told about an important family member in terms of what they habitually do, instead of a singular event. In this case, Tereza’s mother was “always cleaning up and doing stuff.” Perhaps imitating her classmate, Alejandra followed Tereza’s story about her mom by telling about an important family member to her. After refusing to participate in the first story circle, Alejandra, a quiet ELL observed excitedly playing with friends, but reluctantly speaking during large group activities, relayed the following account.

### **Text 3.6**

*Alejandra (Age: 4 years, 7 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

This story is about my sisters. I love my sisters. Um, at my house her play con me. That's all.

Though brief, Alejandra's story turn reflects another important pattern in the data in that children did not just describe family members, but, at times, also directly expressed their relationship with family in the form of a comment. In this instance, Alejandra commented, "I love my sisters."

As these two stories demonstrate, children did not just use the story circle as an occasion to talk about what they did, and with whom, but as an opportunity to talk about what people who matter do as well.

Family members' prominent role in these children's stories suggests the extent to which children's experiences are intertwined with those of family. Children in this sample were able to extend the action in their stories to describe interactions, coordinated action, and third person accounts involving close family members. Sticking to routine events like playing with siblings, observing a mother clean the house, and visiting the park may offer the familiarity needed to clearly convey information to individuals who did not share the experience. Further, in telling about individual experiences with family, children were able to connect with one another over aspects of their lives that are shared. Even though children like Tereza and Alejandra hail from different cultural groups, they have shared background knowledge upon which to draw when conveying information through story.

**Animal Participants.** 21% of the stories featured an animal participant. The children included animal participants in several ways, including as fictional story characters, as entities seen at the park or zoo, or as family pets. The most common participant outside of family

members, animals represent high interest entities which children encounter in their homes and communities.

Children who attempted fictional stories about animals told about lions, panthers, sharks, and snakes. In a representative example, Adan, an ELL in Classroom D, told a story about a little monkey after his circle-mate told a story about visiting the monkeys at the zoo.

### **Text 3.7**

*Adan (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

There was a little monkey in the tree. Then he jump, off of the tree. Then they get him to the boat. Then someone take him to ho, to his home. And then, he go back to his mom. Then, they go to sleep. Then they wake up, and the little, monkey go to the tree now.

Given the preponderance of first person stories, Adan offers a relatively rare third person account about a nonfamily member. In it, he introduces the main character, stating, “there was a little monkey in the tree.” However, he fails to introduce the next participant, referring to them simply as “they” and “someone.” In this instance, one of the challenges of going outside one’s own experiences lies in effectively introducing participants. In a first person account, the listener, in a shared culture, knows quite a bit about a mom and her relationship to the speaker. Other characters who assume less ubiquitously known roles need an introduction. It may be that children need additional support and practice to tell stories that do not derive from their own experiences.

Animal participants figured prominently in a number of children’s first person accounts about going to the park or zoo. In one such story, Maria (Age: 4 years, 0 months old; Home Language: English) described seeing a butterfly at the park. In Maria’s story circle, all four

children told stories about seeing animals that day either at the park or zoo. The last child to tell a story that day, Maria told a story about going to the park which she concluded with a butterfly sighting. She said, “I saw, I saw a butterfly, over there. Right over there (points up). And it was all the way over there, all the way in the sky. And then, I loved, I loved butterflies.” As with other multi-participant stories, Maria’s story involves a first person participant in interaction with another entity, in this case a butterfly. The entity briefly drives the action before the story shifts back to the first person participant’s activity or perspective.

If experiences with family members derive from the routine events of daily life, then encounters with animals may represent the more remarkable and surprising aspects of these children’s lived experience. From the sense of wonder conveyed in Maria’s butterfly encounter to Maricruz’s dog who attempts to go down the slide, animal participants represent funny, exciting, and scary moments in children’s stories. Even from single encounters, children remember the tiger “who yelled” or the bunny they saw with their mother. In this way, children’s animal participants show how children deem singular and special encounters and high interest entities like animals as ideal story topics. This is one way that the children in this sample attended to the need for audience interest, perhaps in an appeal to the culture of the classroom in which animals were especially prized participants. Here too, is another instance where children’s stories drew on and reflected shared background knowledge amongst participants in the story circles. In the case of Maria’s circle, all four participants relayed a unique animal encounter. Their stories simultaneously responded to and extended a shared ideational thread.

**Participants from Known Stories.** In all four classrooms, children retold known stories drawn from classic fairy tales, television, and movies. Though these retellings were present across the sample, children in one story circle, in particular, exchanged primarily known

stories across the four weeks of the study. In Classroom B, Elena told different versions of known fairy tales in each of the story circles. The stories that Elena retold featured prominently in the classroom prior to the story circle activity since the teacher rewarded the class' good behavior with a Friday listening of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* on compact disc. Several of the girls in the classroom regularly read the book during the transition from lunch to nap time. During a classroom read aloud, Elena and another student corrected the facilitator's intonation when it did not match that of the audio recording. In the first story circle, Elena began the story circle with the following retelling.

**Text 3.8**

*Elena (Age: 4 years, 8 months old; Home Language: Bulgarian & Ukrainian); Story Circle Time 1*

I like the story like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. There was one house and. Once upon a time, there was one house. And it was a bear house. And there was two, three bears. And there was a big one. There was a medium one. And there was a little one. And the dad liked to fix the house. And the mom liked to fix the garden with (unclear). And, the baby bear liked to play with some toys in there. Of the house. And then there was eating, on the house. And then there was sitting on the house. And then there was sitting. And then there was sleeping on the house. And there was one girl. And then, she knocked the door. She didn't find anyone. She just tried all the bowls. She tried, and she sit on the chairs. And then she tried to sleep on the bed. And then the, the papa. And then the bears see. They open the door. And they're went upstairs first. And. And they're went upstairs first. And then, and then. The papa say "I was, that was my bed." And then the mama says "That was my bed." And then the baby says

“That’s my bed and there she is.” And then she run away. Out of the window and then. The end.

Elena began her story by carefully introducing the characters and even providing some detail about each character such as the “the dad liked to fix the house.” As she progressed through the story, she shifted from the actions of “the girl” to the actions of the three bears. Compared to first person stories in the sample with a minimal number of participants engaged in activity, Elena’s retelling is quite complex in terms of the number of participants and the order of action needed for the story to be clear. Elena does accurately retell the order of events. In the original story (and classroom version of the story), Goldilocks tries the porridge, sits on the chairs, and then lies on the beds. Soon after, the bears return to discover Goldilock’s misdeeds. Retellings like this suggest some of the affordances of drawing on known stories. Like stories from children’s own experiences, known stories from home and school offer familiarity, a resource that the children can draw on to make meaning through story. Unlike personal experiences, known stories offer a kind of script for introducing participants and managing multiple actors. In this instance, Elena and her classmates repeatedly listened to *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, offering ample opportunity to learn and rehearse the more complex story.

When telling known stories, children did not always focus on accurate retellings. In Elena’s first story circle, she attempted to faithfully render the story. However, in successive weeks, Elena infused new and original details into her story. For example, in the final week of the story circle, Elena had the bears climb “one hundred stairs” to reach the beds and instead of porridge Goldilocks ate the bears’ pie. She said, “She [Goldilocks] saw a pie. She a big pie, a little pie, and a medium pie. First she saw the, big pie. And then, the medium pie. And then, the little pie. Then she eat it all. She liked it.” In this instance, known stories offered a kind of

platform for embellishment and inventive detail. Relying on a known story and familiar participants, Elena altered what the participants saw, did, and felt.

The children in this sample also relayed stories about favorite television and movie characters. Much like the fairy tales, children retold stories about characters that were a part of on-going experiences in the classroom. For example, Joel and a classmate wore shoes advertising the movie *Cars*, they discussed the main character of the story Lightning McQueen during lunch, and were observed recreating scenes from the movie using the classroom's toy cars. In the first story circle, Joel told the following story:

### **Text 3.9**

*Joel (Age: 4 years, 9 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 1*

I like to see *Cars Two*. And Francesco's in *Cars*. And Francesco, she smashed them away. And he was, he almost caught them, in the car. And he caught them. And he was not fast enough. And he became fast. But, all the racers can't get him. But, there was a, there was a car. The orange car's name. I forgot the orange car's name (looks at Facilitator; circle-mate says, "MaKea"). Um, and MaKea just smashes Lightning McQueen away. And Francesco, then he won.

The end.

Joel, like the other children who told stories from favorite movies or shows, focused on one part of the larger story. In this case, Joel told the story of a race featuring one of his favorite characters, Francesco. Joel's circle-mate, who told a *Cars* story in the fourth story circle, supplied the name of the orange car when Joel could not think of it. Across the sample, children retold stories from favorite movies and television shows that other children in the classroom knew and enjoyed as well. Participants drawn from superhero cartoons, *Cars*, and *Toy Story* straddled the world of home and school as children watched these movies and shows at home

with family, but wore clothes, reenacted scenes, and talked about the stories at schools with classmates. In this way, known stories acted as shared stories that offered another way to attend to audience interest. In the process, the children in this sample continued to shape the culture of the classroom by reinforcing the stories that animated classroom life.

### **Common Process Types**

Children in this sample predominantly told stories with more than one process type. Of the 141 stories in the sample, 125 (89%) included participants engaged in different types of processes.

**Table 3.4**

*Common Process Types in the Story Circle*

<b>Process Type</b>	<b>Number of Stories (N = 141)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
material	111	79%
relational	88	62%
mental	59	42%
verbal	26	18%
possessive	25	18%
existential	22	16%
behavioral	15	11%

For example, Joel and another student in his story circle exchanged autobiographical stories told in the third person during their final story circle. In Joel’s story he described an unnamed boy.

### **Text 3.10**

*Joel (Age: 4 years, 9 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 4*

Um, there was a little boy named. And he was five. And, and, and there. And he was even, and he hold his blanky. And he likes to hold him. And he, and he talks. And he likes to drink anything he wants. And, he, likes, to, do, play toys.

The end.



An analysis of the transitivity patterns in this story shows how Joel’s description utilized a number of process types.

um	there	was	a little boy named
		Pr: existence	Existent

and	he	was	five
	Token	Pr: intensive	Value

And	and	and	there

and	he	was	even		and	he	hold	his blanky
	Actor	Pr: intensive				Actor	Pr: material	Goal

and	he	likes		to hold	him
	Senser	Pr: mental		Pr: material	Goal

and	he	and	he	talks
			Sayer	Pr: verbal

and	he	likes		to drink	anything		he	wants
	Senser	Pr: mental		Pr: material	Goal		senser	Pr: mental

and	he	likes		to do	play	toys
	Senser	Pr: mental		Pr: material	Pr: material	Goal

The end

Joel began his story with an existential process, introducing the main participant in the story. Then, Joel used a relational process to tell the boy’s age. He goes on to say that not only does the little boy hold his blanket, but how he feels about holding his blanket as well, providing

insight into the thoughts and feelings of the participant. In all, Joel tells us about a boy who talks, and feels, and does. Even though it is a single participant story, Joel manages to convey a range of activity that offers insight into the boy he described. Across the sample, children used more than one process type. They did not just tell what they did, but introduced the existence of entities, described things through relational processes, and expressed the thoughts and feelings of the participants in their stories.

**Material Processes.** The children in this sample mainly told about participants doing things in the world. 79% of the stories included a material process with which the children described doing things and going places. The children described going everywhere from the zoo to amusement parks to church. Neighborhood parks were by far the most common destination for children and their families. In stories about going places, children described what they did once arriving at that particular place. In a representative example in Classroom B, after hearing his circle-mates story about visiting the park with family, Francisco relayed a story about a visit to the zoo.

### **Text 3.11**

*Francisco (Age: 4 years, 3 months; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 1*

My dad, my dad took me to the zoo. And my brother went there. My brother, and my sister, and me. Then I, I, I, I met the monkey first. Then my dad was playing with him. He left. Then then then, we met the the the, um, crocodile. Then I was crying. Because my dad, my dad carried me. Then we went to the tigers. Then, I, I, I cleaned my, I cleaned my tears. Then, those was sleeping. My dad woke him up. Then, they yelled.

Here, Francisco told about what unfolded when he and his family visited the zoo. His dad was integral to the action as he played with the monkey, carried Francisco when he cried, and woke

up the tiger. With the exception of Francisco's crying (behavioral) and the tiger's yelling (verbal), all of the processes in this story are material processes that describe doing things at the zoo.

Children in this sample also told stories about their experiences playing. In a representative example, Adan, an ELL in Classroom D, described a day when he got a new toy beginning with the trip to the store with his parents and ending with a full day of playing with the new toy.

### **Text 3.12**

*Adan (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 3*

Um, I was, in the car, with my dad and with my mom, and with my brother. I was going to the store. And then, I eat, in the store. I buy everything in the store.

And then, I go to the home. And I already play with it. And then, it will, start raining. And then, um, I go to sleep. And then I read a story already. And then I play. And then I go to sleep. And I play with my toy.

After setting the scene, Adan relates a flurry of activity in which he goes to the store, eats, "buy everything," goes home, plays, sleeps, reads a story, plays, sleeps, and plays again. Across the four classrooms, children like Adan, Diamond, Jada, and Alejandra relayed stories in which the participants played. In this respect, children did not just tell stories about common participants like family and favorite characters from known stories, they also told stories that reflected shared and valued processes like playing.

For these children, the world is a place of action. Accordingly, the bulk of their stories reported on what participants do in the world. Much like the use of participants drawn from the home, children told about their everyday experiences playing with family and going places like the park and the zoo. Activities like going and playing are familiar, yet experiences like making

a snowman and drinking hot coco or playing with a monkey can be special and interesting too. Again, we see the children managing a tension between telling about events that are new and interesting and connecting with other children over common ideas, interests, and experiences.

**Relational Processes.** 62% of the stories included at least one relational process.

The children in this sample used relational processes to give information about participants in their stories. For example, Karla, a biracial student in Classroom A, told a story about growing up. In this story, Karla used relational processes to convey her changing state from a baby to a four year old.

### **Text 3.13**

*Karla (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle 3*

When I was a baby, my mom always take care of me. And then my mom always fed me milk. My mom always pulled my leg (pulled leg up toward body) and cleaned me, and then put my pamper on. And then I got, then when I was a baby, after I got four, my birthday after came. Then from Christmas, I got a princess bike. For I was older, for I'm four.

In this story, Karla bookends the action in her story with relational processes. The story begins the statement, "When I was a baby," and ends with "For I was older, for I'm four." In both instances, Karla uses 'to be' verbs to describe herself.

The children frequently used relational processes to begin stories by orienting the listener to the time and place of the story. For instance, Maricruz began her story about going to the park with her family, saying, "Whe, when I was a, a little girl." Jada's story also began with a relational process: "I was at a beach with my mom." Similarly, Alejandra's story oriented the listener in this way too: "This story is about my sisters."

Though children mainly told stories filled with action, they used relational processes to alert the listener to the context in which the action took place. Relational processes were used to introduce what the children planned to talk about, when the story took place, where it took place, and even to provide descriptive information about participants in the stories. The use of relational processes demonstrates awareness of the need for descriptive information that helps the listener make sense of events. In Karla's story, the shift from wearing pampers to owning a princess bike is made clear when she reveals that she is now four. Just as Diamond's description of going down the slide on her mother's lap makes sense when the listener learns that she was only one year old. In this way, the children in the sample attended to need for contextual information that makes experiences that have not been shared with the listener clear. The very crux of storytelling lies in communicating experience with others so they can understand what has happened in another time and place. The children's use of relational processes demonstrates a budding ability to do just that.

*Possessive Processes.* 18% of the stories included at least one possessive process. Possessive processes are a type of relational process that encodes meanings of ownership. Children in this sample frequently told about getting new things including clothes, shoes, and especially toys. In their stories, children described getting new toys, their plans for getting new toys, and occasionally being denied a coveted new toy. For example, Francisco stated, "I got a new wrestling toy. And I got a John Sina watch. And then I got a candy." He went on to say "I'm going to tell my mommy I want one last toy. But it wasn't. It's not John Morrison. It's going to be Randy X, for he kicks people." In this instance, Francisco shifts from what he currently has to what he wants, employing a relational process to describe his choice between John Morrison and Randy X. A similar instance occurs in Karla's story about when she "got a

princess bike. Across the four classrooms, children portrayed themselves as people who have valuable things. Even when describing his experiences as a baby, Carlos commented that he had “all a lot of toys.”

In this way, the children in this sample expressed a facet of their identity while simultaneously expressing membership in the classroom culture in which having things like toys is particularly valued. Like known stories, toys acted as a kind of shared cultural currency for the children as they refer to a world of characters outside of the school, but known and discussed amongst classmates. In this sense, possessive processes in this sample encode a kind of membership amongst people who are into wrestling, people who are into princesses, and people who are into the *Cars* movies. Children talk about toys as a way to establish their status as people “who buy everything” and have “all a lot of toys,” and also as a way to connect to other children in the classroom and in the broader culture. In this way, the children’s use of possessive processes reflects another instance where they attend to shared interests in their stories.

**Mental Processes.** 42% of the stories in this sample included at least one mental process. Mental processes encode meanings of thinking, feeling, or perceiving. In this sample, children primarily used mental processes to describe what they saw, what they liked, or what they wanted. They mainly used mental processes to express their own perceptions and feelings. Participants like family members may say and do things, but children rarely described their internal states in lexically explicit ways.

Children included memorable things that they saw in their stories. For instance, in Classroom D the teachers and children had recently constructed a family photo album for the classroom. During a story about his experiences as a baby, Carlos referenced a photograph as corroboration of the fact that his dad used to have long hair. He began his story by stating,

“When I was a little boy. Um, my daddy has a long, a long, a long hair. And I saw that in the picture.” In a story circle in Classroom B, Maria told a story about visiting the zoo a week after Francisco did. In this story, Maria described an encounter with seals. She said, “And, and then, I saw seals, in there. And I saw. And seals do tricks. And I saw him. I saw him to do tricks. And I saw him. He eat fish.” In instances like these, the children moved beyond describing what happened to tell about what they, themselves, saw. Carlos’ father did not just have long hair; Carlos saw his dad with long hair. Seals do not just do tricks; Maria saw the seals do tricks. In these instances, children construe experience through their perspective and participation in events. The story is not about seals that do tricks, but about Maria’s experience seeing the seals. In this respect, these children’s stories are about what they have seen in the world. In moments like these, the children forefront their role as the experiencer even when another participant carries out the action.

One of the most common mental processes was an expression of what children liked or loved. For instance, in Joel’s story, he told about what the little boy did and what the little boy liked to do, saying, “He hold his blanky. And he likes to hold him.” Alejandra began her first story with a direct comment about the participants in the story. She said, “This story is about my sisters. I love my sisters.” Similarly, after sighting a butterfly at the park, Maria exclaimed, “And then I loved. I loved butterflies.” Representative of the larger sample, these three children made statements that revealed how they felt about participants and actions in their story.

The children also used mental states to relay what participants wanted in their stories. For example, children did not just enumerate what toys they currently possessed, but commented on toys that they wanted to get. In one such story, Francisco told about a trip to the mall. He said, “We went to the mall. And then we found some toys. And then, and then we, we, we. I

wanted one.” Diamond relayed a story about how her teachers helped her at school. As an example, she introduced a problem that the teacher solved by saying, “But then there was a high bear that I wanted to play with. It was too high to reach.” Finally, in the most complex use of a mental state in the sample, Ana (Age: 4 years, 3 months old; Home Language: Spanish) described an exchange in which her mother tried to wake her up. She stated, “She wanted to kiss me on the cheek. And, and I wanted to go to sleep again.” Here, Ana did not just tell what the mother did, like most stories in the sample. Instead, she juxtaposed the two participants’ mental states. The mother wants the child to wake up and wants to kiss her on the cheek. The child wants to continue sleeping. There is a conflict not just in actions, but in intentions.

For the children in this sample, mental processes were mainly used to express attitudes about what the children, themselves, liked, wanted, or saw. In all, there is a limited emotional range expressed. Participants interact, but children do not typically express how individuals’ actions are informed by thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, let alone how participants may conflict in how they think or feel. Mental processes do, however, represent moments in the text where children express internal states, going beyond representing only the action in the story.

**Verbal Processes.** A portion of the children’s stories (18%) included verbal processes in which children reported what participants said. In this sample, the children mainly used verbal processes to introduce reported speech. Verbal processes were common in retellings of fairy tales. For example, in Elena’s story the bears’ discovery of Goldilocks is encoded in a speech act: “The papa say ‘I was, that was my bed.’ And then the mama says ‘That was my bed.’ And then the baby says ‘That’s my bed and there she is.’” In first person stories, children included verbal processes in their description of events. Remember Carlos’ baby story. In it, Carlos said, “And my papi say ‘brrr brrr brrr.’” Children in this sample also reported their own speech.



While relaying a scary event, Marta, an ELL currently receiving services for an IEP in speech, concluded her story by calling out to her mother.

### **Text 3.14**

*Marta (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

Um, I was, um, a scary. And then, I was thinking about it. And, I can't, um. Um, um, I want my mom. I want my mom. And I said, "Mom. Mom."

Moments like these, where children included reported speech in their stories, had a somewhat dramatic and experiential quality. As a listener you can hear the sound of the father's voice and the cry of the child calling for a parent when scared. Instances like this heighten interest and hold the audiences' attention. These moments also demonstrate the level of comfort some children feel in expressing themselves in front of others. Some children told stories in a quiet voice with their hands in their laps; other children really became quite animated, a quality that teachers often try to inspire in young readers. In this way, children come to understand that stories are more than just words on a page. They express perspectives and emotions. Part of reading and writing is communicating and connecting with a world of human experience. The children's use of verbal processes, though somewhat infrequent, reflects an attempt to have their stories come alive.

**Existential Processes.** In the stories in this sample, children interacted in a world full of living and material things. In 16% of the stories, the children introduced these entities into their stories through existential processes. Existential processes state the existence of something through the word 'there' followed by the verb 'to be.' In these formulations the word 'there' has no representational meaning. It merely serves to introduce the existence of an entity. In the children's stories, existential processes were used to express the conditions in which the action occurred.

Much like relational processes, existential processes were frequently employed at the beginning of stories to establish the context. In Classroom C, Sunita, an ELL of Asian descent, told stories about experiences that she shared with her mother across the four weeks of the study. In one such story, Sunita recalled seeing a rabbit.

### **Text 3.15**

*Sunita (Age: 4 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Nepali); Story Circle Time 2*

Once upon a time there was a little bunny. And one time when I was with my mommy. It come down.

In this story, Sunita began her story with an existential process that introduced the presence of the rabbit. This represents a common pattern in the sample in that existential processes occurred most frequently in the orientation stage of stories, particularly stories that drew on the classic fairy tale. As we will see in the next chapter, existential processes are a typical part of the distinct way that fairy tales begin. Other children in the sample began their stories, introducing important participants – “A couple days ago, there was a snake” – or locations – “Once upon a time, there was a bear house.” In this way, a portion of the children in this sample attended to the listener’s need for context to understand the events that unfold in a story, and provided this context through the use of relational processes.

**Behavioral Processes.** A small proportion (11%) of the stories in this sample included behavioral processes. Of the behavioral processes in this sample, crying was the most common. Children told stories in which they cried from tiredness, from something negative happening, and from being separated from family. In a representative example, Krzysztof, a Polish ELL in Classroom B, told a story about being separated from his parents.

### **Text 3.16**

*Krzysztof (Age: 4 years, 6 months old; Home Language: Polish); Story Circle Time 4*

This is the story of the little boy cried. A little boy just cried, and really cried, really cried. And, and her mommy and daddy don't come back. But they're went to the grocery store. He was by himself, but her grandma mother. And her, decide to stay home with him. And then, then, then, then, her mommy and daddy come back to the grocery store, again, again. And then, they come back to home. To eat dinner. To do, to feed the chickens. And the end.

Here, the story opened with the child crying. As the story unfolds, the reason for the crying becomes clear. Unlike mental processes that tell how the participant felt, behavioral processes show how an individual feels because behavioral processes inhabit a middle state between material and mental processes. Crying and smiling are like feelings encoded in action. In this respect, behavioral processes offer insight into the feelings of characters without directly stating emotions in the way that saying, "I felt sad when my parents left," does. In all, children in this sample rarely employed behavioral processes to express participants' activities. Instead, they used mental processes to make more direct statements about what they liked or wanted. Or, in some instances, the children expressed emotive aspects of story through verbal processes like when Marta called out for her mom.

### **Circumstances**

86% of the stories included at least one circumstance which expressed information about the location, time, manner, accompaniment, extent, matter, or cause of events.

**Table 3.5***Common Circumstances in the Story Circle*

<b>Circumstance Type</b>	<b>Number of Stories</b> (N = 141)	<b>Percentage</b>
Location	107	74%
Time	62	44%
Manner	40	28%
Accompaniment	32	23%
Extent	31	22%
Matter	12	8%
Cause	10	7%

Remember Alejandra's story about her grandmother. An analysis of the transitivity pattern of this story demonstrates how Alejandra used circumstances to tell her story.

One time	I	go	to my grandma's house
Circ: time	Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location

but	I	go sleep
	Actor	Pr: material

Um then	I	go
	Actor	Pr: material

um	I	see	the TV
	Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon

um	con my grandma
	Circ: accompaniment

And then	our dog	go to sleep
	Actor	Pr: material

And then	I	go	to my house
	Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location

I	'm	all done
Carrier	Pr: intensive	Attribute

Alejandra began her story by establishing the time and place of the story. She went on to tell that she watched television with her grandmother, using a circumstance to construe her grandmother as an accompaniment, code-switching between English and Spanish. Alejandra's story concluded with her return home, introducing a new circumstance of location. Alejandra's use of circumstances is consistent with the larger sample in that the children expressed the conditions under which the events in their stories unfold.

**Location.** 74% of the stories in the sample contained at least one circumstance of location. The children set their stories in popular settings like the park, the zoo, and the beach. Many of the stories began with an explicit statement of the participant's location. This was especially the case in stories where children relayed experiences going places. For instance, Maricruz explained, "Whe, when I was a, a little girl. I would go to the park." In similar fashion, Jada started her story indicating her location by saying, "Um, my mommy. I was at a beach." As did Francisco, when he told about going to the zoo: "My dad, my dad took me to the zoo." After initiating a story with a location, the children went on to tell what happened at the park, beach, or zoo, often adding circumstances of location throughout the story.

Since the stories in this sample primarily construed experience through participants' material actions, the children included circumstances of location throughout their stories. Children in two classrooms in the sample told stories about escaping a snake in response to the facilitator's example story. As the children described their escape, they provided information about the location of the snake in relation to themselves. For example, in Classroom C Michael told an elaborated snake story by building on the story of a classmate.

### **Text 3.17**

*Michael (Age: 5 years, 3 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 3*

When I was at the beach. And then, and then I saw a snake. And I thought it was dead. And it wasn't. And then it, wrap over my leg. And then, and then I fell in the water. And then I float. And then, I went deep in the water. Um, and I swim, into the beach. And I made it. And then, I saw the snake. And then I put it in the water.

This story contains several circumstances of location. The story takes place “at the beach.”

Michael went on to say that the snake wrapped “over my leg.” He then fell “in the water,” swam “into the beach,” and put the snake “in the water.” Throughout Michael’s story, he contextualized the action by telling the listener where things took place. This creates a vivid picture of where the story occurred. Location was the most common circumstance provided in this sample with three quarters of the stories including a physical context for events.

**Time.** Another way to establish the setting of a story is to situate the story in time. 44% of the stories contained a circumstance of time. In addition to location, the children in this sample often began their stories with circumstances of time. For example, Alejandra began her story, saying, “One time.” In similar fashion, Sunita began her story with a popular story circumstance, saying, “Once upon a time.” Ana, in Classroom D, began her story, stating, “Um, yesterday, I saw a ghost.” The children also began their story with a clause complex in which they provided a temporal orientation to the action. For instance, Karla started her story with the statement: “When I was a baby, my mom always take care of me.” Through the use of clause complexes like this and other circumstances of time, the children in this sample provided the orientation that listeners need to make sense of others’ experiences.

**Manner.** 28% of the stories included a circumstance of manner. Circumstances of manner indicate how, with what, or like what something occurs. For example in Classroom A, Vitya (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Ukrainian) retold the story of the *Three Little Pigs*. In his story, Vitya relayed how the first little pig “he build his house, out of sand,” and the second pig “he build his house of sticks.” In this instance, “out of sand” and “of sticks” described with what the little pigs built their houses.

Circumstances of manner represent moments where children included additional detail to their stories. Circumstances of manner reflect the difference between saying, “I was playing,” or like in Jada’s story saying “I was playing with my ball.” Most of the children’s stories involved material actions in which they did things in the world. Circumstances of manner express how and with what the children carried out activities.

**Accompaniment.** 23% of the stories included a circumstance of accompaniment. Children in this sample primarily told first person accounts of experiences shared with family members. Family members were included as participants, as coordinated actors demarked by the use of ‘we’, and as accompaniments. From Maricruz who said she went to the park “with my daddy and my sister” to Carlos who claimed to “be a baby with my dad,” the children in this sample used accompaniments to signal important individuals with whom they shared events. In this respect, circumstances of accompaniment offered another way to show how experiences occur in unique contexts at different times, in different places, and with different people.

**Extent.** 22% of the stories included at least one circumstance of extent. Circumstances of extent encode meanings of how long or how far something occurs. In this sample, a number of children employed circumstances of extent to indicate the frequency with which something occurred. For instance, in Tereza’s description of her mother she stated, “She’s always cleaning

up and doing stuff.” In similar fashion, Karla recalled being cared for as a baby, saying “my mom always take care of me. And then my mom always fed me milk.” In these instances, the children use the adverb ‘always’ to express the extent to which participants carrying out a particular action. The children also used the adverb ‘again’ to indicate the extent of events and conclude their stories. In a representative example, Ana concluded her story about a ghost, saying, “I never see it again.” Similarly, Elena ended one of her stories, stating, “Then she never went in the forest again.”

**Matter.** A small proportion of the stories (8%) contained a circumstance of matter which indicated primarily what children told stories about. Eleven stories began with a direct statement of what the storyteller planned to tell. For instance, Alejandra began her story with the statement: “This story is about my sisters.” Tereza introduced her story with the proclamation: “Today, I’m going to tell a story about my mom.” In these instances, children used circumstances of matter as an abstract, or an overview statement of the story. This is an alternative to way to start a story before orienting the listener to context in which the story takes place.

**Cause.** Finally, in 7% of the stories children included a circumstance of cause in which they answered why, for what, or for whom something occurred. In one such instance, Karla described a thwarted attempt to buy a milkshake, saying, “I lost my money for it.” In this case, ‘for it’ serves as the circumstance of cause that explains what the lost money was for. In all, circumstances of cause were rare in this sample as the children were more prone to construe experience in which participants carried out activities in particular times, places, and in particular ways. They were less likely to express why events happened or on whose behalf activities were undertaken.



## **Identity in the Story Circle**

The meaning in a story derives from more than just what happens. Language enables individuals to do more than construe experience. Through language, individuals enact personal and social identities. Thus, stories are not just about experiences, but construe experiences in particular ways to express ideas about who children are and who they are connected to. In this sample, children informed others about unique experiences, expressed attitudes about events, and demonstrated their approbation of particular stories by sharing similar events. Through language, these children continually expressed their persona – their take on the world, their relationship to others, and their personal identity.

**The Influence of Home.** Children in this sample used the story circle as an occasion to identify themselves as individuals with unique personas who are connected to particular people, who do particular things, and construe experience in particular ways. In this sample, children's stories drew heavily from experiences shared with family. Family members served as playmates, caregivers, toy buyers, and excursion companions. They celebrated birthdays, declared children the winner of the race, and defended children from scary ghosts.

Story circles opened up a space for children to tell about their life outside of school, bridging home and school experiences. In story circles, children engaged in the kind of extended use of language associated with language learning, using well known experiences and stories from home as a support for storytelling. This was clearly illustrated in instances when children attempted to deviate from known stories and personal experiences to tell a fictional story of their own creation. Experiences in the home did not just shape children's use of language, they also shaped the ongoing dialogue of the classroom, populating the classroom culture with ideas about ways of being in the world.

*Using Home Languages.* The classrooms in this sample represent unique contexts with distinct configurations of children who represent a mix of English speakers, bilingual speakers, and ELLs with varied experiences and skill in both their native language and in English. Learning in predominantly English-language classrooms that acknowledged the varied home languages, but did not actively support dual language learning, these children used English as the common language of the classroom. With the exception of a cluster of Ukrainian children in Classroom A who often spoke in Ukrainian during play, the children in this sample played, heard stories, and talked during meals in English. Nonetheless, the children's various home languages remained interwoven throughout the classrooms, for example, when a parent and teacher discussed Arabic and English words for shy, when a teacher asked a student to speak to native Ukrainian speakers in Ukrainian in order to stop a particular behavior, or when a teacher comforted a child who had fallen in Spanish. Though dual language learning was not actively supported in these multilingual classrooms, traces of children's home languages coursed throughout the classroom, represented in books, stories, and occasionally classroom talk. Given children's distinct language profiles and variable use of English and native languages in the classroom, it is not surprising that in their stories children incorporated multiple languages. In all, 13 of the 49 (27%) children in the sample used a language other than English in their stories.

These children's stories went beyond representing happenings from home life; they incorporated ways of using language in the home as well. One way that children did this was by including Ukrainian, Arabic, or Spanish words to describe participants in their stories. For example Francisco described an Easter egg hunt with "my tio Christopher." David (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: English & Spanish), along with several other children,

told a story about “my papi,” a Spanish designation for father common amongst individuals from Central America.

Children also used Spanish, Arabic, or Ukrainian names for common items or places. For example in Classroom A, Vitya told a story about buying toys for his dog saying, “Then, then I go to a магазині (store) and buy for my dog toys.” In a different story circle in Classroom A, one child began his story by saying, “Um, my dad bought me fire engine and trains.” In the ensuing story, Alex (Age: 5 years, 1 month; Home Language: Ukrainian) told a story that began in Ukrainian and ended in English. He said, “я пішов магазині (I went store). And, and, and mommy have a choo choo train. And let me play this choo choo train. All day.” Here, Alex relayed a story with a common ideational meaning in this sample: getting new things, particularly new toys just like his circle-mate. Alex did so by combining Ukrainian and English, signaling his status as someone who speaks both languages. This position was shared by a third of his classmates, including one of his circle-mates.

Instances like these also illustrate how some children move fluidly between two languages, using the linguistic resources currently available to them to construe meaning through story. This was particularly evident in the stories of three different participants in the sample who combined Ukrainian, English, and language-like sounds<sup>4</sup> to tell stories. In these instances, children drew on linguistic knowledge of words, structure, and sound to maintain a continuous discourse during their story turn. In doing so, they demonstrate that one way of participating in story circles is through an uninterrupted flow that holds the floor, even if the meaning of the turn

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<sup>4</sup> The use of English, Ukrainian, and non-language sounds in children’s stories was verified in consultation with a school translator fluent in English, Ukrainian, and Russian. Stories from these three children were not transcribed and coded do to the difficulty of rendering the story turns for analysis.

is not readily interpretable to the other participants. For these children, some part of a storytelling activity is about taking a turn and trying things out.

*Sharing Home Practices.* Children also told stories about practices in the home like cooking, going to church, or visiting the Ukraine. In one such instance, Francisco began his story by saying, “Um, my mommy, took me, at church. And we have to pray.” Tereza, who reported attending a Ukrainian school on Saturdays to learn to read in Ukrainian and to dance to traditional Ukrainian songs, told two stories about her experiences in the Ukraine. In her final story about visiting the Ukraine, Tereza described her garden.

**Text 3.18**

*Tereza (Age: 5 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Ukrainian); Story Circle Time 4*

Um, I go to my grandmom, and to, in Ukraine. And in Ukraine, I was playing with my cat. And he was wery black, like a, like a dark spy. And, um, I got my own garden in Ukraine. And I got. There, I got a lot of berries. And strawberries, blueberries, everything. And even we got, a little bit of, onions. I am done.

For Tereza, being Ukrainian is an important part of her identity. Her classroom stories suggest that living in the Ukraine, visiting her grandmother in the Ukraine, and taking classes to strengthen her knowledge of the Ukrainian language and heritage constitute remarkable aspects of who she is and what she does. If engaging in practices enables individuals to represent and negotiate aspects of their identity, then identifying with home languages and home practices allows children to fulfill private intentions in a shared group spaces. It elevates aspects of children’s experience of self by making these parts of lived experience explicit elements of the ongoing classroom dialogue.

Children's experiences in the home were at once unique and shared. For example, Tereza told her story immediately after Alejandra who also told a story about visiting her grandmother in which she code-switched between English and Spanish (See Text 3.3). Just as in the second week when both children described family members, Alejandra and Tereza told stories that responded to one another, but still reflected their unique experiences and identity. In this respect, classroom participation structures, like story circles, facilitate children's self-expression as they tell their teacher and peers about ideas, relationships, and ways of being in the world that are important to them. As Tereza and Alejandra's stories illustrate, these types of learning opportunities bring differences and commonalities to the fore, offering fertile ground for learning by engendering dialogue in the classroom.

**Children's Identity as Capable, Active, and Connected to Others.** The children in this sample told stories which positioned them as capable, active individuals who are strongly connected to family through their stories. By drawing on favorite classroom stories, common experiences, and other children's stories, these children also demonstrated how powerfully they are connected to one another.

Whether escaping snakes or relaying known, favorite stories, the children in this sample emphasized what they were able to do. Across the four classrooms, they described winning races and Easter egg hunts, crossing the street by themselves, escaping ghosts, and playing with "two, two higher, big, big, big giants." They described themselves as caregivers for pets, as less silly than younger siblings, and as individuals who were no longer babies, little boys, or little girls. Though some children described vulnerable moments like when Joel described a little boy who "hold[s] his blanky" and Krzysztof told about "a little boy [who] just cried, and really cried, really cried." Most vulnerable moments served as a counterpoint that highlighted how the

storyteller overcame being separated from parents or had grown past being a baby, as in Karla's story, where she contrasted her past experience as a baby with her more recent experience as an older child stating, "I got a princess bike. For I was older, for I'm four." In this way, Karla brought the listener to the present moment. She has moved from being cared for to riding bikes, a common rite of passage for children as they grow up.

Children in this sample did not just describe themselves as capable, but as active as well. Across the four classrooms, the children told about going places and getting new things. During the time of the study, Chicago experienced a rare, warm April with eighty degree days. Perhaps in response to this sudden warmth, children described going to the park, the zoo, the amusement park, and the beach with family. There, they saw favorite animals, went on slides and rides, and most importantly played. Stories in which children went places and got new things described children's engagement with the world outside of school. Since they described going similar places like the park, one can imagine these stories as a kind of "I go valued places and get valued things too." For example, Diamond "went to Enchanted Castle to play" and Adan "buy[s] everything in the store."

The children's stories also express their connections to other people. As previously discussed, the children demonstrated their connection to family through story. Though they rarely described what they did with their classmates. Instead, they shared unique experiences about their life with family that were reminiscent of their classmates' experiences. For example, in the second week of the story circle, Maricruz shared a story that began "Whe, when I was a, a little girl. I, I would go to the park with my daddy and my sister" (See Text 3.1 for full story). Two weeks later, Maricruz's circle-mate Diamond began her story by relaying a different experience at the park. She said, "When I was a little girl, I liked to play with my mommy. Um,

we go to the park. And we both go on the slide. I go on her lap. And I was one.” Not unlike Tereza’s and Alejandra’s grandmother stories or Joel’s and Krzysztof’s little boy stories, Diamond and Maricruz told topically similar, but distinct stories about their experiences with family. In this instance, they both told stories about when they were young and visited the park. The effect is a kind of “I went to the park with my family too.” Though the stories are not about sharing experiences with classmates, the children share and value similar types of experiences with classmates. This is another way of expressing connection and group membership.

### **Summary**

An analysis of the participants in children’s stories reveals that children in this sample drew heavily from their everyday experiences, telling primarily first person stories. They extended their stories to include the important people in their lives, their family. The children also told stories about high interest participants like animals and favorite characters from books and movies. In all, children told stories that were at once familiar, but in some way interesting or unique.

Though most of the stories included more than one participant, interactions between multiple characters were rare. Instead, the children in this sample told stories where one participant initiated the majority of the activity and interactions served to further illuminate that participant’s experience. In this way, the children mainly adhered closely to one participant’s thoughts, feelings, and actions when construing experience. One exception, known stories, provided an opportunity for children to manage telling about multiple participants. Shared, favorite stories and well known characters offered scripts to rely on for introducing participants

and managing the interaction of multiple characters, perhaps enabling this kind of more complex rendering of story.

The children told stories primarily focused on action in a concrete, material world. They situated these action-oriented experiences in specific contexts by orienting the listener to the time and place of happenings in their stories. These orientations often included existential and relational processes which provided the needed information for understanding the story. The children in this sample also gave additional detail about activities by delineating how, how much, and with whom actions occurred.

Children did not just tell about what participants did, they also relayed information about the inner world of participants by indicating what individuals saw, liked, and wanted. In this respect, they demonstrated a beginning ability to portray experiences driven by intentions and internal states. At times, their stories became animated through the use of reported speech that introduced additional voices to the unfolding events.

In all, the children demonstrated the capacity to construe experience through configurations of participants, processes, and circumstances. By drawing on their own experiences and favorite stories, the children brought their home life into the school, connecting with one another through shared, yet varied home practices. They play, go places, and have and get new things, but their experiences – seeing a butterfly or drinking hot cocoa with their mother – are unique to them.

Inductions into literacy that position children as authorities with valued experiences and perspectives have the advantage of basing instruction on the foundation of what children already know. An analysis of what children tell stories about in story circles shows that even children nearly uniformly portrayed as less able and as coming from homes that are less enriching have a



strong foundation of experience and linguistic resources on which to build. Activities like story circles could serve to make meaningful aspects of children's lived experience explicitly part of the ongoing dialogue of the classroom, offering a bridge between children's home and school experiences. This type of activity, which positions children as active and capable meaning-makers holds powerful implications for classroom instruction.

## **Chapter 4 Organizing Experience through Structural, Cohesive, and Phonological Resources**

In the previous chapter I outlined the ideational meanings that children construed, arguing that through story young children construed lived experience. In this chapter, I examine the ways that children construe experience through structural, cohesive, and phonological resources in order to illustrate how storytelling as a core communicative competency develops from incipient story attempts to more complex instantiations of story that align closely with adult expectations for story.

Stories relate or explain events removed from the immediate context (McCabe, 1991), serving powerful social functions by signaling ideas, relationships, and ways of being in the world that are important in a shared culture. In this study, I argue that the culture of the classroom plays an often underestimated role in shaping ways of using language to continually negotiate valued ways of saying, doing, and being. As such, activities like story circles offer children the opportunity to construe experience through story, to model and compare ways of telling stories, and to engage in a dialogue, sharing meanings about lived experience.

Though the meaning of an oral story is often readily apparent, the way individuals use language to make meaning – structurally, logically, and phonologically – is less obvious. This derives, in part, from the tacit nature of language learning. Individuals learn to use language in social contexts, through interaction, to meet immediate goals and needs. We know how to use language for different purposes, but not necessarily why language works the way it does.

By standing back and analyzing how children use the resources of language to construe meaning through stories, we can gain a better understanding of their facility with using language in a particular situation, in particular forms, for a specific audience. This insight is important because the more precisely we understand what young children can do, the more effectively we can design learning opportunities that exploit children's strengths and build a foundation of linguistic competence. In order to understand how the children in this sample used features of language during story circles, I will present examples of different story types told during story circles as well as examine how the children used structural, logical, and oral language meaning-making features to construe meaning through story.

### **Analytic Method**

In this chapter, I put young children's stories in conversation with known forms of story in order to understand the developmental roots of meaning-making competency. It should be noted that a comparison of children's stories to expected forms is a potentially problematic endeavor. The danger derives from the fact that individuals in a shared culture vest power in particular forms of meaning-making, simultaneously elevating and devaluing different ways of using language. Conscious and unconscious valuing of ways of using language can lead to characterizations of young children's stories as "rambling and unfocused" (Michaels, 2006, 114) as well as "misevaluations" (111) of culturally shaped rhetorical action. However, the value of such comparisons lies in understanding children's stories in relation to a range of meaning-making strategies employed by full participants in cultural activities like storytelling. Through this type of analysis, we can better understand how young children develop along trajectories of increasingly full participation. "Children are, after all, quintessentially legitimate peripheral

participants in adult social worlds” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 32). Analyzing children’s stories in relation to known expectations for story, then, uncovers one way that children are “being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world” (32).

Analyzing children’s stories through a developmental, sociocultural, approach to literacy that casts young children as increasingly full participants in culturally shaped activities requires a careful balance between describing children’s stories on their own terms and in relation to expectations drawn from the broader culture where individuals employ various patterned ways of construing experience. These varied forms play a critical role in managing listeners’ expectations in that form, itself, constitutes a kind of information about the relayed events. As Miller notes:

Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way. Seen thus, form becomes a kind of meta-information, with both semantic value (as information) and syntactic (or formal) value (Miller, 1984, 159).

Through an analysis of form – in this case, different story types and their patterns of realizations – I illustrate the different ways that the children in this sample constructed text along a continuum of complexity. In doing so, these children’s stories demonstrate that ways of using language entail not only meeting listener expectations, but guiding their listener and construing meaning with varying precision.

### **Structural Realization**

**Stages.** Different types of stories have different stages through which their meanings are realized. These stages contribute to the significance of the story as the structure carries implicit

meanings about the ways events unfold in a shared culture. For example, narratives are often considered a way of foregrounding the role of the individual as a critical actor capable of overcoming challenges (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; Bruner, 1990). So, a story like Krzysztof’s account of being left home alone (See Text 3.16) construes meaning at two levels. It is a story about Krzysztof’s individual experience overcoming the sadness of separation; and, a story about how individuals can survive painful partings from loved ones, or challenges more generally.

For the analysis presented in this chapter, I coded stories into stages according to each stage’s functional role. Functional stages can be recognized through patterns of realization in the grammar of language. For this study, discussion of possible patterns of realization was drawn from several sources (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; Hasan, 1984; Martin, 1984; Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) (See Table 4.1). In order to capture the full complement of stages employed in the children’s stories, I describe additional stages based on the children’s use of language. For instance, analyses of adult stories do not typically note a middle stage of description. However, several children in the sample employed descriptive language in the middle stages of stories for different purposes – as a kind of mini orientation to a second complication, as a descriptive aside about a newly introduced entity, or simply as part of an alternating pattern of description and event. In this respect, stages drawn from samples of adult storytelling were included as guides or “frames of expectation” (Lindfors, 1999) that required substantiation in this sample of stories.

**Table 4.1**  
*Description of Functional Stages of Story*

<b>Part of Text</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Possible Patterns of Realization</b>
Beginning	Abstract	Makes meta-statement about text; summary of story including reason for telling	Verbal processes, relational processes, circumstances of matter

	Orientation	Sets the scene in terms of time, location, and behavior situation; introduces cast of characters	Elaborating clause complexes; existential processes, relational processes, circumstances of time or location
Middle	Event	Relays a temporal sequence of occurrences, giving an account of how one event lead to another	Material processes, connective clauses ‘and’ ‘then’
	Description*	Describes an individual, inanimate object, or general conditions	Existential processes, relational processes
	Complication	Disrupts the sequence of events through a change in conditions	Material processes, changing pattern of participant roles, conjunctions of contrast
End	Resolution	Returns events to status quo by dealing with the complication; can serve as a middle or ending stage (Reoccurring stage present in middle and end of text)	Material processes, changing pattern of participant roles
	Reorientation	Restates or refers to the beginning of the text; often states the point of the text; acts as a kind of culminating event	Circumstances of time, consequential conjunction
	Coda	Makes meta-statement about text and returns text to the present time	Relational processes, anaphoric reference to beginning event or whole course of events
	Statement of Conclusion*	Ends the story turn through a direct statement	Relational processes, use of phrase ‘the end’
Throughout	Evaluation	Provides an interpersonal take on events by indicating attitudes, opinions, or the usuality of events; can take the form of a prediction	Circumstances of manner or extent, first person participant, mental processes, verbal processes, change in established pattern of intonation

Comment\*      Makes a direct statement as an  
aside from the story

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\*All stages drawn from the literature (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; Hasan, 1984; Martin, 1984; Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) unless marked with \*.

Drawing on expected patterns of realization while remaining open to new patterns, I analyzed stories for evidence of story stages. For instance, remember Maricruz’s story about her dog attempting to go on the slide. The story began with an orientation in which Maricruz established the setting for the story through a circumstance of time as well as introduced relevant participants through a relational process and a circumstance of accompaniment.

Whe	when	I	was	a	a little girl
	Circ: time	Carrier	Pr: intensive		Attribute

I	would go	to the park	with my daddy and my sister
Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location	Circ: accompaniment

Maricruz then introduced a complicating action to her story with an “and then.” Her dog attempted to go on the slide. She construed this through the verb tense in the material process “was going to go,” indicating the potentiality of the event. This event runs counter to our expectations as it would be unusual to see a dog going down a slide.

And then	ah	ah my doggie
Adjunct: cohesive		Actor

Ah	ah there	were

he	was going to go
Actor	Pr: material

ah	on the slide
	Circ: location

Maricruz resolved the complication by preventing the dog from going on the slide. Each stage is realized through some expected patterns of language use. The complication and resolution were realized through material processes because they report events that first disrupt and then return to usuality. In this instance, there is an alternating pattern of participant roles as the dog acts and Maricruz intervenes. Maricruz signaled the unexpected nature of events through the cohesive conjunction, “but.” This cohesive conjunction interconnects the processes through a relationship of comparison that contrasts the two events.

but	I	would not let	him	go
Adjunct: cohesive	Agent	Pr: Causative	Actor	Pr: material

Maricruz brought her story to a conclusion through a direct statement of conclusion.

I	'm	finished
Carrier	Pr: intensive	Attribute

As this example illustrates, stages are realized through rhetorical patterns in the grammar of language. I followed a similar process to identify story stages for each story turn in the sample.

**Rhetorical Strategies.** Within functional stages, storytellers from diverse cultural backgrounds have been shown to employ different rhetorical strategies to construe experience (Michaels, 1981, Heath, 1982, Gee, 1985, Minami & McCabe, 1991). Research into African American storytelling (see Champion, 2002 for an overview), in particular, offers insight into culturally shaped rhetorical strategies which may be present in young children’s stories.

To illustrate some of the rhetorical strategies identified amongst African American speakers and others, I present a story reported by Heath (1982). In this story, a two and a half year old African American boy named Lem responded to the sound of church bells in the distance. Though Lem is younger than the children in this study’s sample, his story illustrates how speakers use rhetorical strategies within and across functional stages of stories.



#### **Text 4.1**

*Lem's Story from "What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school" (Heath, 1982, 67)*

Way*	<i>Orientation</i>
Far	
Now	
It a church bell	
Ringin'	
Dey singin'	<i>Events</i>
Ringin'	
You hear it?	<i>Comment</i>
I hear it	
Far	<i>Reorientation</i>
Now.	

\*Story rendering retained from original text. Functional stages added for this analysis.

*Repetition.* Repetition is a rhetorical strategy in which the storyteller uses the same key phrases throughout the story. This rhetorical strategy has been documented among different local discourse communities including African American (Champion, 2002; Okpewho, 1992; Awona, 1966 cited in Champion, 2002) and Hawai'i Creole English speakers (Masuda, 1995). As a rhetorical device, speakers use repetition to emphasize or intensify aspects of a story (Labov, 1972). In this sense, repetition serves an evaluative function in that it helps establish the point of the story by reflecting the speakers' perspective on events. In Lem's story, he began and ended his story with a repetition of the circumstance of location and time, "far now." In terms of stages, this repetition serves the function of returning the listener to where the story began, to its

original impetus of a church bell ringing in the distance. In this instance, we can see that rhetorical strategies like repetition are integral, though optional, to how stories realize their meaning through functional stages.

*Analogy.* The second instance of repetition in Lem's story creates an analogy between a church bell and a singing choir: "It a church bell ringin' / Dey singin' / Ringin'." Here, Lem used rhythm, rhyme, and repetition to offer an evocative account that relies on the metaphorical connection between events. Work like Heath's account of patterns of language socialization in three communities (1981) shows how some discourse communities rely more heavily on analogic relationships between participants, processes, and circumstances to construe meaning, especially in story. Michael's study of sharing time in first grade classrooms demonstrates that the connection between stages in a story may be analogic or implicit when children engage in a type of storytelling referred to as topic associating (1981, 2006).

*Implicit Connections.* Research into African American (Gee, 1985; Michaels, 1981, 2006) and Japanese (Minami, 2002) children's stories demonstrates that some local discourse communities support patterns of language use in which connections are not just analogic, but implicit as well. This reflects socially shaped assumptions about interaction that manifest in different expectations for language use. Characterizing language as falling on a continuum from high to low context, Hall notes how cultural groups hold different expectations for how much information individuals make lexically explicit (1989; 1975) versus relying on interpersonal relationships, shared history, and patterned ways of using gesture and tone to cue understanding (Minami, 2002). As Michaels (1981, 2006) and Heath (1983) have shown, this unconsciously activated shared world of understanding can be difficult for speakers from other discourse

communities to interpret, though it is a full and legitimate way of participating in storytelling for members of a shared culture.

*Ideophones.* Defined as an “idea in sound” (Okpewho, 1992, 92, cited in Champion, 2002), ideophones are an element of the phonology of language through which storytellers add dramatic elements to their stories. We saw an instance of ideophones in chapter three in Carlos’ story about “being a baby” with his dad when Carlos said, “When I was raaaaaa (raises voice, leans back head, and lets out loud cry). And my papi say “brrr brrr brrr” (making mock talking sound and shaking finger in a scolding fashion)” (See Text 3.4 for full Text). Instances like these illustrate some of the ways that young children can use sound to construe meaning in story.

*Call and Response.* Call and response consists of “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (Smitherman, 1977, 104). Though not forms of story, per se, call and response can be incorporated into storytelling (Champion, 1999, cited in Champion, 2002) adding interactional features to what is often considered a monologic activity. We see a similar interactional gesture in Lem’s story when he comments, “You hear it? / I hear it.”

Taken together, rhetorical strategies like the ones described above highlight additional patterns of language use documented in different discourse communities. These strategies help stories realize their meanings in and between functional stages. Rhetorical strategies offer additional ways to convey evaluative stances, to relate parts of the message to one another, and to establish a relationship between the speaker and listener. Given that this study took place in classrooms with members from different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, I analyzed stories not only in terms of expected stages, but in terms of possible rhetorical strategies as well.

## Story Types

If functional stages fulfill different purposes in a story, then story types demonstrate how patterned ways of construing experience make meanings which are carried not just by the content, but by the form. In this study, I analyzed stories in relation to three prominent story types – narrative, recount, and observation – observed in both adult and elementary school children’s stories (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; Martin, 1984). These three types of stories have some similar and distinct qualities particularly in terms of their stages of realization. For instance, all three story types begin by orienting the listener to what is about to come. From here these story types proceed in very different ways. Narratives deal with disruptions and a return to the status quo as individuals resolve complications. Individuals realize narrative structure through the stages of complications and resolutions. Recounts are often described as journeys (Rothery & Stenglin, 1997) in which an individual goes through a succession of events. Structurally, this is realized through an orienting stage followed by event stages and some type of concluding stage like a reorientation or coda. Observations, unlike narratives and recounts, feel frozen in time as the storyteller describes an occurrence, interjecting considerable personal commentary about the event. Observations typically include primarily descriptive stages with a dearth of temporal conjunctions.

After coding the stories in terms of stages, I grouped stories according to a “family resemblance approach” in which texts were considered flexibly in relationship to a prototypical exemplar of each story type (Pappas, 2006). In this sample, there were three main story types: descriptive, recount-type, and narrative-type. Texts categorized as recount-type or narrative-type were not necessarily canonical so much as related to prototypical instantiations of each story type. For instance, it has been suggested that a canonical narrative follows a pattern of

orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, with a coda as an optional ending (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). However, other large samples of oral stories demonstrate considerable variation in how narratives unfold, including the fact that not all complications are explicitly resolved in narrative-type stories (Plum, 2004). Following Labov's recommendation that "complicating action is essential if we are to recognize a narrative" (1972, 370), all stories categorized as narrative-type included at least one complication. Stories characterized as recount-type were event focused, but did not include a complicating event.

Recount-type and narrative-type stories were event focused, in contrast to descriptive story turns which were typically entity focused (Plum, 2004). I labeled stories as 'descriptive' in lieu of observation-type because most of the descriptive stories in the sample lacked the interpersonal, evaluative aspect typical of observations. Instead, the descriptive story turns in this sample described a particular person or known story character, often without an explicit interpersonal perspective. In this respect, the descriptive stories in this sample were very nearly like reports, a kind of expository text that describes "some state of affairs 'generically'" (Plum, 2004, 243). However, these story turns are more akin to a descriptive story in that they "describe a specific state of affairs" (243) like when Tereza described her garden in the Urkaine (See Text 3.18). Typically, a report would be about gardens more generally.

I categorized a portion of the stories as single event story turns. Single event story turns often included an orientation or statement of conclusion, but contained only one single event. Like recount-type and narrative-type stories, these stories were event focused as opposed to entity focused. These story turns were dissimilar from more developed stories in that single event stories did not detail how multiple actions constituted an occurrence with experiential and interpersonal import.

This analysis of story types and the stages through which they are realized serves two functions. First, I use this analysis to describe the extent to which children's stories met structural expectations with respect to known story types. Second, I document the range and frequency of types of stories told in the story circle in order to understand the extent to which children tell particular types of stories. Finally, I examine story types for potential patterned ways of telling stories present among children of different ages, race and ethnicity groups, and ELL status.

### **Cohesive Conjunctions**

Cohesive elements like conjunctions are important to text because they establish the relationship between parts of a text, conveying logical relationships that move the text forward in a more or less focused manner. Conjunctions occur within individual clauses and between clauses. Conjunctions that establish the relationship between clauses separated by a pause serve a cohesive function. Cohesive conjunctives are instrumental in signaling the logical relationships between stages in different types of story such as the temporal succession of recounts, the deep descriptive focus of descriptive stories, and the disruption of events typical of narratives. Cohesive conjunctions generally express three types of relationships: elaboration, extension, and enhancement (See description drawn from Eggins, 2010; Martin & Rose, 2003 in Table 4.2). Briefly, elaboration restates or clarifies a prior statement. Extension expresses addition or qualification of a prior statement. Enhancement builds on a prior statement, further expressing meaning in terms of time, means, cause, purpose, and condition.

**Table 4.2***Description of Cohesive Conjunctions (Eggsins, 2010; Martin & Rose, 2003)*

Type of Relationship	Meaning Expressed		Example Conjunctions
Elaboration	Restatement		In other words
Extension	Addition	Addition	And, besides
		Alternation	Or, if not - then
	Comparison	Similarity	Like, as, similarly
		Contrast	But, on the other hand
Enhancement	Time	Successive	Then, after, before
		Simultaneous	While, meanwhile
	Consequence	Cause	So, because, since
		Means	By, by this means
		Purpose	In order to, so as
		Condition	If, unless

Together, the options of elaboration, extension, and enhancement allow speakers and writers to expand their text by logically connecting “experientially related meanings” (Eggsins, 2010). For example, in a story about getting a milkshake, Karla relayed the following events: “*And* my dad forgot what I liked on my milkshake. There was no whipcream. *So*, I went to buy my own. *And then*, I lost my money for it. *And then*, I went back home. *And* I even crossed the street by myself.” Karla established the relationship between events, connecting events in terms of cause or consequence, ordering events in time, and adding additional information. In this way, she construed experience as a logically sequenced set of events.

In the analysis presented in this chapter, I examine the relationships children establish between different stages of text in order to understand how young children use not just structural, but cohesive elements also to construe meaning along a continuum of complexity. This analysis

shows the types of relationships that children establish between the parts of a text as well as the extent to which they make those relationships lexically explicit.

### Stress and Intonation

Structural organization such as story stages and the cohesive conjunctions that relate stages to one another reflect macro-level organization of text. At the micro-level, text unfolds in tone units which realize a unit of information. Units of information have a focus. This focus is realized through stress<sup>5</sup> (Halliday & Greaves, 2008), or emphasis on the salient syllable of the focal element. Returning to Karla's story, we can see how her story unfolds as a sequence of information: "And my dad forgot what I liked on my milkshake. There was no whipcream<sub>slower</sub>. So, I went to buy my own. And then, I lost my money for it<sub>faster</sub>. And then I went back home. And I even crossed the street by myself<sub>faster</sub>." Here, Karla used the system of phonology to make meaning by indicating the focus of information. Typically, an information unit, which is a unit of phonology, corresponds to a clause, which is a grammatical unit. The focal element is signaled by an emphasis on the final salient syllable in the clause. This is the case, when Karla said, "And then, I lost my money for it<sub>faster</sub>. And then I went back home."

However, information units and clauses do not always perfectly align. There can be several information units in a single clause. And speakers use stress and intonation to single out different elements as the focus of their message. The statement, "And I even crossed the street by myself<sub>faster</sub>," illustrates this point. Here, Karla placed the emphasis on the word "even," an evaluative moment in her story that highlights how crossing the street by herself reflected an extraordinary turn of events. Karla further emphasized this point stressing "myself."

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<sup>5</sup> In *Intonation in the Grammar of English* (2008) Halliday describes the phonology of language in terms of tone units, tonicity, and tonality. [Describe each]. I have chosen more commonly recognized terms of stress to reflect moments in text where the speaker elongates and .... I use intonation to identify changes in pitch contour that occur in moments of stress.








Alternatively, she could have placed the stress on “street,” shifting the focus of the message to the location of the event. Through her choice of emphasis, Karla construed a different type of meaning. If her first attempt at independence failed (buying her own whip cream, but losing the money), Karla ended her story with a clear statement of how she still managed to complete major tasks independently. Choices in the system of phonology enabled Karla to more precisely make this point to an audience that otherwise might interpret her story in a number of ways.


Stories unfold in waves of information in which speakers signal the focus of their message through an emphasis, typically, on salient syllables (See Halliday & Greaves, 2008 for a full discussion of intonation in grammar). To the listener, this prominence sounds like a part of the word, or the whole word in the case of monosyllabic words, that is elongated or louder. Beyond emphasizing the focus of information, tone units give language its “melodic shape” as the speaker’s pitch changes at the point of emphasis in the tone unit (Halliday & Greaves, 2008, 42). So the focus of information is signaled through the sound of speech as speakers subtly emphasize the focus of their message by changing volume, lengthening syllables, and altering their pitch. Changes in pitch are realized through five main tones in English.


**Table 4.3**


*Basic Tones Present in English*

<b>Tone</b>	<b>Symbol</b>
Rise	
Fall	
Level Rising	
Rise Falling	
Fall Rising	

These tones can be used in combination as well. So a statement might end with fall rising pitch and a final falling tone.

Intonation communicates both logical and interpersonal meaning. For example, a falling tone signifies completeness. So, declarative statements often end with a falling tone. A rising tone signifies incompleteness. So, a listener might expect a clause complex like “When I was  young, I liked to go to the park.” In this construction, the first part of the clause complex ends on a rising tone, signaling more information to come. The second part of the clause complex ends on a final tone, indicating that this message is complete.

Interpersonally, changes in pitch help communicate the speaker’s attitudes. Intonation can signal excitement and uncertainty. It can help determine whether an individual is seeking or providing information. Intonation can also emphasize evaluative moments in text like when Karla  “even” crossed the street by herself.

Finally, speakers manage the flow of information by saying whole tone units louder, softer, faster, or slower (See Table 4.4. for coding). Speech typically unfolds in rhythmic patterns, punctuated by regularly occurring moments of emphasis. Another way to manage information is to break this regular rhythm with a larger stretch of language like a tone unit uttered at a different speed or volume. An instance like this occurred in Karla’s story when she said, “There was no whipcreamslower.” In her story, Karla relayed a succession of events. She used this descriptive statement to explain what, specifically, was problematic about her dad forgetting what she liked on her ice cream. At this point, Karla’s speech noticeably slowed. Instead of emphasizing a single focus of information, she was able to mark this whole clause as a point of significance. Through moves like this, speakers have another choice for orchestrating information to construe particular meanings.

**Table 4.4***Coding for Changes in Speed and Volume*

<b>Change in Tone Unit</b>	<b>Coding</b>
Faster	<u>Tone unit</u> <sub>faster</sub>
Slower	<u>Tone unit</u> <sub>slower</sub>
Louder	<b>Tone unit</b> <sup>louder</sup>
Softer	<b>Tone unit</b> <sup>softer</sup>

In this chapter, I analyze children’s stories in terms of stress and intonation in order to examine patterns in use of intonation as a storytelling device which gives language its melodic shape, emphasizes different aspects of meaning, manages the flow of discourse, and works in conjunction with structure and cohesion to orchestrate information in construals of story.

Although the range of cultural backgrounds and varying competency with language do not make for an ideal sample in terms of identifying culturally shaped patterns in use of phonological resources, I conducted this analysis with an awareness of and interest in whether children would evidence patterned uses of phonology documented amongst children from shared discourse communities in elementary school (Michaels, 1981, 2006).

## **Results**

### **Structural Realizations of Story**

In the story circles in this sample, a majority of the stories (66%) structurally reflected the story types of descriptive, recount-type, or narrative-type. Of these story types, children largely told recount-type stories (38%), followed in frequency by narrative-type stories (19%), and descriptive stories (9%) (See Table 4.5). A portion of the children’s stories related a single event (14%) with varying additional story stages. These consisted of a complete statement, and may

be regarded as a kind of nascent story in that these single events did relay occurrences removed from the immediate context and signal particular people, events, and ways of being as important.

A small portion of the stories (9%) were categorized as ‘other.’ These stories consisted of interesting contributions to the story circle that did not use language in expected ways.

Though relatively few in number, stories in this category played with sound or the act of telling a story in some way.

In 11% of the story turns a child chose not to tell a story. These were characterized as ‘refusals.’ Just under half (47%) of the refusals occurred during a child’s first time in the story circle. Two children declined to tell a story in every story circle they attended. Both of these children were ELLs who did not speak English and used their home language sparingly in the classroom.

**Table 4.5**

*Types of Stories Told During Story Circles*

<b>Story Turns</b> (N = 176)	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Refusal	19	11%
Other	16	9%
Single Event	24	14%
Recount-type	66	38%
Narrative-type	34	19%
Descriptive	15	9%
Call and Response	2	>1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Other Ways of Engaging.** In 9% of the story turns, children played with sound and action in some way, but did not use the semantic unit of words to drive the meaning of their contribution. For instance, Eric (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: English) used his story turn to mimic the action of telling a story, opening and closing his mouth as if talking.

When another child in the circle asked if he was finished, Eric continued to open and close his

mouth in a mock talking motion for approximately 30 seconds more. The effect was something like, ‘telling a story looks like this.’ In another story circle group, Sarah told a story combining words, sound, and a song like quality to her utterances.

#### **Text 4.2**

*Sarah (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 3*

I’m too loulee. (In a sing song voice) And whan. Fohaw. *Other*

Then, I’m all done. *Statement of Conclusion*

The three children discussed in Chapter 3 (pg. 109) who created a steady flow of language by intermixing Ukrainian, English, and language-like sounds also told stories categorized as other since their use of nonlanguage sounds prohibited the type of analysis presented in this chapter. Though these types of contributions made up a small proportion of the story turns, they do demonstrate that some children attended to and played with more than just words in storytelling. The sounds, actions, and even the look of storytelling can be explored as part of a story turn.

Earlier, I noted that children’s storytelling represented a form of valued participation in which they advanced on trajectories toward ever more complete and complex participation in a cultural activity. In this regard, children whose story turns reflect diverse attempts to marshal knowledge about language can be characterized as engaging in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in that the children used what they know to approximate storytelling. In doing so, these children devised a meaningful way of participating in the story circle activity given their current facility construing experience through language. In Chapter 5 we will see that children negotiated different ways of participating in story circles that ranged from listening to telling a complete story. Further, some children strove to entertain circle-mates. Story circle turns like Eric’s and Sarah’s may reflect attempts to entertain circle-mates even when the storyteller has more limited command of the functional potential of language.

**Single Events.** A portion of the stories told in this sample consisted of a single event.

Like the story turns that followed more common story structures, these events relayed information about things that happened outside of the immediate context. Topically, single event story turns described the same types of people and happenings as more developed stories in the sample. In this respect, children’s single event story turns may be regarded as something like a beginning or nascent story. Consider Inez’s event:

**Text 4.3**

*Inez (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

My mommy go, to the doctor, with me.

*Event*

That’s it.

*Statement of Conclusion*

In this single event, Inez used a transitivity pattern common to other stories in the sample as an actor, in this case “my mommy,” went somewhere. Like other stories, Inez included a circumstance of location and a circumstance of accompaniment to relay an experience shared by the storyteller and a family member. In this respect, even these beginning stories attend to the need to orient the listener to the context of events.

Stories characterized as single events reflect a continuum of offerings that range from a sole event to an orientation, event, evaluation, and statement of conclusion.

**Table 4.6**

*Single Event Story Turns*

<b>Single Event Stories</b> (N = 24)	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Single Event Only	4	16%
Single Event + Beginning Stage	3	13%
Single Event + Concluding Stage	7	29%
Single Event + Beginning and Concluding Stage	7	29%
Single Event + Beginning, Evaluation, Concluding Stage	3	13%
Total	24	100%

In this respect, single events are nascent stories not only in terms of content, but in terms of developing story structure as well.

An examination of the range in single event story turns highlights how children begin to develop, at the most basic level, a sense of story as including a beginning, middle, and an end. For instance in Classroom C, Marcus, an ELL with an IEP in speech and language, relayed a single event in response to a circle-mate's story about buying shoes with his mother. Earlier that day, Marcus and his classmates examined a gym shoe which had been cut in half to reveal the different layers of the shoe. In the story circle that day, Marcus and his circle-mates told stories about their experiences buying new shoes. Marcus said the following:

**Text 4.4**

*Marcus (Age: 3 years, 8 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

When we were at the store, a shoe. (points at shoe) *Event*

A shoe too.

Here, Marcus' statement resembles the orientation stage of many of the stories in this sample. It begins by locating the events in place and time. Given the context of the story, one can infer that Marcus bought or got shoes when he was at the store. However, his contribution ends here without further description or events.

Ten of the stories in the sample included either a beginning or ending stage in addition to the single event. In the previous chapter, we encountered a story by Sunita, an ELL in Classroom C, who made use of existential and relational processes to set the scene for her story. In this story, Sunita oriented the listener with an existential process that introduces the "little bunny" as a participant of interest. Sunita also employs circumstances of time and accompaniment to orient the listener.

#### **Text 4.5**

*Sunita (Age: 4 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Nepali); Story Circle Time 2*

Once upon a time, there was a little bunny. *Orientation*

And one time, when I was with my mommy, it come down. *Event*

Like Marcus' story, Sunita's story contained a single event that makes use of a clause complex – “When I was with my mommy, it come down.” 16% of stories contained a clause complex of this type in the orientation stage. In this way, even single event stories demonstrated attention to the need to locate events in terms of space, time, and relevant participants. It also suggests that single event stories like these may in fact be beginnings which the children left undeveloped. Sunita's story went beyond Marcus' by employing additional orienting detail. In this case, she utilized a circumstance of time common to fairy tales and explicitly introduced a participant. In contrast, Marcus began his story with the participant “we” without introducing specifically who went to the store, perhaps relying on his listeners to assume that he was telling about himself and a parent since those were the main participants in other children's stories.

Three stories in the sample moved beyond a single event with a beginning or a concluding stage to include a moment of evaluation as well. Remember Alejandra's story about her sisters. In this story, Alejandra told one of the more sophisticated single event stories in the sample.

#### **Text 4.6**

*Alejandra (Age: 4 years, 7 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

This story is about my sisters. *Abstract*

I love my sisters. *Evaluation*

Um, at my house, her play con me. *Event*

That's all. *Statement of Conclusion*



The story began with an abstract, an optional story stage in which the storyteller readies the listeners for what they are about to hear. Then, Alejandra made an evaluative comment, expressing an attitude about events in the story. Next, Alejandra relayed a single event, expressed by a common material process in the sample, playing. She ended her story with a direct statement of conclusion, some variation of which was present in over half of the stories (58%). In this instance, the listener knows what Alejandra is going to talk about, what happened, and how she felt about it. Compared to Marcus' and Sunita's story, Alejandra's story represents a closer approximation of a complete story.

If children who told stories where words were not the semantic driver of meaning engaged in a kind of legitimate peripheral participation in story circles, then children who told single event story turns represent a move closer to full participation in a storytelling activity. Stories characterized as single event stories reflect a continuum from a single statement with orienting detail to multiple clause story turns that reflect budding story attempts. In these stories, we can see the foundations of story as the children provided the most basic information needed for the listener to understand something that occurred in another place and time. In addressing similar ideational meanings as more developed stories in the sample, these incipient stories contributed to the overall dialogue of the story circle and their respective classroom cultures. This holds implications for instruction because we can see how stories develop from simple beginnings to more complex renderings within the context of the shared ideas and interests of the classroom. Developing an account of the development of story guides educators in understanding the trajectories along which children develop as storytellers.

**Recount-Type Stories.** Like single events, recount-type stories are event focused.

These stories unfold through a series of largely material processes which taken together constitute a single happening or incident. Like single event story turns, stories characterized as recount-type stories reflect a continuum of offerings with different structural configurations. In this section, I will show three common structural realizations of recount-type stories in an attempt to show the diverse ways that the children in this sample used event focused story structures to construe meaning.

The most basic recounts relayed a short series of related events. In one such recount, Vitya, an ELL in Classroom A, followed his circle-mate's story about sleeping with her dog at home with a story about his own dog.

**Text 4.7**

*Vitya (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Ukrainian); Story Circle Time 4*

I play with my dog when, whe. When I was home. *Orientation*

Then, then I go to a магазині (store) and buy for my dog toys. *Events*

Then, I. I eated and go to sleep.

I done. *Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, Vitya oriented the listener by situating his story in a particular location. He used a circumstance of accompaniment to indicate that he and his dog were the participants of interest.

In the event stage of the story, Vitya told what happened in this story. In the final stage of the story, Vitya made a direct statement of conclusion, signaling the end of his story turn.

Structurally, this story closely follows the pattern of a prototypical recount. Each stage included expected patterns of realization. For example, in the orientation Vitya employed the structure of a clause complex with the dependent clause, “when I was home.” This set the scene

for the story through a circumstantial relational process that indicated where Vitya was when he played with his dog.

I	play	with my dog	when, whe
Actor	Pr: material	Circ: accompaniment	

When	I	was	home
Circ: time	Carrier	Pr: intensive	Attribute / Circ: location

In the events stage, Vitya used material processes in this action oriented story. He used the cohesive conjunction, “then,” to introduce successive events to the story.

Then, then	I	go	to a магазині (shop)	and	buy	for my dog	toys
Adjunct: Cohesive	Actor	Pr: material	Circ: location		Pr: material	Beneficiary	Goal

then	I
Adjunct: cohesive	

I	eated	and	go to sleep
Actor	Pr: material		Pr: material

I	(am)	done
Carrier	Pr: intensive	Attribute

Finally, in the concluding stage, Vitya ended his story with a relational process.

As the patterns of realization show, Vitya’s simple recount-type story about his dog unfolded much like stories documented in adult and elementary school samples with the exception of the ending. Instead of rounding events off with a statement that brought the story into the present moment or a statement that referred back to the beginning in some way that makes the point of the story clear, Vitya’s story ended with a final event in which he said, “[I] go to sleep.” In this instance, the natural ending to a day spent playing with the dog at home is the

end of the day. Just under a quarter of the stories in this sample ended with a final event.

Others, like Vitya, added a statement of conclusion after their final event.

**Table 4.7**

*Final Stages in Story Circle Stories*

<b>Final Stage of Stories</b> (N = 137)*	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Event	31	23%
Description	10	7%
Complication	1	1%
Resolution	7	5%
Statement of Conclusion	75	55%
Coda + Statement of Conclusion	4	3%
Coda only	2	1%
Reorientation	3	2%
Evaluation	4	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Stories characterized as refusals, other, or single event only (n = 39) excluded.

Through the diverse strategies that the children employed to end their stories, we see a range of legitimate options for construing experience through story that range from providing a natural conclusion to events to explicitly linking events forward into the present moment through a coda. Stories drawn from adult storytellers demonstrate that most complete stories end with a resolution, coda, or reorientation (Plum, 2004). In these three stages, storytellers bring significance to events through a number of choices that ultimately depend on the storyteller's purpose in telling the story. In this sample, only 11% of the stories ended with one of these canonical story stages. Instead, the most common way to end a story was through a direct statement like that employed by Alejandra and Vitya. A statement of conclusion achieves the goal of providing an ending to the story and signaling relinquishment of the floor. So, in Vitya's case, his story has a beginning, middle, and end. However, it does not reinforce the storyteller's purpose or meaning in conveying a particular set of events in the same way as a reorientation.

This shows one way that endings to stories reflect not only available options in language, but expectations for storytelling, and use of increasing sophistication in marshaling the functional potential of language to guide the listener’s interpretation of events.

Stories in this sample did not just end with final events, they began with events as well (See Table 4.8). Stories that began with events did not include circumstances of time or location that established the context for the story. Instead, these stories began without the kind of contextualization needed for the listener to understand the scene in which the story took place. In a sense, these stories jumped straight into the action.

**Table 4.8**

*Beginning Stages in Story Circle Stories*

<b>Beginning Stage of Stories</b> (n=137)*	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Event	35	26%
Description	12	9%
Abstract only	11	8%
Orientation	69	50%
Abstract + Orientation	8	6%
Evaluation	2	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Single event only stories excluded.

In one such story, Marta told about spending time with family. In it, she said:

**Text 4.8**

*Marta (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 4*

I was um. My mommy, um, kiss right here. (Points to forehead) *Events*

And um, was my dad. And, my dad kiss on my hair. And then,  
we’re watching a show.

And that’s so fun on the show. *Evaluation*

Here, Marta told a story with three events – a kiss from her mom, a kiss from her dad, and a shared show viewing. She concluded her story with an evaluative statement in which she interjected her perspective on events, a rare final stage (3%) in this sample. The effect of omitting the orientation stage is clear. Marta’s story could take place at any number of locations - at home, at an extended family member’s house, or at the movie theater. Without specifying the context, the listener is left to wonder and possibly assume. If stories vary in terms of how well they meet listeners’ expectations and guide interpretation, then setting the context serves an important function in this regard. Marta appealed to this need for context when she pointed to her forehead, initially using gesture instead of making the location of the kiss lexically explicit, but by launching directly into events she left the listener without key information needed to understand the story and its significance.

Though recount-type stories in this sample unfolded in different ways and reflected different states of completeness, all the recount-type stories contained patterns of realization that align with canonical recounts. In one of the more prototypical instantiations of recount in this sample, Karla told a story that oriented the listener to the action and ended by bringing the story into the present moment. Remember Karla’s story about when she was young.

**Text 4.9**

*Karla (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle 3*

When I was a baby, my mom *always* take care of me. *Orientation / Evaluation*

And then my mom *always* fed me milk. My mom *always* pulled my leg (pulled leg up toward body) and cleaned me, and then put my pamper on. *Events / Evaluation*

And then I got, then when I was a baby, after I got four, my *Description / Event*

birthday after came.

Then from Christmas, I got a princess bike.

*Event*

For I was older, for I'm four.

*Coda*

Karla began and ended her story in a way that reinforced the overall meaning. She started with the statement, "When I was a baby, my mom always take care of me." Later, the story shifted into the present with a kind of miniature, second orientation when Karla stated, "and then I got, then when I was a baby, after I got four, my birthday after came." In this brief descriptive moment, Karla oriented the listener to a changed state of events in which she is now older. She concluded with the final event and coda, "Then from Christmas, I got a princess bike. For I was older, for I'm four." Many children in the sample would have ended the story with the final event of getting a princess bike, a suitable ending that implicitly construes the meaning that Karla had grown. Karla's use of a coda demonstrates how a canonical ending can make meaning explicit and support audience understanding. It shows how prototypical story stages serve a practical function. In this instance, a coda is useful for Karla. It helps her story meet its goal of establishing a contrast between the past and the present.

Storytellers, like all speakers, have a number of choices for how to construe meaning. The contrast between stories like Vitya's and Karla's, which both have a beginning, middle, and end, highlights how developing an understanding of ways of concluding stories could further support young children's storytelling by bolstering their ability to more precisely construe meaning. Shifting the focus of early literacy learning to meaning-focused activities elevates the development of skillfully construing meaning to an important, learnable competency which can be practiced and developed over time. Stories like Karla's demonstrate the value of developing a repertoire of choices for construing meaning through story.

**Narrative-Type Stories.** Much like single event and recount-type stories in this sample, a broad range of stories met the criteria for a narrative-type story. This array included stories with little more than a complication and resolution and stories with a series of resolved complications. Some narrative-type stories had unresolved complications. Others contained features typical of fairy tales, a subgenre of narrative (Hasan, 1984). Despite the variation, all stories categorized as narrative-type contained a complication, the defining characteristic of narrative which researchers theorize makes stories more interesting, more worth telling, and more culturally valued (in Western cultures) (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Bruner, 1984).

The most basic form of narrative-type story in this sample consisted of little more than a complication and resolution. In one such story, Maricruz told the last in a series of four stories about spending time with her family and her dog.

**Text 4.10**

*Maricruz (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish) Story Circle Time 4*

When I was a, when I was a little baby, I, I, I.	<i>Orientation</i>
My doggy was scaring me with my sister.	<i>Complication</i>
And then, my mom go ask my dog, out of the house.	<i>Resolution</i>
The end.	<i>Statement of Conclusion</i>

In this story, Maricruz set the scene for her story and promptly launched into the complicating event. This small crisis was immediately resolved when her mother intervened. Even in this simple narrative, Maricruz employed expected patterns of realization for a complication and resolution.

My doggy	was scaring	me	with my sister
Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Circ: accompaniment



And then	my mom	go ask	my dog	out of the house
Adjunct: cohesive	Sayer	Pr: verbal	Receiver	Circ: location

For instance, this complication and resolution involve a changing pattern of participant roles.

First the dog acts, then the mother acts to remove the dog.

Most narrative-type stories in this sample were not as brief as Maricruz's story.

Remember Krzysztof's account of being left alone.

#### **Text 4.11**

*Krzysztof (Age: 4 years, 6 months old; Home Language: Polish) Story Circle Time 4*

This is the story of the little boy cried

*Abstract*

A little boy just cried, and really cried and really cried. And, and her mommy and daddy don't come back. But they're went to the grocery store.

*Complication*

He was by himself, but her grandma mother.

*Description*

And her decide to stay home with him.

*Resolution*

And then the. And her mommy and daddy come back to the grocery store. *Again, again.*

*Complication /*

*Evaluation*

And then, they come back to home. To eat dinner, to feed the chickens.

*Resolution*

And the end.

*Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, Krzysztof used a series of complications and resolutions to tell the story of "the little boy cried." Much like Maricruz's brief narrative, Krzysztof's narrative involved multiple actors. For instance, the parents left, the boy was alone, the grandmother decided to stay. He extended the suspense in the story by including evaluation. Evaluation can be interspersed throughout a story or present in a discrete stage of a story. In this instance, Krzysztof's

statement, “again, again,” comments on an aspect of time. Perhaps, he intended to suggest something about the length of separation or the repeated nature of being separated. Regardless of the exact intent, this instance of evaluation slowed the story down and postponed the resolution of events while simultaneously expressing Krzysztof’s perspective on events.

The children in this sample rarely used evaluation in their stories, including it only 21% of the story turns in the sample, which suggests that these types of evaluative interjections may represent a more advanced storytelling skill. Indeed, research suggests that evaluation consistently emerges as a stable storytelling competency in the later elementary years and is characteristic of skilled adult storytellers (Labov, 1972) who use evaluation to engage and entertain listeners by dramatizing events. Evaluation arrests the listener’s attention, heightening suspense and interjecting interpersonal perspectives. In this regard, evaluation plays a central role in guiding the listener’s interpretation. It acts as another source of complexity in storytelling in that the storyteller must do more than relay a series of actions. Instead, they need to contend with the way that they, themselves, as well as story participants and listeners think and feel about what has been relayed. This requires the storyteller to acknowledge and control evaluative aspects of meaning-making since stories always negotiate different ways of being in a shared culture. Later in this chapter, we will see how children in this sample used phonological resources to convey interpersonal stances on events.

In terms of sources of structural diversity in this sample of narrative-type stories, just as in adult samples of narratives (Plum, 2004), not all complications ended up resolved. In this sample, children did not explicitly resolve 41% of the complications (13/32) in their stories. In some instances, the children simply did not resolve events. For instance, in a retelling of the Cars movie, Daniel, an ELL in Classroom B, relayed a story that ended with a complication.

**Text 4.12***Daniel (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

This is the story of Lightning McQueen.

*Abstract*

Lightning McQueen went to the race track.

*Orientation*

But he crash with McGoin and losed it.

*Complication*

The end.

*Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, the participant of interest, Lightning McQueen, crashed and lost the race. Daniel signaled the contrast in events with the conjunction, *but*. However, in this story Lightning McQueen did not prevail over challenging events. Instead, Daniel's story concluded with a complicating and final event in which the main participant crashed and lost.

In other stories in the sample, the children only implied the resolution to complicating events. For instance, Ana, an ELL in Classroom D, told a story with a series of complications that were not all explicitly resolved.

**Text 4.13***Ana (Age: 4 years, 3 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 4*

My mom was on the internet.

*Orientation*

And she, she gave me a sm, smack on my bottom.

*Complication*

And then, I was. And then, and then my mom was. And

*Events*

then, my mom was doing her computer. And then, we was watching TV. And then, we was eating ice cream.

And then, my, my mom had a headache.

*Complication*

And then I went mc, Dunkin Donuts. And then, and then,

*Events*

we, I got to rest. And then, I sit on the floor.

And then I, got on the floor, when the ghost was chasing

*Complication*

me.

And then, I call my mom to wake up.

*Events*

And then, I said. My mom has to um. My mom, I told my mom. I said, “Mommy wake up.” And then, I said. And then, I, she said, “What.” And then I, and I said, “Something’s in the house.” And then she said, “Let me see. Get the flashlight.”

And I, and I go back to bed. The end.

*Resolution*

In this story, Ana did not explicitly resolve the first two complications. However, the series of events which immediately follow the complication implied a return to the status quo. Ana got a “smack on the bottom,” but went on to watch television and eat ice cream. Later, her mom got a headache, but the family went to Dunkin Donuts and Ana “got to rest.” The final complication, being chased by a ghost, was resolved and Ana went “back to bed.” In all, Ana’s story reflects the ups and downs of everyday life in which some crises are not tidily solved so much as just pass as the day continues. This story also demonstrates some of the variation amongst stories categorized as narrative-type. Though all the narrative-type stories have complications, the children in this sample told stories that varied in terms of length, number of complications, and the explicit resolution of complicating events.

Seven of the narrative-type stories featured characteristics typical of fairy tales, a sub-genre of narrative. Fairy tales contain a few distinct characteristics (See Hasan, 1984 for full discussion) which children in this sample employed. First, fairy tales include temporal distance which suggests that the story takes place in a far off land and time. This is classically achieved through the circumstance of time, “Once upon a time.” Fairy tales also introduce participants in a unique way. Storytellers use nominal groups to describe animate participants, often

introducing participants one by one. These nominal groups typically include indefinite articles or cardinal numbers. Participants in fairy tales are often distinguished by their habitual actions. The most complete instance of this type of storytelling can be found in Elena's retelling of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (See Text 3.8 for full story).

#### **Text 4.14**

*Elena (Age: 4 years, 8 months old; Home Language: Bulgarian & Ukrainian); Story Circle Time 1*

Once upon a time, there was one house. And it was a bear house. *Orientation*

And there was two, three bears. And there was a big one. There was a medium one. And there was a little one. And the dad liked to fix the house. And the mom liked to fix the garden with (unclear). And, the baby bear liked to play with some toys in there.

In this orientation, Elena began her story by referring to "a bear house." She achieved particularization of the three bears by introducing them one by one, "There was a big one. There was a medium one. And there was a little one." She further distinguished the three bears from all other bears by indicating a habitual behavior for each one, "And the dad liked to fix the house. And the mom like to fix the garden with (unclear). And, the baby bear liked to play with some toys in there." The story went on to include a series of complications like other narrative-type stories in the sample. However, through its use of features of story typical of fairy tales, it constitutes another source of variation amongst narrative-type stories in this sample. This shows how even within a single story type, there are multiple ways to construe meaning. In doing so, it directly challenges the notion that story can be reduced to a unitary model since numerous

legitimate variations exist. Further, these variations occur not only in the stories of young children, but in the broader culture from which these stories are drawn.

Language features characteristic of fairy tales were not restricted to retellings alone. Children used realization patterns typical of fairy tales in their own stories as well. For instance, Sunita's single event story included an orientation reminiscent of classic fairy tales when she said, "Once upon a time, there was a little bunny." Krzysztof told the story of the *Three Little Pigs* in his first story circle. In the next two story circles, he told stories that reflected realization patterns typical of fairy tales in fictional stories of his own making.

#### **Text 4.15**

*Krzysztof (Age: 4 years, 6 months old; Home Language: Polish) Story Circle Time 3*

Once upon a time, it was a little panther.

*Orientation*

And it went into the forest. And, and, and went to the forest.

*Events*

And don't listen to him mommy and daddy, and her sister tiny. A

*Complication*

little tiny mouse.

And then lived happily ever after.

*Coda*

The end.

*Statement of Conclusion*

Here, Krzysztof made use of a simple version of a pattern of orientation canonically found in fairy tales by saying, "Once upon a time, it was a little panther." The panther entered the forest, a common setting amongst the Classroom B children's favorite fairy tales. Krzysztof said that the panther "didn't listen to him mommy and daddy," a common complication in fairy tales that led characters such as Goldilocks and Red Riding Hood into trouble. Krzysztof did not resolve the complication in this story, but ended with the well-known, "and then [they] lived happily ever after." In this story, one can see how Krzysztof drew on known stories to tell a story of his own. And, in doing so, he told a nearly complete narrative-type story with realization patterns

common to fairy tales. This suggests one way in which children can leverage story knowledge acquired through frequent readings to compose their own stories. Far from being constraining, “frames of expectation” (Lindfors, 1999) for language use, in this instance, served as a support that guided the children’s use of language in story circle settings.

**Descriptive Stories.** A portion of the stories in this sample focused on describing entities rather than recounting a series of events. Amongst this subset of story turns, there was a range in length and complexity not unlike that found in event-type and narrative-type stories. For instance, in a simpler instantiation of a descriptive story, Araceli, an ELL in Classroom B, described her birthday cake using relational processes.

**Text 4.16**

*Araceli (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

When I grow up, I have a party with my sisters and my family. *Orientation*

Then, then, then, then. My cake, it was strawberry. It just have some horses. *Description*

Then, then I’m finished. *Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, Araceli oriented the listener through a clause complex that indicated the time and accompaniments for the story. She then described her birthday cake through two separate relational clauses. Araceli ended her story with a statement of conclusion, effectively ending her story turn. Unlike event oriented stories which told what happened, Araceli’s story described a central aspect of her party – the cake. This story turn, though not unfolding as a series of events, was in keeping with other stories in the sample in which children told about getting or possessing different things as a kind of self-aggrandizement or accounting of goods.

In a more complex descriptive story, Tereza told a story about her younger brother. This story is distinctive in the sample of descriptive stories for its use of an extended evaluation that provides an interpersonal perspective on events.

**Text 4.17**

*Tereza (Age: 5 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Ukrainian); Story Circle Time 1*

Today, I'm going to tell a story about my brother.

*Abstract*

My brother is *so* silly. And he is *still* a baby.

*Description / Evaluation*

And he *always* makes silly tricks and.

*Event / Evaluation*

And he is *wery, wery* silly.

*Description / Evaluation*

And I don't know why he is like this. And I don't know why he is going to be silly. When he is gonna be grow up. And I think that I am not going to be like this from him.

*Evaluation*

In this descriptive story, Tereza used both embedded evaluation and an extended evaluative stage. She also included a single event stage which told what made her brother so silly and cast his silliness as a recurrent event: "he *always* makes silly tricks." Like Araceli's brief descriptive story turn, Tereza's more developed descriptive story construed similar ideational meanings as more event focused stories in the sample. Like Karla's recount-type story about growing from being cared for to having a princess bike or Carlos' recount-type story about being a baby with his dad in which he employed ideophones, Tereza told about and commented on what it is like to be a baby. These contrasting story types demonstrate how storytellers have multiple options for how to construe meaning. Both a deep descriptive focus and a succession of sequential events can highlight the contrast between a child who "is older" and a child who "is still a baby."

One advantage of story circles may lie in making these alternative ways of organizing stories and construing experience transparent. As we saw with Krzysztof, children incorporated



ways of telling stories from stories that they had heard. Expanding exposure to different types of stories while situating children as capable authors of experience opens a kind of dialogue between children about experiences that matter and ways of construing these experiences that are valued within the culture of the classroom. As I discuss further in chapter five, one way that children negotiated ways of participating in story circles was to tell different types of stories around shared experiences.

**Call and Response.** Further evidence of children’s capacity to draw on diverse patterned ways of construing meaning comes from the inclusion of culturally shaped rhetorical strategy of call and response. In two stories in the sample, children employed a call and response structure to retell a classroom favorite – *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*. Call and response consists of “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (Smitherman, 1977, 104). In Classroom C, two children in the same story circle retold *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by performing both the call and response portion of the story. For example, in her final story turn Inez said: “Yellow dog, yellow dog, what do you see? I see red bird see a me. Red bird, red bird, what do you see? I see a yellow duck see a me.” She continued this way, completing the call and response for several different animals.

The inclusion of diverse structures such as this suggests that story circles can be a forum for exploring different forms of literary responses with distinct ways of organizing language. In this case, an Arabic boy and Latina girl in a multiethnic, multilingual classroom retold a story that employed call and response, a rhetorical strategy closely associated with the African American community. Story turns like this suggest the unique power of the early childhood care and education classroom as a distinct space for navigating diverse ways of construing meaning.

Representing multiple ways of construing experience and providing opportunities for children to explore and to practice using the functional potential of language makes this type of learning possible.

In all, an analysis of children's stories in terms of story stages and story types demonstrates that the majority of children in the sample told stories that reflect simple instantiations of story that largely conformed to known patterns of storytelling. Further, the presence of multiple story types demonstrates that for the children in this sample multiple forms of story can be deployed and valued. By recognizing varied forms of story as valuable, this study shows what otherwise might be considered disorganized, incomplete, or merely description as organized, legitimate construals of meaning that employ known patterns of meaning-making in storytelling.

Variation existed within and across story types as children told stories of differing length and complexity, showing a range of skill in terms guiding the listener's interpretation of events. This analysis further substantiates the existence of multiple story types as children construed similar types of meanings through diverse story structures, highlighting aspects of choice in language. One clear affordance of story circles lies in putting these diverse ways of making meaning in conversation with one another since some children's story turns exhibit the influence of exposure to different types of stories and different rhetorical strategies.

### **Logical Connections**

In this section, I will examine the children's use of logical connections in order to understand how they connect events to create a cohesive story and the types of relationships that they establish between events in stories. In this sample, children used nine different cohesive conjunctions – *and*, *and then*, *then*, *and now*, *but then*, *but*, *because* or *'cause*, *so*, and *for*. The

children in this sample used *and* most frequently, accounting for 51% of the total cohesive conjunctions used during story turns. Children also used cohesive conjunctions that expressed a temporal relationship between events such as *and then*, *then*, *and now*, and *but then* 39% percent of the time. Causal and qualifying relationships were expressed much less frequently in this sample through the conjunctions *because*, *'cause*, *so*, or *for* just over 5% of the time and *but* 3% of the time.

**Table 4.9**

*Logical Connections Used During Children's Stories*

Type of Logical Connection (N = 612)	Frequency	Percent
And	310	51%
And then	186	30%
Then	56	9%
And now	1	<1%
But then	1	<1%
But	20	3%
Because / 'cause	30	5%
So	5	1%
For	3	<1%
Total	612	100%

Given the high number of event-focused stories in the sample, it is not too surprising that children used the conjunctions *and*, *and then*, and *then* so frequently. Recounts consist of a series of events which Martin has described as having a kind of “extendable back bone” (1984, 38) in that the story can be lengthened by adding more detail. The conjunctions *and*, *and then*, and *then* all extend and enhance prior statements with additional detail such as succeeding events. Oral stories typically contain greater use of the conjunction *and* since it facilitates extending a story with minimal planning (Martin & Rose, 2003; Plum, 2004). As McCabe and Peterson demonstrated, young children begin using *and* to connect events in their stories and continue to favor this conjunction throughout the elementary years (1997). In this sample, the

children mainly told stories about an occurrence by adding more detail or more events to their stories. Structurally, recounts enable this kind of extension.

**Relationships of Extension.** Cohesive conjunctions can extend meaning through addition or qualification, adding units together or comparing them as similar or different (Martin & Rose, 2003). Extension consists of adding additional information to a previous statement. Extending meaning can be used in any story type, but it is a hallmark of descriptive stories since this story type describes without progressing through time. For example, Tereza developed her description of her brother using cohesive conjunctions to build a more complete observation. The descriptive portion of Tereza's story used the conjunction *and* to continue to add information: "My brother is so silly. *And* he is still a baby. *And* he always makes silly tricks and. *And* he is wery, wery silly." As in this sample, children frequently used cohesive conjunctions to add more information to an immediately preceding statement creating chains of information that keep the story coherent and build a more complete picture of events.

Extending conjunctions can also add detail by qualifying a prior statement. In this sample, children used the contrastive conjunction *but* just 3% of the time. Krzysztof's narrative offers a good example of a cohesive element used to qualify a prior statement. He said, "*And, and* her mommy and daddy don't come back. *But* they're went to the grocery store." Basically, Krzysztof noted that *instead* of coming back his parents went to the grocery store, setting up a contrasting relationship between the two events. Here we can see that qualification offers another way to add more information and extend a story. The use of contrastive conjunctions like *but* reflects a more complex use of conjunction through which children do more than link events. Instead, they establish relationships where the subsequent event runs counter to expectations and disrupts the steady flow of occurrences. The dearth of contrastive conjunctions

in this sample indicates just how advanced a skill construing this type of relationship is for young children.

Contrastive conjunctions can also be used to introduce a complication to the story. Remember Daniel's narrative-type story. In this story, he introduced the complicating event with a cohesive conjunction that contrasted racing and crashing: "Lightning McQueen went to the race track. *But* he crash with McGoin and losed it." In similar fashion, Francisco told about an Easter egg hunt in which he found a special egg and won the contest. Describing the location of the special egg, Francisco said, "They were putting the eggs in the bag. *But*, he couldn't find the one that been next to the, next to my, my porch." Here again, the storyteller used a contrastive conjunction to signal a complication. In these examples, we can see how cohesive conjunctions can be integral to expressing the logical relationships of different types of stories. In the case of narrative-type stories, something disrupts the smooth flow of events. A portion of the children in the sample construed that meaning through a qualifying cohesive conjunction.

**Relationships of Enhancement.** Cohesive conjunctions do not just add to, compare, and contrast events, they develop meanings in terms of time or cause as well.

*Temporal enhancement.* The children in this sample used cohesive conjunctions to enhance prior statements by creating a chain of events or sequence of events in time. Consider Adan's recount-type story:

**Text 4.18**

*Adan (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 3*

I was in the car, with my mom and with my dad. *And* with my brother. I was going to the store. Orientation

*And then* I eat in the store. I buy everything in the store. Events

*And then* I go to the home. *And* I already play with it. *And then* it will start raining. *And then* um, I go to sleep. *And then* I read a story already. *And then* I play. *And then* I go to sleep. *And* I play with my toy.

In this story, Adan relayed a succession of events sequenced largely by the cohesive conjunction, *and then*, which expresses both an additive and temporal meaning. This is a common pattern for this sample which consists largely of event focused stories with material processes. Children frequently sequenced these processes through cohesive conjunctions, 40% of which made relationships of time explicit.

*Causal enhancement.* Though children in this sample predominantly connected more information and events together in an extending chain, 5% of the cohesive conjunctions established causal relationships between events. Another way to add more information to a story is to enhance previous information with causal connections like *because*, *'cause*, *so*, and *for*. Children used causal conjunctions to explain the relationship between events like when Karla said, “And my dad forgot what I liked on my milkshake. There was no whipcream. *So*, I went to buy my own.” In similar fashion, Vitya oriented the listener to his retelling of the *Three Little Pigs*, saying: “One day, the mom of the three little pigs say to, to, to the three little pigs. Go to make their own house. *Because, because* the mom no have a lot of money.” As these examples illustrate, causal connections add explanatory information to a story. These types of connections offer insight into why events unfold as they do. In this respect, causal connections are a kind of advanced storytelling skill in this sample. In these stories, children do not just relay what happens, but describe the conditions that give rise to events as well. This constitutes another source of complexity in storytelling.

An analysis of young children's use of cohesive conjunctions demonstrates how children construe experience through largely extended chains of events, adding ever more detail to their stories. A small proportion of the cohesive conjunctions in this sample expressed either causal or contrastive relationships between events, reflecting an advanced storytelling skill and a source of storytelling complexity which children can be supported to develop. An analysis of children's use of cohesive conjunctions shows children's capacity to tell cohesive stories that are structurally organized and develop along trajectories of increasing complexity in terms of length, completeness, and the use of cohesive devices to express causal and contrastive relationships.

### **Stress and Intonation**

So far, we have seen that the children in this sample told mainly event-focused stories in which they added additional events through cohesive conjunctions that express relationships of addition or temporal succession. In this section, I will examine some of the ways that children in this sample used stress and intonation to construe meaning by managing the flow of discourse. First, I will describe a general pattern of rising intonation used across the sample. Then, I will discuss how the children in this sample used features of phonology to give information, emphasize aspects of stories, and convey interpersonal information.

Throughout the sample, children managed the flow of information through largely single clause sentences with a rising tone on the final word. As mentioned earlier, a rising tone typically signals incompleteness. This type of intonation can be read as indicating that there is more to come. For recount-type stories in which participants go through a succession of events, new happenings follow one after another. Returning to Adan's story about the little monkey, we can see an example of one of the more basic uses of stress and intonation in the sample.

### Text 4.19

*Adan (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

There was a little monkey in the tree. *Orientation*

Then he jump, off of the tree. Then they get him into the boat. *Events*

Then someone take him to ho, to his home. And then, he go back to his mom. Then, they go to sleep. Then they wake up.

And the little, monkey go to the tree<sub>faster</sub>, now. *Reorientation*

Adan's story unfolds in a series of material processes. Each sentence consists of single clause with emphasis on the final word. In terms of intonation, Adan utilized a rising tone in each case with the exception of the final word "now," which ends the story with a falling tone, effectively signaling the end of the story. Adan used emphasis to highlight the monkey's actions and location. So, when the monkey acts – he "jump[s]," "sleep[s]," and "wake[s] up" – there is emphasis. Similarly, Adan stressed the changing location of the monkey from the "tree," to the "boat," and finally "back" with his mom in the tree again. Through emphasis, Adan reinforced the meaning of his story as a tale of a monkey who leaves his tree and ultimately finds his way home again through a brief series of events. The repeated rising tone may serve to hold the floor (Michaels, 1981, 2006) by cuing the listener that there are additional events. Though Adan did not include a direct statement of conclusion, the monkey's return to the tree reorients the listener to experiential starting place of the story. Coupled with falling tone on the word "now," Adan's story concluded in a way that meets the expectations for members of a shared culture.

Children in this sample also used features of phonology when giving descriptive information. For instance, Pablo, a child in Classroom A, told a series of descriptive story turns



which were entity focused. In these story turns, Pablo made declarative statements to tell about favorite story characters.

**Text 4.20**

*Pablo (Age: 5 years, 1 month old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 2*

I want to <sup> / </sup> try, <sup> / </sup> Lightning McQueen.	<i>Abstract</i>
Lightning McQueen is a <sup> / </sup> car.	<i>Description</i>
He <sup> / </sup> could drives.	<i>Event</i>
He <sup> / </sup> got fire (6 second pause).	<i>Description</i>

In this description of Lightning McQueen, Pablo employed a falling tone at the end of each statement, signaling completeness. This use of tone is typical for declarative statements which are characterized by certainty. When compared with event-oriented stories like Adan’s monkey story with its material processes and rising intonation, Pablo’s description of Lightning McQueen exhibits features of language more akin to expository text. It is more like a report about Lightning McQueen than a story.

Children in this sample used stress and intonation to emphasize particular aspects of their stories. In some instances, children did not just place emphasis on the final word in a clause. Instead, they used emphasis to signal important parts of their stories. For instance, in her final story turn, Maria (Age: 4 years, 0 months old; Home Language: English) relayed seeing different types of elephants. She said: “We saw  <sup>/</sup> elephants. We saw  <sup>/</sup> big elephants. We saw  <sup>/</sup> baby elephants.” In this example, Maria used stress to emphasize the different kinds of elephants over other parts of information in the clause. In similar fashion, Joel (Age: 4 years, 9 months old; Home Language: English) told a story about a character in the movie *Cars*. In this story, he used rising intonation to emphasize Franchesco’s speed. The use of rising intonation contrasted with an overall pattern of falling tone on the final syllable of each clause. He said: “And Franchesco,

she smashed them away. And he was, he almost caught them, in the car. And he caught them. And he was not fast enough. And he became fast.” In this story, “fast” stands out from other elements because of the contrast in intonation. In this excerpt from Joel’s narrative-type story, it was Francesco’s ability to become “fast” which enabled him to overcome the challenges of the race. In this respect, being “fast” is of singular importance to understanding Joel’s story.

Children also used changes in volume and speed of language to signal different parts of their stories as the focus. For instance, Krzysztof retold the story of the *Three Little Pigs* during his first story turn. In his retelling, he used volume and speed as well as changes in intonation.

For instance, Krzysztof began his story with an orientation, event, and complication. He said:

“Ah once upon a time, there was a three little pigs **went in the woods**<sup>softer</sup>. And ah, and ah they went to build a home. And the big, big bad wolf blowed down them house away. And the strong bricks are there<sup>faster</sup>.” In this story, Krzysztof oriented the listener with the statement,

“Ah once upon a time, there was a three little pigs **went in the woods**<sup>softer</sup>.” Here, he emphasized three critical elements in orientations, the time, place, and characters of interest. He began his story in classic fairy tale fashion by setting the story in far removed time. After introducing the participants, Krzysztof lowered his voice when he said, “went in the woods,” presenting this information as subordinate to the main focus of the three little pigs. In similar fashion, at the end of this excerpt, Krzysztof said, “And the strong bricks are there<sup>faster</sup>.” This time, Krzysztof sped up his language, producing a similar effect. The statement ends with a falling tone, signaling a complete act of meaning. However, in terms of focus, Krzysztof made “bricks” the main focus and “there” the secondary focus. This instance demonstrates how some children used more than intonation to emphasize different parts of their stories.

Given that stories like Adan’s (See Text 4.18) which emphasize the final salient syllable through a single intonational contour of rising intonation reflect the dominant pattern in the

sample, stories like Krzysztof's which contain rising and falling intonation and changes in speed and volume represent a more differentiated and complex use of phonological resources to construe meaning. So, just as children's stories varied in complexity in terms of use of structural organization and cohesive conjunctions, their stories demonstrate varied use of stress and intonation.

Finally, some children in the sample used phonological resources to emphasize evaluation in their stories. For instance, in her story about her little brother, Tereza employed both embedded evaluation as well as a discrete evaluative stage. In the descriptive portion of her story, evaluative elements were drawn out, emphasizing her perspective on her brother's silly behavior. For example, she said, "Today I'm going to tell a story about my brother. My brother is so silly. And he is still a baby. And he always makes silly tricks and. And he is wery, wery silly." By emphasizing the evaluative aspects of her story, Tereza strengthened the listener's sense of how silly her baby brother is. He is not just silly, he is "so silly." Earlier, we saw a similar instance of emphasizing evaluation in Karla's story about crossing the street by herself. Moments of evaluation qualify events, giving the listener insight into how the speaker thinks and feels about happenings. Through stress and intonation, speakers are able to heighten the effect.

Children in the sample conveyed interpersonal information through the use of a rising tone which not only conveyed a sense of there is more to come, but also a kind of excitement. In this respect, they used phonology to convey an evaluative stance on events. For instance, Andriy, an ELL with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in speech, told a story about escaping a snake in which the opening clauses all ended on a rising tone.

### Text 4.21

Andriy (Age: 5 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Ukrainian) Story Circle Time 1

Cool, a snake.	<i>Evaluation / Comment</i>
No I seed the snake, a big.	<i>Event</i>
Then he going my sides. And now he going my sides, right here	<i>Complication</i>
(gestures with both hands on the side of his body).	
<b>And then</b> <sup>louder</sup> , and then he can't catch me.	<i>Resolution</i>
I walking by my house. And now, and now, I <u>opened the door</u> <sup>faster</sup>	<i>Events</i>
and closed the door.	
And the snakes can't catch me, <i>anymore</i> .	<i>Evaluation / Coda</i>

In this story, Andriy began his story with the evaluative comment, “Cool, a snake.” He went on to tell about the snake’s size and close proximity using a rising tone. Rising intonation on statements like “and then he can’t catch me,” leave the listener waiting for what will happen next. In an event-focused story like Andriy’s this conveys a sense of excitement as events unfold to describe his escape.

Notably, Andriy ended his story with a coda that brought events into the present moment. In this coda, Andriy repeated the resolution from earlier in the story, a rhetorical strategy that conveys an evaluative stance by emphasizing the importance of a particular event, in this case, the snake’s inability to catch Andriy. This is one of only two instances of repetition of this kind in the sample. Though repetition, which carries an evaluative meaning, has been documented in samples of adult and teen storytellers (Labov, 1972) and in the case of Lem, a young child storyteller (Heath, 1981, 1983), repetition was extremely rare in this sample of preschool storytellers. In this instance, Andriy employed macro and micro features of language to convey

a sense of excitement in his escape story, exemplifying the way children coordinated multiple meaning-making resources of language to construe meaning.


### **Coordinating Meaning-making Resources of Language**

The children in this sample employed features of oral language meaning-making alongside cohesive conjunctions and structural organization. Coordinating multiple resources in language, the children managed the flow of information to construe meaning through story. As with individual features of meaning-making described above, there was a wide variety in the complexity demonstrated in children's coordinated use of meaning-making resources.

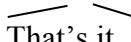
At the most basic level, children told a single event without cohesive conjunctions. In these single event stories, the children used stress and intonation to signal the focus of information just like in longer stories in the sample. Inez's nascent story about visiting the doctor demonstrates the kind of coordination common amongst children who told single event stories.

#### **Text 4.22**

*Inez (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

My mommy  go, to the doctor, with me.

*Event*

 That's it.

*Statement of Conclusion*

In this single event story turn, Inez placed emphasis on the final word in each tone unit that makes up the event. In doing so, she highlighted who, went, where as the key information. Her statement of conclusion ended on falling tone, signaling the completion of her act of meaning. Compared to other stories in the sample, this is a basic instantiation of story. Inez relayed an experience in a new context. She told who did what, where and with whom, using phonological resources to cue the listener to what matters. She used falling intonation and a statement of

conclusion to cede the floor and signal the completion of her story turn. In this single event story turn, we can see the fundamental elements of story.

The majority of the stories in this sample included multiple events connected through meanings of addition and temporal succession. These stories varied in use of stress and intonation with most like Adan's monkey story employing mainly rising intonation that emphasized the focus of information and primed the listener for more events to come. Others, used rising and falling intonation like Joel's retelling of the *Cars* movie, placed emphasis on more than just the final word in the clause (remember Maria's elephants), and altered the volume or speed of whole tone units to manage the focus of information, like in Krzysztof's retelling of the *Three Little Pigs*. Jada's story about going to the beach with her family exemplifies some of the features of multi-event stories.

#### **Text 4.23**

*Jada (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle 2*

Um, my mommy. I was at a beach, with my mom.	<i>Orientation</i>
And then. And I was playing with my ball.	<i>Event</i>
And I, I was in the water.	<i>Description</i>
And I, and I was playing with my sister, at the beach. And then, and then I went back home.	<i>Events</i>
<u>I'm done</u> <sub>faster</sub> .	<i>Statement of Conclusion</i>

Jada's story oriented the listener to events by setting the scene. Her story follows a pattern of description and event with a falling tone on the final event. First, she used a relational process to locate the action at the beach. Then, she told about playing with her ball, ending the sequence with a falling tone. In the second series of description and event, Jada located the action in the

water. She then told how she played with her sister and finally went home, again ending on a final tone. The final event of going home reflects a common pattern in the sample in which children's last event presented a natural ending to the story. Often, the participants went home or to sleep. This kind of ending is reminiscent of a resolution in narrative-type stories since it reflects an implicit return to the status quo or a state of rest. Jada ended her story, like Inez, with a final statement of conclusion.

Some children in the sample managed multiple aspects of more complex storytelling that enabled more a more precise construal of meaning. By being more lexically explicit, children were able to tell stories that were less dependent on "context, shared assumptions, and background knowledge for correct interpretation" (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz, 1979). Instances of more complex storytelling included more complete story structures like Karla's recount-type story with a coda that made the meaning of her story clearer. Children who told more complex stories often told longer stories with more story stages such as multiple complications in a narrative. Children used contrastive and causal cohesive conjunctions, moving beyond simply adding more information. In terms of intonation, these children employed alternating patterns of rising and falling intonation that helped manage the flow of information in more precise ways. Francisco's story about visiting the zoo exemplifies some of the ways that children coordinated the multiple resources of language to make meaning.

**Text 4.24**

*Francisco (Age: 4 years, 3 months; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 1*

My dad, my dad took me to the zoo. And my brother went there. *Orientation*  
 My brother, and my sister, and me.  
 Then I, I, I, I met the monkey first. Then my dad was playing with *Events*

him.

He left.

*Complication*

Then then then, we met the the the, um, crocodile.

*Event*

Then I was crying.

*Complication*

Because my dad, my dad carried me.

*Resolution*

Then we went to the tigers. Then, I, I, I cleaned my, I cleaned my

*Events*

tears.

Then, those was sleeping.

*Complication*

My dad woke him up. Then, they yelled.

*Resolution*

In this story, Francisco told a story that involved the action and reaction of multiple participants.

For example, Francisco said, “Then my dad was playing with him. He left.” Next, they met the

crocodile, Francisco cried, his father carried him. Similarly, the tigers slept. The father woke

them. The tigers yelled. Throughout, Francisco used stress and intonation to manage the flow of

information. For instance, meeting each animal is signaled with a rising tone: “Then I, I, I, I met

the monkey first,” “Then then then, we met the the the, um, crocodile,” “Then we went to the

tigers.” Then, a short vignette with a complication occurred at a visit to each of the animals.

Each vignette ended with a falling tone: “He left,” “my dad carried me,” “Then, they yelled.” In

this way, Francisco organized his story as a series of three short narratives which together relay

what happened when he visited the zoo. In this instance, the coordination of multiple linguistic

resources enabled Francisco to tell a story in which he and his father played with the animals,

and ultimately got the tigers to roar.



## Summary

In the last chapter, we saw how children used configurations of participants, processes, and circumstances to construe meaning through story. In this chapter, I built on this analysis by examining ways of organizing and emphasizing language to construe meaning and guide the listener's interpretation of events. An analysis of structural, cohesive, and oral language meaning-making features demonstrates how children organize the flow of information on a micro and macro level.

The children in this sample used all three meaning-making features of language with varying degrees of complexity. Examining the range of stories given during story circles offers several critical insights. First, it shows how children develop increasing facility construing story in a number of ways. Stories become longer, reflect more complex structural organization, relate events as caused by or in contrast to other events, provide more explicit perspective on events, and use stress and intonation in ways that emphasize events in more differentiated and sophisticated ways. Though some children coordinate multiple meaning-making features in complex ways, most children's stories reflect a more uneven pattern of development in which different aspects of more mature storytelling are used. For example, in Daniel's brief narrative-type story about Lightning McQueen, he used a well-known story structure and signaled the complication with a contrastive cohesive conjunction, but his story was relatively short in length and included a more basic use of stress and intonation.

The variation in story circle offerings also provides insight for classroom instruction. The varying sources of complexity utilized by children demonstrate how children were more or less successful construing meaning through story for an audience that did not share the experiences or the perspective of the speaker. The children in this sample proved adept at linking events, but demonstrated much less facility with the aspects of storytelling that help a

listener understand the storyteller's point of view of events. Across the sample, there is a dearth of evaluative language, causal connections, and story endings that help make the speakers' intentions clear. These three features of language help individuals understand one another in a world filled with so many varying experiences and perspectives. Though the children were able to relay events that happened in another context, they showed less skill in expressing feelings and attitudes that guide the listener's interpretation of the story. Consequently, their perspective on the events they describe was not always clear. Pedagogically, supporting young meaning-makers to more clearly articulate perspectives on events could offer fertile ground for advancing children's ability to tell stories.

In this chapter, we saw how some children used patterns of rising tone to build a kind of excitement about coming events. In the last chapter, we saw how children attempted to appeal to circle-mate's known interests by talking about shared interests such as favorite stories. Storytelling devices such as these may serve to reflect the speaker's stance on events because for some children being excited about Lightning McQueen winning the race was a shared perspective.

Examining variation in the use of meaning-making features of language uncovers how a perspective on language as a system of choice shows how there are multiple ways – at the micro and macro level – to construe meaning through story. Examples of stories that achieve similar meanings through different structures and intonational patterns, demonstrate aspects of choice in language. As researchers, a perspective that acknowledges choice and recognizes variation in ways of telling story offers a compelling account of how storytelling as a core competency begins and develops in the early years without constraining or devaluing particular instantiations of story. For teachers, this insight demonstrates the need for an awareness of different ways of

construing meaning as well as ways of introducing children to literacy as a fundamentally meaning-driven activity.

Finally, I undertook this analysis with an awareness of differences documented in rhetorical strategies and phonological patterns of meaning making amongst members of different discourse communities (Heath, 1981, 1983; Michaels, 1981, 2006). Accordingly, I hypothesized that story circles might serve a particularly critical role in bringing diverse, culturally shaped ways of making meaning to the fore, especially in classrooms where multiethnic and multilingual configurations of children learned together in the classroom. However, I did not find patterns in language use determined by children's race, ethnicity, or home language status, perhaps because children lived in the same mixed income, multiethnic neighborhoods in Chicago. This is a different kind of local context than that documented in previous studies. Furthermore, rhetorical strategies such as the use of repetition, analogy, ideophones, and call and response were extremely rare with each strategy occurring only once or twice in the sample.

Though children told stories that reflected multiple ways of construing meaning, as we saw in the first results chapter, they marshaled these multiple ways to exchange stories about shared, but unique lived experiences. In this respect, story circles highlight how children seek to connect and belong to the shared culture of classroom. As we will see in the next chapter, children's stories are more than the textual instantiation of story, their stories act as a form of activity through which children negotiate aspects of identity and the culture of the classroom.

## **Chapter 5 Story Circles: A Socially Meaningful Activity that Supports and Shapes Storytelling**

In the previous two chapters, I analyzed stories in terms of patterns of ideational meanings, structural organization, cohesion, and oral language meaning-making features. These analyses revealed that children construed shared, but unique lived experiences through organized, cohesive stories that varied along trajectories of completeness and complexity. In this chapter, I examine the dialogic power of stories in the culture of the classroom, analyzing how children's stories were simultaneously informed by and informed the ideas, interests, and ways of being prevalent in the culture of the classroom. In this respect, children's stories are more than their textual instantiation. Stories constitute a form of social action through which children negotiate aspects of their identity and the culture of classroom, playing a role in shaping their social world.

An examination of story circles as meaningful social activity that shape and are shaped by children's stories highlights how children develop from legitimate peripheral participation to increasingly full participants. Increasingly full participation entails telling complete stories and engaging in the valuing and evaluation, inextricably related to literacy. Beyond participating in increasingly complete ways, as we have already seen, children participated in different ways such as listening, fulfilling story turns with contributions in which words were not the semantic driver of meaning, and using the phonology of language in increasingly differentiated and sophisticated ways to engage and entertain. In this chapter, I further explore how children

participate in different ways, not just in terms of the stories they tell, but in terms of the roles children enact through these stories.

Throughout, I conceptualize children's participation in story circles as a dialogue. Children in this sample maintained a dialogue with ideational threads interwoven throughout the classroom culture, with their circle-mates about ways of participating in story circles, and with stories over time. Conceptualizing children's stories as dialogic activity demonstrates how inextricably connected stories remain to the context in which they are produced. Further, it shows how children respond to the broader nexus of ideas and interests supported in the classroom.

The value of analyzing young children's stories as a dialogic, social activity lies in the pedagogical implications of seeing young, low SES children from diverse linguistic backgrounds as capable meaning-makers who can shape their own community of learners. This analysis demonstrates how even young children deemed at risk for school failure play an active role in configuring ongoing activity, shaping ways of participating and the textual instantiations of that participation. By examining the ways that young children's interactions support and shape learning, this analysis demonstrates how teachers can strategically leverage activities like story circles to promote language learning as well as learning that takes place across the classroom day.

### **Analytic Method**

The analysis in this chapter seeks to delineate what story circles, as a socially meaningful activity, "gets people to do with one another and what they do with it" (Miller, 1984). This analysis identifies patterns in the data determined by looking across the fully transcribed and

analyzed data set of stories as configurations of participants, processes, and circumstances divided into stages of realization with full phonological markings. Children's participation was analyzed in relation to the larger sample, their classrooms, their story circle group, and their storytelling across the four weeks.

In addition to the stories, I transcribed full story circles in order to capture children's comments which were made before, during, and after individual story turns. Full story circle transcripts report all dialogue, including individual children's stories, from the beginning of each story circle until the conclusion of the story circle. These transcripts maintain the order in which children told stories as well as the interactive features of story circles such as children's comments to one another about storytelling.

### **Ideational Threads in the Culture of Classroom**

I coded stories for evidence of shared ideational meanings with the ongoing classroom studies and interests, with the facilitator story, and with circle-mates' stories by tracking participants, processes, and circumstances present across stories. Remember that as classrooms guided by The Creative Curriculum, each classroom engaged in extended, thematic studies. For example, in Classroom C the children and teachers studied shoes. Through this ongoing engagement, children played in a shoe store set up in the house area, examined a cross-section of a tennis shoe, and compared their shoes which were adorned with favorite story characters such as Buzz Lightyear and Lightning McQueen. Children extended these ongoing studies by telling stories in the story circle that related to activities across the classroom day. As we saw earlier, one such instance of this occurred when Marcus (See Text 4.3) and his circle-mates exchanged stories about buying their shoes immediately after the whole class participated in a whole group activity, examining a cross-section of a shoe.

Conceptually, I consider shared ideational meanings ideational threads in that certain story participants and ideas were stitched into the fabric of classroom life and appeared across different participation structures throughout the days and weeks of the study. These ideational threads included participants (ex. specific *Cars* characters), processes (ex. going places), and circumstances (ex. when I was little).

Children maintained ideational threads in different ways. In coding for ideational threads, I identified how many story circles involved shared threads as well as how children picked up and extended particular ideational threads in the classroom. Returning to the example of Classroom C and the shoe study, I identified “shoes” as an ideational thread in my field note descriptions of the ongoing studies in the classroom. Then, I read each story for evidence of the ideational thread, “shoes,” marking the transcript whenever children discussed this ideational thread in their stories or comments. I also noted interactional features that accompanied instances of the ideational thread such as when Marcus said, “a shoe too,” indicating that like the other children in his group, he had bought shoes at the store. Instances like this highlight how in continuing ideational threads, children often directly responded through story to an ongoing dialogue in the story circle and culture of the classroom.

This analysis shows one way that story circles support and shape learning across the larger classroom context. Further, it demonstrates how story circles support children in actively developing distinctive classroom cultures because children continued to discuss ideas present in the culture of the classroom in their story turns. Through their stories children kept some ideas, interests, and ways of being alive and actively explored.

## **Story Circle Comments**

In the story circles, children did more than just tell stories. They talked to each other before, during, and after story turns. I analyzed story circle transcripts, identifying and counting children's comments during story circle turns. Children made a range of comments from seeking clarity to offering story ideas to attempting to end unusually long stories compared to the average story length in the sample. I counted comments across the whole sample as well as in individual story circles and from particular participants in order to determine the extent to which children commented as a whole and in particular story circle groups. Further, I determined characteristics of stories and children associated with particular types of comments. For instance, stories that were at least two times longer than the average story in the sample in several instances elicited an attempt to end the story by a circle-mate who said, "the end."

An analysis of children's comments during story circles illustrates the ways that children begin to value and evaluate ways of participating in the literate world. In this regard, some children do more than tell stories, they attempt to exert control over how other children tell stories as well.

## **Ongoing Participation**

In this study, children participated in a small group storytelling activity for one month as a way to explore how ongoing participation in storytelling might shape and support children's facility construing experience even as the children, themselves, shaped what it meant to participate. Previous analyses demonstrated that children told different kinds of stories that reflected varying levels of completeness and complexity. In this chapter, I examine particular children's storytelling across the four weeks of the story circle activity in order to demonstrate how the textual instantiation of children's stories enabled children to fulfill different social roles



with regards to story circle participation. These roles included being a listener, a storyteller, a sense-maker, and an entertainer. In the analysis, I examine children's use of language for evidence of the enactment of different roles. For instance, in Carlos' stories (See text 3.4, 5.2) he used ideophones to animate interactions between participants in the story. Coupled with the use of gesture and exaggerated language, these ideophones entertained and engaged listeners, enabling Carlos to fulfill the role of entertainer in the story circle.

This analysis demonstrates the ways that individual children navigated participation in story circles. Like the analysis of children's comments, an analysis of children's ongoing participation in story circles hints at the different social positions that children occupy in the classroom as well as further substantiating the range in completeness and complexity of children's participation in a small group storytelling activity.

## **Results**

In this chapter, I consider participation in story circles in relation to the broader classroom context and the confluence of identities, interests, ways of being in the classroom that make up the social milieu in which story circles occur. Story circles provide the space for children to express, negotiate, and reinforce the culture of the classroom as well as their individual place in this context. Through their participation in an ongoing storytelling activity, the children in this sample maintained a dialogue through which they simultaneously asserted their own sense of belonging and continued to transform to what it is that they belong.

### **Ideational Threads in the Story Circle and Classroom Context**

In this section, I trace how children's stories directly responded to ideational threads in the classroom culture, the facilitator's story, and other children's stories. Through this analysis, I

demonstrate how socially meaningful activities like story circles support children's storytelling by drawing on the rich context of ideas present in the classroom context. Story circles open spaces for children to develop, extend, and begin new ideational threads. In the process, children cultivate a culture of the classroom which straddles home and school life in ways with important implications for language learning in the early childhood care and education classroom.

**Responding to the Classroom Culture.** The children in this sample told stories that directly responded to favorite classroom stories, ongoing classroom studies, and individual children's interests by continuing ideational threads from other participation structures in the classroom. Children construed ideational meanings through participants, processes, and circumstances that evolved across multiple settings in the classroom including free play, whole group read-alouds, circle time discussions, and meal times. Unlike other participation structures throughout the day, story circles offered an intentional space for language use. In this space, children told stories about the ongoing preoccupations of their shared classroom life. Engaging in this kind of storytelling has the effect of expressing group membership and of maintaining and developing particular ideational threads as an ongoing part of the dialogue of the classroom culture.

*Favorite Stories.* Part of what defines a culture is the stories that animate it. In the classrooms in this study, children had different favorite stories that ranged from a book of call and response that became newly popular during the time of the study in Classroom C to the fairy tale *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The children in classroom B knew this story so well that they corrected the facilitator's intonation when it did not match that on the audio recording to which they usually listened. Still other children in the classroom like Daniel and Francisco reenacted and invented stories with toy cars from a favorite movie. In Classroom D, a child

relayed a favorite story from home about a “pumpkin boy,” introducing a new story into the world of the classroom.

The stories that circulated through the classroom presented different structural organizations – the call and response, the particular way of orienting the listener in fairy tales, the complication and resolution typical of narratives. In these classrooms, stories employed different ways of construing experience, made distinct meanings about individual and community life, and were embraced by different children with varying levels of enthusiasm. As we have already seen, some children in this sample participated in story circles by telling and extending known stories from the broader culture that permeated the classroom context such as stories from the *Cars* movies. In the process, the children leveraged these models of expert storytelling to tell, at times, more complex stories with multiple participants carrying out actions in coordinated sequences of events. Through these retellings, the children populated the culture of the classroom with constellations of ways of relating to others and to the world, codified in story.

Children in this sample did not just retell known stories; they took up and extended ideational threads from favorite classroom stories in ways that shaped children’s stories in the story circle. For example, in Classroom B, Joel and Daniel used toy cars to reenact scenes from the *Cars* movie during free play. Then, in the story circle, Joel told a story which began, “I like to see *Cars Two*. And Frachesco’s in *Cars*.” The following week, Krzysztof began his story, “I want to tell a different story after cars.” He then proceeded to tell a fictional story about three little cars utilizing a narrative-type structure with features typical of fairy tales. Later, in the same story circle Daniel told a story about Lightning McQueen, the main character in the *Cars* movies, winning a race. Elena began a story about the three little pigs, but swiftly changed

course when Daniel commented that she had already told that story. She turned the three pigs into cars saying, “And then there’s a car. Her name is Tanda.” In the subsequent weeks, children in this story circle continued to play cars in the classroom and Daniel told a second story focused on the *Cars* movies.

Daniel’s comment to Elena shows one of the ways that children attempted to directly shape story circle participation by commenting on other children’s contributions. In this instance, Daniel’s comment had the positive effect of prompting Elena to embellish and change a known story instead of attempting to retell a known story verbatim. In response to the comment, Elena told about what she, perhaps, interpreted to be a story of interest to her circle-mates, a story about cars. The result was an amalgamation of Elena’s fairy tale and her circle-mates’ abiding interest in cars.

In the above mentioned story circle, the children interwove an ideational thread from two story circle members’ favorite story into their stories, marrying their circle-mates interests and their own. Elena and Krzysztof both told fairy tales in their first story turn. In their second turn, they infused cars, a common participant in Joel and Daniel’s car play and Joel’s first story turn, into their fairy tale type stories. Daniel and Joel expressed aspects of their identity as people who know the *Cars* movies. Elena and Krzysztof expressed their group membership in the classroom, as people who know, value, and can tell the same stories as classmates. Finally, the children shaped the culture of the classroom itself as ideas, interests, and the stories that animated them were proposed and contested in the story circle. Here, we see children engaged in a process of figuring out what matters and to whom.

*Ongoing Studies.* The children in this sample continued ideational threads from ongoing studies in the classroom. For example, in Classroom D at the time of the study, the children

were learning about the life cycle of caterpillars. At the same time, the mothers of three children in this classroom were pregnant. As a result, the teachers and children in this classroom discussed growing and changing as part of their regular instructional activities. In one story circle in this classroom the children exchanged stories about when they were young. 68% of the stories in this circle began with a circumstance of time such as “when I was a little baby” or “when I was a little girl.” The children then went on to relay experiences with family such as drinking from a bottle, having their diaper changed, or going to the park.

In similar fashion, the children in Classroom C were learning about shoes at the time of the study. As previously mentioned, as part of this study, the teachers and children built a classroom shoe store in the house area. One day, during whole group instruction during circle time, the teacher passed around a shoe that had been cut so that children could see the various layers of the shoe. Later that day in the story circle, the children in one group told about experiences buying their shoes. It was in the context of this story circle that Marcus told his single event story about buying shoes as discussed earlier. In this instance, the children used the story circle as an occasion to tell about their personal experiences with shoes. The whole group instruction which preceded the story circle was predominantly teacher-led with children looking at and touching the shoe as the teacher explained the layers of the shoe and identified parts of the shoe such as the sole. In this instance, the children’s stories complemented instruction from a different participation structure and provided children with a space to tell about their own experiences with shoes in a way that fruitfully extended teacher-led instruction.

The children in this sample even incorporated ideational threads from daily, routine instruction in their stories. For example, in Classroom A a designated child took the lead in identifying a number, color, and shape each day during whole group instruction. In one story

circle, Andriy, an ELL currently receiving services for an IEP in speech, told an escape story in which he said, “Now **I go**<sup>louder</sup> round and round<sub>acc</sub> (swirls hand in a circular motion quickly). And then, that shark is going round, like that circle.” A circle-mate responded with her own shark escape story in which the shark moved in another shape-inspired motion. She said, “A shark go **in a triangle**<sup>louder</sup>.”

In these three instances, the children in this sample interwove ideational threads from ongoing classroom studies into their story circle participation. In effect saying, part of what we talk about together and think about in the classroom is when we were young, shoes, and shapes. These instances also show how children continue to process and to understand what they are learning about across participation structures in the school day. In this respect, story circles offer a space for children to discuss and think through new ideas learned in the classroom.

The ongoing studies of the classroom supported children’s storytelling by offering a ready store of experiences and ideas upon which children can draw. By drawing on ongoing studies in the classroom, the children in this sample demonstrate how teachers can have a hand in orchestrating learning by fostering ongoing studies in the classroom. Children, in turn, continued the dialogue and took up the idea, for example, of what it means to be young or to grow up. This suggests that activity structures like story circles, which open space for children to construe experience through story, are part of the ongoing learning in the broader classroom, especially when that learning connects with children’s interests and concerns. Further, in a dialectic process story circles offer insight into the ideas and interests that animate children. Teachers can learn about fruitful areas for further study by listening to children’s stories, just as children’s stories respond to the ideas and interests that teachers have a hand in promoting.

*Children's Interests.* In addition to favorite stories and ongoing classroom studies, the children in this sample took up ideational threads based on individual interests. For example, in Classroom A, Andriy considered the snake to be one of his favorite animals prior to participating in the story circle; so much so that his teacher reported that he repeatedly drew pictures of snakes in school. In the first story circle the facilitator told a story which included a snake encounter. Andriy excitedly followed with his own snake story. He told snake stories for the first three weeks of the story circle before switching to a shark escape story upon the suggestion of a circle-mate who said, "I wanta, say a shark." In the final story circle, as noted above, Andriy and his circle-mate told shark escape stories that picked up a thread from their play earlier that morning. Several children had pretended to be fishing while Andriy imitated a shark trying to catch the fish before the other children could pull them up. In telling shark escape stories, Andriy and his circle-mate brought multiple elements of the classroom context together. They continued the ideational thread of a chasing shark from their play, they included movements in the story based on a routinized shape activity that centered around naming different shapes, and they directly responded to the facilitator example story by telling an evolving series of scary animal encounter stories across the four weeks of the activity. Through this example, we can see how the classroom is constituted by multiple ideas, interests, and identities that reflect the actions of the many parties that make up a classroom. In the story circle, Andriy gave voice to those multiple threads, and in doing so, made new meanings from the many disparate dialogues of the classroom.

**Responding to the Facilitator Story.** As we have seen, children told stories in the context of classrooms animated by an ongoing dialogue of ideas and interests. In story circles, children continued and extended these ideas through story, and in the process, actively shaped an

ever evolving classroom culture. As Andriy's stories illustrate, at times, these ideational threads intersected. In many ways, the facilitator story overlapped with ongoing dialogues in the classroom. Drawing on this model story, the children told stories that directly responded to ideational threads in the story that reflected existing preoccupations in the classroom.

In the first week, the facilitator began the story circle by introducing the activity and telling the first story. This was the only adult story told during the four weeks of participation in the activity. The facilitator told a brief narrative-type story about a scary encounter with a snake which occurred while hiking with family.

### **Text 5.1**

#### *Facilitator Example Story; Story Circle Time 1*

This is a story about when I was young.

*Abstract*

One time, I went hiking with my family on a mountain trail.

*Orientation*

*Suddenly*, when I put my foot down, it began to move in a zigzag from side to side.

*Evaluation / Complication*

I was so scared.

*Evaluation*

When I looked down I discovered that I had stepped on a small snake. The snake's body moved in a zigzag on the trail, so my foot moved that way too.

*Events*

I lifted my foot and it slithered away.

*Resolution*

But I was *still so* scared because I was afraid of snakes.

*Evaluation / Complication*

Nothing happened though.

*Resolution*

The snake kept moving and I continued to walk with my family.

*Reorientation*

Over a quarter of the children's stories (28%) responded to the initial story example by relating a story about being young, being scared, or an encounter with a snake. In these stories, children



picked up and extended an ideational thread like the circumstance of time, “when I was young,” in many cases responding to an ideational meaning that already figured prominently in the classroom. So, in Classroom D where children and teachers engaged in an ongoing study of the life cycle and what it means experientially to grow, children in one story circle, as we have seen, told predominantly stories about when they were young.

*Being Young.* Stories about being young enabled children to present different aspects of the self, establishing a connection with circle-mates over a shared value placed on being with family and shared experiences such as playing at the park. The connections children establish through story show how drawing on common values and experiences in the story circle provides a support for storytelling because children do not need to invent stories without support. They can draw on the common social fabric of their classroom culture.

Stories about when children were young directly responded to the facilitator story which began, “This is a story about when I was young.” In reply, children began their stories by saying something like, “When I was a little baby,” “Once I was a little girl,” or “When I was a little boy.” In this way, the children in this sample entered the dialogue with their own account of experience from the past. Then, the children relayed events that ranged from experiences in the home, at school, and at the park. Children’s stories about when they were young also expressed important relationships to parents, siblings, and family pets. For example, Carlos, an ELL in Classroom D, told four different stories about being a baby, all of which expressed his connection to his dad as well as provided a general sense of what it was like to be a baby.

### **Text 5.2**

*Carlos (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 3*

When I was a little boy. Um, my daddy has a long, a long, a long      *Orientation*

hair. And I saw that in the picture<sub>faster</sub>.

And they give me all, a lot of toys. And then, he say “Ah,  
good boy.” And the puppy say “Ahbbabbabaa **maah**<sup>louder</sup>.” And  
he eat the bone. Me say “Wahh wahh wahh wahwowowo<sub>slower</sub>.”

And dad says “**No. Don’t. Go. Do. That**<sup>louder</sup>.”

The end.

*Evaluation / Events*

*Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, Carlos described a brief vignette from the past in which his dog barked, he cried, and his father scolded. In all four of Carlos’ stories, he described the general experience of being a baby saying, “I want someone to pick me up,” “my mommy, he wants to get me food,” and “I eat all my milk, and go in my pants.” This story continues that pattern. Though the story is brief, it creates a vivid picture of a moment in time in the home when Carlos “was a little boy.”

Many of the stories about when children were young relay events shared with the family. For instance, Diamond, an African American student in Classroom D, told stories about spending time with her mother when she was young. She said, “When I was a little girl, I liked to play with my mommy. Um, we go to the park. And we both go on the slide. I go on her lap. And I was one.” One of Diamond’s circle-mates, Maricruz, told stories about when she was young that revolved around activities shared with her parents, sister, and dog. Maricruz began one such story by saying, “Whe, when I was a, a little girl. I would go to the park with my daddy and my sister.” For these children, being young is strongly associated with being with family. Whether crying in the home or playing outside, being with parents, siblings, and pets is an important part of the experience of being young.

Stories about being young also served as a counterpoint through which children made direct comparisons between being a baby and being older. Stories like Tereza’s and Karla’s, in

Classroom A, demonstrate how children can marshal different structural organizations of story to contrast current and former life experiences. Ultimately, the children explore what it means to be themselves in this moment, as part of a classroom, home, and broader culture in which they position themselves and are positioned in multiple ways. In instances like these, children's participation in story circles opens the space for them to explore facets of their identity in ways that connect to continuing dialogues in the classroom, dialogues inspired by events in the home, but maintained through ongoing classroom studies. This shows how story circles can be more than an occasion for children to use language in extended turns because in construing experience through story the children tell stories that directly respond to the ideas, interests, and identities already present in the classroom, including the ideational meanings taken up by the facilitator's story.

*Being Scared.* In similar fashion, some children responded to the initial example story by telling a story about being scared, directly responding to the facilitator story, and in this case, a classroom interest. Children in Classroom D, a classroom with a small group of children who were particularly interested in scary stories and movies, told stories about a time when something scary happened across the four weeks of the story circle activity.

The classrooms in this study served children with multiple experiences and interests. Story circles offered an additional space for children to introduce, maintain, and extend ideational meanings in the classroom culture that were not included in ongoing classroom studies. Perhaps this is especially so when the facilitator story touches on those meanings and suggests, in this case, story circles are a place for telling about being scared. For instance, the scary stories in Classroom D were not just scary, but exciting and funny as well. Children in Classroom D frequently told about scary movies and monsters throughout the day like while

waiting for the morning circle time to begin. One child in particular, David, was observed acting out monster characters that he reported seeing while watching scary movies at home with his family. In this classroom, the idea of being scared and the scary stories it inspired remained a classroom interest that was not reflected in the classroom books or a classroom study at the time of the study. As such, children’s use of the ideational thread “being scared” in stories demonstrates how story circles provide a space for children to construe aspects of experience that may be remarkable to particular children or small groups of children even when these ideational meanings are not immediately taken up as part of the larger classroom culture.

In the scary stories, children recounted encounters with monsters, ghosts, spiders, and just general feelings of being frightened at night. For example, Marta began her story circle by telling a more impressionistic experience about being scared using language that mirrored the facilitator’s pronouncement, “I was so scared.” She began her story saying, “Um, I was, um, a scary.” The story ended with an appeal to her mother for help (See Text 5.12). Though Marta’s story turn provided less detail about the circumstances surrounding being scared, she offered a powerful sense of the feeling of being scared. A daily playmate of Marta’s, Ana, told the next story in the circle. In this story, Ana continued the ideational thread of soliciting help from her mother, but added a new element as she told a story not just about being scared, but being scared by a ghost.

**Text 5.3**

*Ana (Age: 4 years, 3 months old; Home Language: Spanish) Story Circle Time 1*

Um, yesterday, I saw a ghost.	<i>Orientation</i>
And I was crying on the floor. And the ghost wanted to get me.	<i>Complication</i>
Then I, then I wanted to catch it. Then, it went away. Then, I never	<i>Resolution</i>

saw it again.

And I went to my mom's room. And I said "Mommy, I saw something in my, in the house." Then I said. Then I go to sleep.

*Events*

Then um, I heard another ghost<sub>faster</sub>. Then um.

*Complication*

What happened.

*Comment*

I did this (blinks eyes shut). And um, I, I did this (shuts eyes).

*Evaluation*

(Opens eyes) But, I, I scratch my, um, head (gestures with hand to side of head).

Um, he went, it wanted to go away.

*Resolution*

And, I never see it again<sub>faster</sub>.

*Coda*

In this story, Ana used words and gestures to tell a story about seeing a ghost. In terms of length and structure, Ana's story reflects a higher level of complexity compared to Marta's relatively short, recount-type story that, as we will see later in this chapter, ended with a sense of incompleteness.

Nevertheless, the two stories stand in conversation with one another as Ana drew on an ideational thread from Marta's story which, in turn, extended a thread from the facilitator story about being scared. The facilitator's story told about a time when something scary happened, but nothing came of it. Marta's story relayed how something scary happened and she reached out to her mother for help. Ana's story recounted a time when something scary happened and she attempted to solve the problem in a number of ways: she tried to chase the ghost away herself, she went to her mother for help, and ultimately she stood in astonishment as what scared her went away on its own. So, after much ado the conflict resolved itself in similar fashion to the facilitator's story. In this instance, through their participation in story circles, the two children

extended a larger classroom dialogue about being scared and scary things, shaping what story circles are an occasion to talk about and how these conversations stand in relation to the broader classroom culture. As in other stories in the sample, these stories reflect more than simple happenings. Through stories the children construed experience, meditating on representations of the self as vulnerable, as connected to protecting others, as ghost chasers; and these meditations found support in the larger classroom dialogue and the facilitator's example story.

*Encountering a Snake.* Children in this sample extended the ideational thread of encountering a snake from the facilitator's story as well. Snake stories mainly consisted of first person stories in which the child attempted to avoid or escape a snake. Two of the four classrooms had a story circle group in which two or three children told rivaling snake stories at different points throughout the four weeks of the activity. As we have seen, in Classroom A, two Ukrainian students told snake stories for the first three weeks of the story circle. In the final week, they told a similar escape story with a shark as the antagonist. For these two children, these escape stories aligned closely with an ongoing individual interest in snakes and sharks. In the first story circle, Andriy emphatically raised his hand to start the first circle and responded to the example story by saying, "Cool, a snake. No, I seed the snake, a big." He then launched into his own story of a snake encounter, a story marked by through a pattern of rising intonation that conveyed his excitement.

Children like Andriy with a special affinity for snakes were not the only ones to tell snake stories. Four other children told snake stories during the first story circle and snake encounter stories continued across the four weeks of the activity. Each week, children would devise new ways of escaping the snake. For example, in Classroom C Michael told an elaborated snake story that built on the story of a classmate.

#### Text 5.4

Michael (Age: 5 years, 3 months old; Home Language: English) Story Circle Time 3

When I was at the beach. And then, and then I saw a snake. *Orientation*

And I thought it was dead. And it wasn't. And then, it wrap over  
my leg. And then, and then I fell in the water. *Complication*

And then I float. And then, I went deep in the water. Um, and I  
swim, into the beach. And I made it. *Resolution*

And then, I saw the snake. *Complication*

And then I put it in the water. *Resolution*

Here, Michael expanded on previous stories told in the story circle by not only escaping the snake, but defeating the snake as well when he “put it in the water.” He also included an elaborated detail, saying “it wrap over my leg.”

This kind of interesting detail about the physical movements of the snake or the escapee continued from week to week as the children created new and interesting snake encounters. These elaborated details about the physical movements of the snake were not unlike the “zigzag” or “slither[ing]” described in the initial story example. As we have seen, Andriy and his circle-mate included similar types of detail in their stories about escaping the shark. The children’s snake stories (and shark escape stories) clearly responded to the initial example story in which the storyteller met a snake, but came out unharmed.

The use of an elaborated detail that changed from story to story shows how the children did not just imitate the initial facilitator story, but built on the story, and in the process created a new way of participating that included a playful back and forth and a kind of one-upmanship. In this instance, the facilitator story spoke to existing individual interests and suggested new ways

of participating in story circles. In telling snake encounter stories, the children relayed different ways of escaping an antagonist. Structurally, this entailed at least one crisis moment which the storyteller had to resolve. As we have seen, this is the defining characteristic of narrative-type stories, a highly valued rhetorical pattern of action (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). This shows how the type of story that the facilitator tells can inspire children to tell particular types of stories as well.

**Responding to other Children's Stories.** Children in this sample told stories that directly responded to the existing classroom culture, the facilitator's example story, and to other children's stories. Through these responses, the children maintained an ever shifting dialogue of ideas, interests, and identities which their stories sustained and extended. Story circles supported children's storytelling not only by eliciting stories that drew on the larger conversations of the classroom, but by putting children in direct interaction with one another. This interaction enabled children to tell stories based on shared ideational threads that occurred in the context of the story circle itself.

In 88% of the story circles at least two stories included a shared ideational thread. In some instances, children continued the same ideational thread from week to week. For example, in Classroom B the children in one story circle all told stories about going to different destinations. In one story, Maria told a story about visiting a park. Francisco followed with a story about going to the zoo. The next week, Maria responded by telling her own story about visiting the zoo, continuing the ideational thread begun the week before.

In some instances, children all told stories that related to the same ideational thread, but interwove an additional shared idea. We saw this in the story circle where children told stories about being young. Maricruz told a story about going to the park with family when she was



young. The following week, Diamond joined Maricruz in telling a story about going to the park when she was young with family. Their stories spoke directly to David and Carlos who told stories about when they were young that centered on experiences with family in the home, but also uniquely responded to one another.

In responding to other children's stories, the children in this sample picked up on different elements in stories, shifting the thread of the dialogue as the story circle continued. This happened in the story circle with Vitya, Adriana, Alejandra, and Tereza. In week three, Adriana told a story about taking her dog to the park. In week four, Vitya began the story circle with a story in which he bought toys for his dog. This story ended with Vitya going to sleep. Adriana followed with a story in which she and her dog went to sleep together in her bed at home. In the next story, Alejandra relayed a story about a visit to her grandmother. While at her grandmother's house her dog went to sleep. Tereza completed the circle with a story about visiting her grandmother in the Ukraine, picking up on the new ideational thread started in Alejandra's story. In instances like this, children told stories by drawing on the active dialogue in story maintained in the story circle. When telling stories, children can not only draw on the confluence of ideas actively explored in the classroom through books, studies, and individual interests, they have other children's stories as an immediate resource on which they can draw. Through these types of interchanges, the children cue and are cued to construe particular experiences through story.

### **Commenting in the Story Circle**

Children's stories shaped and were shaped by the story circle activity through direct comments made during participation. In half of the story circles (50%), at least one child commented to another child before, during, or after a story turn. Further, all ten of the story

groups made comments at one time across the four weeks of the activity. This shows that when children in this sample worked with the same group of children in a small group storytelling activity, they did more than just tell stories. The children in these classrooms made comments to express their perspective on stories told in the circle. Further, the children in this sample were largely responsive to the input of classmates. The majority of children's comments aimed to prescribe some aspect of other children's storytelling. All 20 story circles that included a comment contained remarks about what a particular storyteller should do – they should speak louder, they should end this story, they should tell a different story, and they should start their story like this. In this way, children in these story circles made direct statements about what stories should be like, and their circle-mates typically responded by speaking louder, ending their story, telling a different story, or even beginning their story in a particular way. This shows how even very young children can shape notions of story, establishing norms for what constitutes important things to talk about and ways of talking about them.

**Table 5.1**

*Types of Comments in the Story Circle*

<b>Type of Comment</b> (N = 27)	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Encouragement to Tell a Story	7	26%
Clarity Seeking	5	19%
Length	8	30%
Variety	2	7%
Ways of Telling a Story	1	4%
General Interaction	4	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

The two most common comments made during the story circles were efforts to encourage other children to tell a story and attempts to end story circle turns that circle-mates perceived as too long.

In all, 18 children made comments during the story circles and 22 children received comments. Of these children, nine children both made and received comments during the four weeks of story circle participation. Demographically, children who made comments were slightly older, on average, during the time of the study (Sample mean age  $M = 54.2$ ,  $SD = 6.8$ ) and told longer stories, on average, than their peers (Sample mean story length in words  $M = 53.2$ ,  $SD = 47.9$ ).

**Table 5.2**

*Demographics of Children who Made Comments*

<b>Children</b> (N = 18)	<b>Mean (SD) / Percentage</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
European American	6%
Ukrainian	16%
Latino	61%
African American	11%
Latino / African American	6%
<b>Home Language</b>	
English	44%
Ukrainian	16%
Spanish	32%
Bilingual	6%
Age (months)	57.3 (6.0)
Gender (female)	44%
Mean Words	70.8 (59.5)

The ethnicity of children who commented mirrors that of the larger sample. A slightly higher portion of children who commented were parent identified as English as the home language speakers with eight out of the 13 English as the home language speakers in the sample making at least one comment during the four weeks of the activity.

The children who received comments were primarily Latino, Spanish as the home language speakers as were the children who commented on other children's stories. 73% of the

children who received comments were parent identified ELLs. These children were average age for the sample, but told slightly longer than average stories ( $M = 57.4$ ,  $SD = 54.4$ ). However, the stories of children who received comments were not as long as children who made comments ( $M = 70.8$ ,  $SD = 59.5$ ), even though the most frequent comment in the sample was an attempt to shorten a speaker's story.

**Table 5.3**

*Demographics of Children who Received Comments*

<b>Children</b> (N = 22)	<b>Mean (SD) / Percentage</b>
Ethnicity	
European American	8%
Ukrainian	8%
Latino	68%
Polish	4%
African American	4%
Arab	4%
Home Language	
English	27%
Ukrainian	9%
Spanish	56%
Polish	4%
Arabic	4%
Age (months)	54.1 (6.0)
Gender (female)	55%
Mean Words	57.4 (54.4)

In this section, I examine the range of comments made during story circles from encouragement, to clarity seeking, to attempts to shape other children's contributions to the story circle.

**Encouraging Comments.** In seven of the story circles, children encouraged or approved of another child's story through direct comments. Children encouraged others by demonstrating how to talk into the recorder, suggesting story topics, and directly stating approval of another child's story. For example, Adriana encouraged Alejandra to tell a story in their final story

circle. She picked up a doll that Alejandra had brought to the circle and said, “Yeah. Tell baby a story. Come on. Poor baby have.” Alejandra interrupted this entreaty and began her story.

Instances where children offered encouragement to other storytellers demonstrate how the story circle context can be supportive for children, especially those children who do not frequently speak in group contexts. Not unlike children who spoke too softly to be readily heard, children received feedback from other children that others wanted to hear what they had to say. In this way, the children in the sample signaled to other children that they were valued members of the classroom culture and that their stories had a place in the ongoing dialogue of the classroom.

**Seeking Clarity.** In five of the story circles, children exhorted a storyteller to speak up or asked for clarity about something that was said, but could not be understood. Children told their stories in different ways. Some children looked around animatedly at peers while talking and used hand gestures. Others held their hands folded in their laps and told their story while looking down or straight ahead. Some children told a story in such a quiet voice that it was hard for their classmates to hear, prompting circle-mates to ask them to speak up or repeat what they had said. For example, in Classroom C, Inez told her third story in a particularly quiet voice, making it difficult for her circle-mates to hear. In response, Michael commented that he could not hear the story and proposed a solution.

### **Text 5.5**

*Classroom C, Group 7, Story Circle Time 3*

**Inez:** (unclear) to me.

**Michael:** What did she say. Maybe we can record it. Record it. So we can hear it.

**Facilitator:** Can you say it louder, so everyone can hear?

**Inez:** My mommy take the doctor me.

**Michael:** She talk too low. I can't even hear it.

**Inez:** My mommy take the doctor me. Pinch me. The doctor talk to my mommy. **We, go, back home** <sup>softer</sup>.

**Jada:** Just record it.

In this instance, Michael commented to the facilitator that he could not hear the story. In response to the comment, the facilitator asked the child if they could speak louder. Then, Inez attempted to tell the story again, but in a louder voice. After story circles had concluded, children often asked to hear the stories played back. Here, Michael suggests using the tape recorder as a way to hear the story. If Inez's story could not be heard and understood in real time, perhaps the tape recorder would provide clarity. In two other instances in the sample, a child retold a story in response to a circle-mates comment that they could not hear.

Situations like the one described above suggest a few important things about children's interactions in the story circle. In this instance, and the ones like it, children were listening to other children's stories and wanted to be able to hear. The child who spoke quietly or unclearly received feedback about their story turn as well as a direct way to improve – in this case, speak louder. Finally, the child who received the feedback attempted to remedy the situation by speaking louder. In this example, Michael's persistence suggests that Inez still needed to increase the volume of her speech in order to be heard and understood. However, Michael's comments offer direction about how Inez can have a successful story turn in the future. For children in this sample, a successful story turn requires speaking loud and clear.

This instance shows how children shaped participation in story circles over time. It is not enough to take a turn and say something. Full participation requires telling a story to your circle-mates. In this respect, the children established storytelling as a communicative, social act, dependent on being heard. They also implicated the audio recorder as a key element in the

practice of story circles, proposing that the technology might offer a kind of second chance for Inez's story to fulfill its meaning potential and be heard.

**Shaping Story Circle Contributions.** Children's comments during story circles shaped contributions in terms of length, variety, and even ways of telling stories.

*Length.* In eight of the story circles a child commented on the length of another child's story, sometimes prompting the storyteller to conclude their story and sometimes going unheeded. On average, stories that prompted a comment about length averaged 154.3 words (SD = 123.7), over three times the length of the average story in the sample. All but one of these stories was at least double the length of the average story.

Comments about story length took three forms. The first kind of comment consisted of a general statement about story length. For instance, during Elena's retelling of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, Joel said, "That's a long story (sigh)" as Elena described how Goldilocks tried the different beds. Elena's story was 268 words long. In a second kind of comment, children directly implored the storyteller to conclude the story. For example, Adan interjected during a circle-mates story saying, "What. It's getting too long, Luis." After Luis failed to end his story turn, Adan said, "Come on Luis" three more times in a bid to encourage Luis to finish his story. Luis's story was classified as other and included a mix of English and language like sounds that were not readily interpretable.

In the third kind of comment, children said, "the end" as the storyteller told their story. Teachers in at least two of the classrooms were observed ending storybook reading with the pronouncement "the end" as a signal that the story had concluded. The children often ended their own stories by saying "the end." By saying "the end" during another child's story, the commenters seemed to be attempting to conclude the story themselves. For example, Carlos said

“the end” four times during the second story circle, when Diamond told a story about when she was young that relayed what she did with family in each of her first three years of life. Others’ stories about when storytellers were young typically relayed a single event such as an experience as a baby. Diamond’s story, the longest in the sample, was 382 words long. By attempting to tell an experience as a baby, as a one year old, as a two year old, and as a three year old, Diamond told a longer story than her circle-mate Carlos wanted to hear. As soon as Diamond began to tell what she did as a three year old, Carlos interjected by saying, “The end. The end. The end.” Diamond made one final statement before saying, “The end,” herself, officially concluding her story. In this instance, Carlos’ comments suggest that, in his view, an acceptable circle time story tells about when one is young, but does not tell about each year of one’s life. Not to be outdone, when Carlos finished his own story, Diamond said, “and that’s all,” having her own hand in concluding his story. Through attempts to shorten and conclude other children’s stories, the children in this sample demonstrate how even young children shape one another’s storytelling through direct comments about storytelling performance.

Instances like this demonstrate how children did more than just tell stories in the story circle, they also used direct comments to express their stance on other children’s stories. Valuing and evaluating particular stories involves power. Children who commented told longer stories on average than their peers. They also participated in story circles in a different way, encouraging children to speak up in Michael’s case and trying to curtail long stories in Carlos’ case. This shows how as facility with language grows, so do the ways that children use language in group storytelling activities. Children do not just tell longer stories, they begin to comment and direct the storytelling of others. In terms of participation, this suggests trajectories of



development that move from just telling a story to taking an active role in exerting control over storytelling in the story circle group.

*Variety.* In two of the story circles, a child commented to a storyteller on the need for variation in story topic. In one such incident, as previously noted, Elena was telling the story of the *Three Little Pigs* when her circle-mate Daniel commented that she had already told that story.

### **Text 5.6**

*Classroom B, Group 5, Story Circle Time 2*

**Elena:** Well, this, this story is, the three little pigs. Once upon a time there was a pig house. He build a house with bricks.

**Daniel:** She's doing the same.

**Elena:** No I'm not<sub>faster</sub>.

**Elena:** And then there's a car. Her name is Tanda. And then he went to the house. All the way to broke the things. And then the wolf came, all the way to the house. And then, he just blow it. And then the pig went to the, to the third house<sub>faster</sub>. And then he went to the third house. And then he did a paint. Very fast, before the wolf come. And the cars, break good. Then, the end.

Here, Daniel claimed that Elena was telling the same story. In actuality, Elena had told the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* during the first circle. Her circle-mate Krzysztof told the story of the *Three Little Pigs* during the first story circle. Nonetheless, Elena promptly changed course in response to the comment, incorporating cars into her story. She told a story that began as the *Three Little Pigs*, but ended as a kind of hybrid between her circle-mates' interest in cars and the original *Three Little Pigs* fairy tale. In this interaction, a peer made a comment about not

telling the same story. The storyteller responded to the comment by denying the claim and by altering her story to better match the interests expressed by the commenter.

This interaction illustrates how children's comments during the story circle can influence and shape storytelling. Just as the children did not want to hear a very long story, they did not want to hear a repetition of the same story either. In story circles, the children commented to other children as a way of establishing and reinforcing expectations for storytelling, as we have seen, as audible, not too long, and new. In this way, children provided each other direct feedback on how to attend to the needs and interests of their immediate audience. These interactions reveal a conceptualization of story as more than a series of events. Instead, storytelling is social, interactive, and interesting. It draws on shared norms, even as those very norms are shaped and contested through active participation in shared storytelling activities in which children tell stories and make direct comments to propose particular ideational meanings and ways of construing those meanings as valuable.

*Ways of Telling Stories.* In one story circle, a child attempted to directly prescribe how her circle-mates would introduce their stories. In the first story circle, Elena told the first story which began with an abstract introducing *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* as her story. As Joel went to begin his story, Elena stated, "He didn't tell what he is going to say." Joel told his story. When he finished, Elena said, "I want he to. I want he to. I want us, to say which story you say. After, when you are all done." Joel obliged and said that his story was about "*Cars Two*." The subsequent storytellers in the circle all used an abstract at the beginning of their story, as Elena put it, telling what they were going to say.

An examination of children's comments during story circles demonstrates how engagement in a small group storytelling activity develops children's capacity to reflect on,

value, and critique stories and storytelling performance. Simultaneously, reflecting and critiquing in the story circle promotes valued ways of telling stories in the culture of the classroom. In this respect, the affordances of engagement in storytelling activities derive from positioning children as authorities with a stake in determining valued ways of participating in literacy activities. Children in preschool settings can do more than learn about the sounds and symbols that govern written language, they can begin to cultivate sensibilities about the compositional aspects of literate works as well.

### **Children's Ongoing Participation in Story Circles**

So far, we have seen that children told stories that responded to and shaped the culture of the classroom by continuing ideational threads from the classroom context. In this shared culture, children made comments aimed at directing the storytelling of others, further shaping how stories and story circles unfolded. In this section, I examine how children developed along trajectories toward ever more complete participation in the socially meaningful activity of story circles by participating in different ways over time. Through this participation, children's stories enabled them to assume different social roles with respect to the story circle. These roles included being a listener, a storyteller, a sense-maker, and an entertainer.

The analysis that follows suggests how ongoing participation in a storytelling activity destabilizes the notion that individual children construe experience through a single patterned way of telling stories. Instead, storytelling, when examined as an ongoing practice, takes varied forms and reflects different patterned ways of using the functional potential of language to make meaning. Further, through the meanings that children construe in stories, they present aspects of the self in relation to the classroom culture and their broader social world. In this section, I examine children as participants who listen, tell stories, make sense of events, and entertain in

order to understand how children with varying facility storytelling advance toward more complete participation in a storytelling activity over time.

**Participating as a Listener.** The classrooms in this sample included children with a diverse range of skill using language to tell stories as evidenced in the range of words per story which varied from zero to 382 (Sample mean story length in words  $M = 53.2$ ,  $SD = 47.9$ ) and the range of complexity in structure, cohesion, and use of phonological resources documented in the previous chapter. Within this range, some children chose to listen in the story circle instead of telling a story. In all, ten children chose not to tell a story during at least one story circle.

**Table 5.4**

*Number of Stories Told by Children who Declined to Tell a Story During at Least One Story Turn*

<b>Number of Stories Told</b>	<b>Number of Children (N = 10)</b>
Zero Stories	2
One Story	2
Two Stories	2
Three Stories	4

Nine of the ten children declined to tell a story during their first story circle experience.

However, all but two of the children went on to tell a story at some point during the four weeks of the activity. 60% of these children told at least two stories that ranged from single event story turns to narratives with multiple complications.

One participant who chose to participate by listening, Alejandra, told only two stories across the four weeks of the story circle. She elected not to tell a story during her first story circle, but was able to build experience talking in a group across the four weeks of the activity using other children as a source of support. As we saw earlier, Alejandra told a story about her sisters in the second story circle immediately after Tereza told a story about her mother that

began, “Today, I’m going to tell a story about my mom” (See Text 3.5). Alejandra followed with a story about her sisters.

### **Text 5.7**

*Alejandra (Age: 4 years, 7 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

This story is about my sisters.

*Abstract*

I love my sisters.

*Evaluation*

Um, at my house her play con me<sub>faster</sub>.

*Event*

That’s all.

*Statement of Conclusion*

As the circle dispersed, Alejandra added more information to her story, telling the facilitator, “I have two sisters at my house with me. My two sisters. One is half eight. (Holds up seven fingers.) The other is six. (Lowers one finger.)<sup>6</sup>” Later that day at lunch, Alejandra talked about her sisters again, this time describing how she played dolls with them at home. In her story circle turn, Alejandra told a brief single event with many of the expected features of story which responded directly to Tereza’s story about her mother. Through this single event story turn, Alejandra spoke in front of a small group of peers. She built on her story turn immediately after the story circle as well as later in the day. This instance demonstrates how building experience talking in a group can facilitate language use even for participants who initially choose to participate by listening.

As Alejandra alternated between participating by listening and participating by telling a story, she contributed to her story circle group by drawing on and introducing new ideational threads. In the third story circle, Alejandra again declined to tell a story. In the fourth story circle, she initially refused, but was encouraged to tell a story by her circle-mate Adriana who told Alejandra to tell a story to the doll that she had brought to the circle. In her final story turn,

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<sup>6</sup> Quote recorded in field notes.

Alejandra told a recount-type story with four events. She immediately followed Vitya and Adriana, both of whom told stories about their dogs. Adriana’s story ended with the final events: “My dog was sleeping in my room<sup>faster</sup>. And then, I was sleeping, and I went to bed.” Alejandra picked up this ideational thread from Adriana’s story as she described her visit to her grandmother’s house, including how her dog went to sleep.

**Text 5.8**

*Alejandra (Age: 4 years, 7 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 4*

One time, I go to my grandma’s house.	<i>Orientation</i>
But I go sleep. Um, then I go, um, I see the TV. Um, con my grandma. And then, our dog go to sleep. And then, I go to my house.	<i>Events</i>
I’m all done.	<i>Statement of Conclusion</i>

Immediately following this story, Tereza told a story that began, “Um, I go to my grandmom, and to, in Ukraine,” further developing a new thread by telling her own story about visiting her grandmother. In this way, Alejandra’s story contributed to the group interaction both by drawing on and by providing a new, shared ideational thread. Though she did not tell a story in every story circle, she participated in all four story circles either as a listener or as a storyteller. Furthermore, her contributions became longer and met expectations for story as consisting of more than one event. After participating in four story circles as a listener and a storyteller, Alejandra told a complete story, extended the length of her contribution, and substantively engaged with circle-mates over shared experiences. Alejandra’s story circle group exchanged stories focused on the family and home life across the four weeks. Through her stories, Alejandra made important contributions to the dialogue.

In instances like these, children shaped the story circle activity by participating in different ways. In Alejandra's case, she alternated between not telling and telling a story. In the process, she enacted different roles in the story circle. She positioned herself as a listener, as a storyteller, and as someone who actively responds to other children's experiences. As she navigated these different positions, her ways of participating in the activity prompted another child to encourage her to tell a story, and, in effect, have a say in how the story circle activity unfolded. In this instance, story circle interactions became dynamic interchanges in which children's ways of participating shaped the storytelling activity, even as the legitimacy of ways of participating remained contested. Is it sufficient to just listen in a story circle? What constitutes valued participation, and for whom? In this story circle, children picked up and extended ideational threads from one another's stories. Do participants have an obligation to continue the thread? In interactions like these, we can see children negotiating ways of telling stories together and establishing practices for how this type of activity unfolds. In the process, Alejandra gained experience holding the floor and talking in a group as she and her circle-mates worked out different ways of participating in an ongoing storytelling activity.

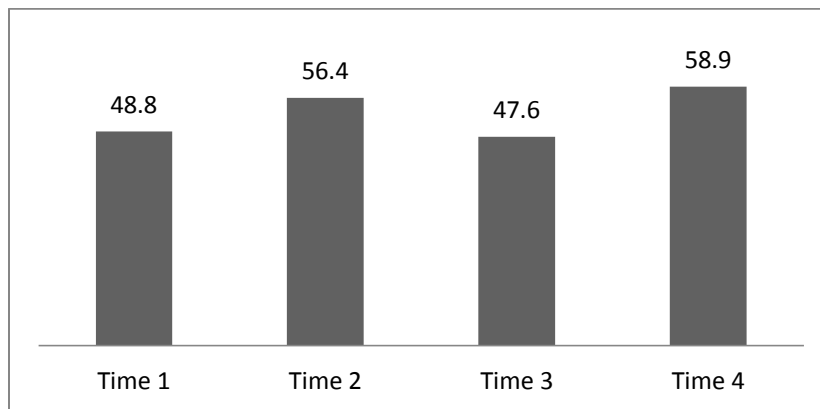
**Participating as a Storyteller.** Through ongoing participation in story circles, the children in this sample engaged in a kind of dialogue with their own stories over time. Through this continuing dialogue, the children enacted different ways of participating in story circles and moved toward telling more structurally complete instantiations of story. The majority of the children in the sample participated in story circles as storytellers as 96% of the children attempted a story in at least one story turn.

Across the four weeks of the storytelling activity, there was a general trend toward telling longer and more complete stories as evidenced by a modest increase in the average number of

words per story over time. However, as we have seen, interactional features of story circles (i.e. comments about length of stories) and differences in storytelling condition (i.e. retelling a known story versus telling an original fictional story) shaped children’s storytelling, particularly in terms of length.

**Figure 5.1**

*Average Story Length by Story Circle Time*



*Telling Complete Stories.* A more complete story represents improved performance using the functional potential of language to construe experience, and in the process, the self as an experiential being. In this section, I present two ways that children in the sample extended their contributions – by developing the same story across story circles and by telling distinct, but more complete stories over time. For many of the children in the sample, like Alejandra, even their limited experience telling stories in a small group context demonstrates progression toward more competent performance of storytelling.

For some children, story circles elicited a dialogue between their own stories from week to week. In doing so, 18% of the children in this sample retold a variation of the same story across more than one story circle, demonstrating increasing success telling a structurally complete story. In one such instance, Inez told about the same event in three successive story circles, adding additional events with each new telling. Working on recounting the same



occurrence allowed Inez to expand her story from one to four events. An examination of Inez's first three stories shows how repeated storytelling opportunities enabled Inez to tell a more complete story.

### Text 5.9

*Inez (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

My mommy go, to the doctor, with me. *Event*  
That's it. *Statement of Conclusion*

### Text 5.10

*Inez (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

My mommy, took me my doctor. *Orientation*  
**And take care, a lot of stuff** <sup>softer</sup>. *Event*

### Text 5.11

*Inez (Age: 4 years, 1 month old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 3*

My mommy take the doctor me. *Orientation*  
Pinch me. The doctor talk to my mommy. **We, go, back** *Events*  
**home** <sup>softer</sup>.

As noted in the previous chapter, in Inez's single event story, the event is like an orientation in more complete stories in the sample in that the characters of interest are introduced as well as the location for the story. In Inez's second story turn, she added a second event to this orienting event. Perhaps indicating her uncertainty, Inez said this event in an even softer voice. In her third story turn, Inez told a recount-type story which ended with the kind of natural final event commonly found in the sample as the story ended when Inez and her mother returned home. Inez, again, lowered her voice before the final event and marked the story as complete with a

falling tone on the word home. Ongoing participation in a storytelling activity gave Inez the time and opportunity to expand on her comments and say more while carving out another way of interacting in a story circle.

Inez's storytelling demonstrates another way that children shaped story circles as an activity. Here, she repeatedly worked on the same story from week to week. This is an instance of rehearsal in which Inez's story refers back to her prior story circle turns instead of picking up and extending an ideational thread from her circle group. Her circle-mates did not question this type of performance beyond exhorting her to speak louder on one occasion (See Text 5.5).

Though she continued to relay the same occurrence, her circle-mates still wanted to hear what she had to say. Inez's way of acting implicitly questions what a story circle as "an enterprise is about" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 93). Does telling a more complete story constitute full participation? Or, is it more important to tell stories which reflect the ongoing dialogue of the story circle group? Inez's storytelling suggests that another legitimate way of participating in story circles is to retell and extend the same story. As we will see, other children in the sample told about the same occurrence in more than one story circle. In the process, these children worked on different problems related to construing experience through story.

Children did not just tell increasingly complete stories through repeated recounting of the same happenings. The children in this sample also told more complete stories while relaying different events in their life. 65% of the children told ideationally new stories in each story circle. For instance, Marta told a series of stories about her experiences at home and school. In the first two story circles, she ended her stories abruptly, giving them a sense of incompleteness. For instance, in Marta's first story she told a story about a time when she was scared.

### Text 5.12

*Marta (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

Um, I was, um, a scary. *Description*

And then, I was thinking, about it. And, I can't, um. Um, um, I *Events*  
want my mom. I want my mom. And I said, "mom, mom."

In this story turn, Marta began with a vague and an incomplete event that left the listener unsure about what Marta "was thinking, about" and what she "can't" do. The story ends with Marta relaying that she wanted her mom and called out for her. In this story, we can see that many of the details needed to make sense of events are missing. What made her scared? What happened after she called for her mom?

In Marta's second story turn, she told a more complete story with an orientation, complication, and resolution.

### Text 5.13

*Marta (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 2*

Um, I was on a, um, computer. No in the gym<sub>faster</sub>. *Orientation*

I had Dimah, push me. *Complication*

And, and, and I, I push her. *Resolution*

And him no want to<sub>faster</sub> hurry up. And no want to. Because, and *Event*  
um, I cause. (sits silent for 7 seconds)

I done. *Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, Marta began by orienting the listener to the location of story. She introduced a complication through the familiar pattern of changing participant roles. So, in this story, Marta made it clear what happened. As a listener, we know where the story took place and who did

what. Then, Marta went on to explain the events in the story, but seemed to get stuck. She paused and made a statement of conclusion, abruptly ending the story.

In Marta's third story turn, she told a story without abruptly ending or leaving information incomplete. In this story, she relayed an experience not receiving a desired toy.

#### **Text 5.14**

*Marta (Age: 4 years, 4 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 3*

My dad is went, on the, on the, on the bus. Ah no. Um, um, we had go, to the store.	<i>Orientation</i>
And, and him, he say, no <u>to me</u> <sub>faster</sub> .	<i>Complication</i>
And I want to, get a, a block.	<i>Event</i>
And I have <u>a lot of</u> <sub>faster</sub> toys.	<i>Description</i>
And he say no.	<i>Evaluation / Complication</i>

Here, Marta oriented the listener to the events and introduced the complicating action of the story, her father's refusal. Just as in her two previous stories, Marta employed a mental process to construe the intentions of participants – Marta wanted her mom, a child did not want to hurry up in the line, and Marta wanted a block. In this story, Marta followed with a possessive process through which she provided further context for events. She justified her father's refusal to buy her the desired toy through a familiar declaration in the larger story sample in which she noted how many toys she had. Her story ended with a final event that echoed the original complication as her father "say no." Much like a reorientation, the rhetorical strategy of repetition brings the listener back to the beginning of the story and provides an evaluative stance on the events. It reaffirms that this story is about the time Marta went to the store with her father and he said no. Marta signaled the completion of her message, and perhaps the finality of her father's decision,

through falling intonation on the word “no.” In doing so, she told a complete story through ongoing participation in story circles.

*Telling Different Types of Stories.* Children in this sample construed experience through different organizational structures that construct different story types. 63% of the children in the sample told more than one type of structural realization of story across time points (See Appendix for a record of the story circle participation of children chosen as exemplars for this study of story circles). In this way, ongoing participation in a storytelling activity offered children the opportunity to gain experience with different ways of organizing information.

**Table 5.5**

*Structural Realizations of Story across Time Points*

<b>Stories Told Across Four Story Turns</b>	<b>Number of Children</b> (N = 49)	<b>Percentage</b>
No Codeable Story*	6	12%
Only One Story	3	6%
Same Type of Story Across Turns	9	19%
Different Types of Story Across Turns	31	63%
Total	49	100%

\*Stories listed as other or refusals were marked as uncodeable since they are not types of stories.

Even children who told relatively short stories construed experience through different story types. For example, Araceli told stories about different special occasions such as a birthday party and an Easter event at the park. In her first story, Araceli told a descriptive story that described an aspect of her party – the birthday cake.

**Text 5.15**

*Araceli (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 1*

When I grow up, I have a party, with my sisters and my family. *Orientation*

Then, then, then, then my cake, it was strawberry shortcake. *Just* *Evaluation / Description*

have some horses.

Then, then I'm finished.

*Statement of Conclusion*

This story is a descriptive account of her birthday party which focused on her cake. Through the use of relational processes in the middle section of her story, Araceli relayed what her cake was like in lieu of telling what happened at the party. Araceli's three other story turns told a series of events. For instance, in a recount-type story Araceli told about winning a race at an Easter event.

### **Text 5.16**

*Araceli (Age: 5 years, 2 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 4*

When I go to the, to the, to the race. To the Easter, to the park<sub>faster</sub>. *Orientation*

I go t tooking to eggs.

Then I run. Then I win. *Events*

That's it. *Statement of Conclusion*

Structurally, both stories have a beginning, middle, and end. She began both stories with a clause complex construction that oriented the listener to the context of events. In the second story example, Araceli relayed events. She told what happened in the race. Each story represents the most basic form of two different story types, a descriptively focused and an event-focused story. Through these different organizing patterns, Araceli told about different aspects of experience. Her use of stress and intonation reinforced the focus of the story. In the middle stage of the first story she emphasized, "cake," "shortcake," and "horses." In the middle stage of the second story she stressed the action of the story by placing emphasis on "run" and "win."

As Araceli's stories demonstrate, even children who told relatively short stories told different types of stories when given an opportunity to participate in an ongoing storytelling activity. This suggests that children can gain experience construing experience in different ways from activities like story circles. Further, it points to the need for research into children's

storytelling to gather multiple story samples in order to capture the range of ways that children make meaning through story.

Children did not just tell different types of stories, they told stories drawn from the broader culture, stories drawn from their own personal experience, and original fictional stories. 25% of the children told a combination of different kinds of stories across the four weeks of the story circle activity.

**Table 5.6**

*Personal Experience, Known, and Original Fictional Stories across the Story Circle Activity*

Combination of Stories Told	Number of Children (N = 49)	Percentage
No Codeable Story	6	12%
Only One Story	3	6%
Stories of Personal Experience Only	24	49%
Known Stories Only	4	8%
Personal Experience & Known	7	15%
Personal Experience & Fictional	4	8%
Personal Experience, Known, & Fictional	1	2%
Total	49	100%

For instance, Joel retold a story from the *Cars* movies through a narrative-type structure with a series of complications.

**Text 5.17**

*Joel (Age: 4 years, 9 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 1*

I like to see <i>Cars Two</i> . And Franchesco's in <i>Cars</i> .	<i>Evaluation</i>
And Franchesco, she smashed them away.	<i>Event</i>
And he was, he <i>almost</i> caught them, in the car.	<i>Evaluation / Complication</i>
And he caught them.	<i>Resolution</i>
And he was not fast emenough.	<i>Complication</i>
And he became fast. But, <u>all the racers can't get him</u> <sub>faster</sub> .	<i>Resolution</i>

But, there was a, there was a car.

*Description*

The orange car's name. I forgot the orange car's name (looks at facilitator; circle-mate says, "Makea").

*Comment*

Um, and MaKea *just* smashes Lightning McQueen away.

*Evaluation / Complication*

And Franchesco, then he won.

*Resolution*

The end.

*Statement of Conclusion*

In this story, Joel relayed a series of complicating and resolving events as he told about Franchesco's victory in the race. Like many of the narratives in the sample, Joel's story involved multiple actors interacting around competing interests. For a storyteller, this requires introducing multiple participants, in this case Franchesco, "all the racers," Makea, and Lightning McQueen. It also necessitates properly ordering events and keeping a series of actions and reactions straight. Joel heightened the tension between dueling racers with evaluative language such as "almost" and "just," creating a sense of the closeness of the race's outcome. As noted earlier, drawing on known stories offers a kind of script for managing a more complex story of this kind. In this way, known stories provided support for more complicated storytelling.

While the scaffold provided by known stories enabled children in this sample to tell complex narrative-type stories, telling stories from personal experience offered a different kind of challenge and relied on different sources of support. In addition to drawing on known stories, Joel told a seemingly autobiographical story in which he told about a boy by relaying his habitual actions. In contrast to his first story, this story revolved around a single participant, the little boy.



### Text 5.18

Joel (Age: 4 years, 9 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 4

Um, there was a little boy named. And he was five. *Orientation*

And, and, and there. And he was *even*, and he hold his blanky. *Evaluation / Events*

And he likes to hold him. And he, and he talks. And he likes to  
drink anything he wants. And, he, likes, to, do, play toys.

The end<sub>faster</sub>. *Statement of Conclusion*

If known stories offer a kind of script that supports storytelling, then stories of personal experience provide the support of telling about one's own lived experience. In this instance, Joel told about a little boy, possibly himself, who liked to "hold his blanky," talk, and play toys. His story unfolded in successive waves of information about what the boy does and likes to do. Through repeated storytelling opportunities, Joel not only told two structurally distinct types of stories, but told stories drawn from personal and cultural sources. The opportunity to tell different kinds of stories allows children to practice multiple ways of construing experience. As demonstrated earlier, practice enabled children in this sample to tell longer, more complete stories as well as different kinds of stories.

**Participating as a Sense-Maker.** Stories not only function to communicate happenings to others, they help individuals order, organize, and make sense of happenings themselves. Whereas Inez used the same occurrence as a way to extend her story with additional events, other children in the sample told about the same happening as a way of making sense of events. Through repeated storytelling, children can come to understand what happened and what meaning to assign to what happened. In one such instance, Maria told two stories about an incident at the park that left her crying. In these stories, she managed the tension between doing

what she wanted and doing what she needed to do to stay safe as well as the painful contrast between having fun and getting hurt. At times, both stories can be confusing as Maria seemed to be figuring out how to represent what happened and what it meant. In the first story, Maria told about walking with her mother while crying, seemingly after the focal event had occurred.

**Text 5.19**

*Maria (Age: 4 years, 0 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 1*

Um, I went with my family, to go, at the park. *Orientation*  
 And then, and they went, went across the river. And then, and I *Events*  
 crossed the river and the street. And there were. My mom hold  
 my hand on the street. Cause I was crying. Cause I am really  
 crying. Because I was walking at the park. And I was not doing  
 nothing, to do.  
 Because I'm going to do whatever I'm going to do. *Coda*

In this story, Maria ended with the final event, “And I was not doing nothing, to do,” – a familiar refrain for children who have done something that they were not supposed to do. She concluded with a kind of moral to her story in which she commented, “Because I’m going to do whatever I’m going to do.” So, she did not do anything, but she would probably do it again. The listener is left to wonder what exactly Maria did do that led her to cry, but Maria, herself, is quite clear that the experience will not diminish her determination to do what she likes. This determination wavers a bit in Maria’s second story circle in which she reconsiders the value of “being safe.”

**Text 5.20**

*Maria (Age: 4 years, 0 months old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 2*

I was, I was going at the park. *Orientation*

Because I was not smiling, smiling. Because I was crying at the  
park. Because whatever I was doing. Jumping at the cart. I was  
jumping at the park.

*Events*

And I was happy. Really happy and. And I saw. Because I was  
really, I was. I wasn't safe forever<sup>faster</sup>. I was (unclear).

*Evaluation*

I have to do, forever I have to do. Forever I do. I saw, I saw a  
butterfly over there. Right over there (points up).

*Events*

And it was all the way over there, all the way in the sky.

*Description*

And then, I loved, I loved butterflies. And I loved, I loved being  
safe. I loved butterflies, and nothing else.

*Evaluation*

In this second story, the listener learns more about what transpired at the park. In the first story, Maria recounted the aftermath. Here, she relayed how she was “jumping at the cart” presumably leading to a fall. After proclaiming the value of being safe, Maria concluded instead that she “loved butterflies, and nothing else.” In this back and forth between doing what she wanted, being safe, and loving butterflies, Maria was actively working on a problem. She was making sense of her experience at the park and determining what it meant to her. This interpretation is strengthened by the use of behavioral processes and relational processes through which Maria construed a range of emotions from “not smiling,” to “crying,” to “really happy.” Of course, across the two story circles Maria works through the experience in the context of a group storytelling activity. In this respect, she also casts a portrayal of self as someone who does what they want and is not deterred by negative experiences.

In this instance, the value of an ongoing storytelling activity in which children take turns holding the floor lies in giving children the space to figure out how to represent lived experiences

on their own. Over time the child gained a better grasp on what to tell and how to tell it. This stands in sharp contrast to moments documented in other research (Michaels, 1981, 2006) where teachers unsuccessfully intervened in children’s attempts to make sense of events for a classroom audience and suggests a fruitful alternative to teacher-scaffolded storytelling.

In similar fashion, Ana told about a day at home when she was spanked by her mother. In the third story circle, Ana started her story by saying, “Um, my mommy was a, doing her computer. Then I was sitting on the floor. And I didn’t, and my mom, um, hit me on the bottom. And, she was mad at my brothers.” Ana then went on to tell about how she and her brothers were chasing one another in the house, explaining what had led to her being spanked. She revisited this same moment again in the fourth story circle. Only this time, instead of explaining the context that led to being spanked, Ana situated the spanking in the context of the larger day with a number of ups and downs.

**Text 5.21**

*Ana (Age: 4 years, 3 months old; Home Language: Spanish); Story Circle Time 4*

My mom was on the internet.

*Orientation*

And she, she gave me a sm, smack on my bottom.

*Complication*

And then, I was. And then, and then my mom was. And

*Events*

then, my mom was doing her computer. And then, we was watching TV. And then, we was eating ice cream.

And then, my, my mom had a headache.

*Complication*

And then I went mc, Dunkin Donuts. And then, and then,

*Events*

we, I got to rest. And then, I sit on the floor.

And then I, got on the floor, when the ghost was chasing

*Complication*

me.

And then, I call my mom to wake up.

*Event*

And then, I said. My mom has to um. My mom, I told my mom. I said, "Mommy wake up." And then, I said. And

*Evaluation*

then, I, she said, "What." And then I, and I said,

"Something's in the house." And then she said, "Let me see. Get the flashlight."

And I, and I go back to bed. The end.

*Resolution*

In this story, she said, "My mom was on the internet. And she, she gave me a sma, smack on my bottom. And then, I was. And then, and then my mom was. And then, my mom was doing her computer. And then, we was watching TV. And then, we was eating ice cream." In this narrative-type story, Ana relayed a series of complications both mundane and extraordinary. She was spanked, her mom got a headache, and a ghost scared her at night. The first two complications just passed as Ana and her family went on to watch TV, eat ice cream, and engage in other events. The final complication was resolved as Ana's mother brought a flashlight to her room and Ana was able to rest.

Across the two story turns, the way that Ana told about being spanked changed from a focal event which Ana explained to a minor complication in a series of ups and downs that occurred one day. Ana's final story began with a conflict in the relationship, but ended with Ana seeking her mother out for comfort and help, which was a consistent turn of events in her first two and her final story. Ana's relationship with her mother, who saved her from ghosts, spiders, and brothers, was a dominant theme in her stories. For Ana, this relationship entailed conflicts too, a conflict which she explained in her third story about playing chase with her brothers and making her mother mad. Ana's stories demonstrate another way to participate in story circles,

making the activity a space for navigating relationships not just with other children, but with individuals from children's broader life as well.

As the children made sense of events through their construals of experience, they explored the meaning of past events while simultaneously reflecting on future action. This is another way to project an image of the self which suggests that another legitimate way to participate in story circles is not only to connect to others and continue ideational threads of shared meaning, but to wrestle with experience itself as a way to understand and project an image of self as a particular kind of person. Ongoing engagement in a storytelling activity affords the opportunity to explore the meaning of events by recasting occurrences, working on construing a variation of the same story over time. Here again, children's performance in story circles varies not just in length and complexity of the story told, but in the ways that children choose to participate over time - in the kinds of problems they take up and in the way they interact with these problems over time.

**Participating as an Entertainer.** For some children telling a complete story demonstrates increasingly full participation as a storyteller in the classroom. Other children can already tell a complete story. For them, entertaining, engaging, and more deftly construing meaning represent new challenges and improved performance. Ongoing participation in story circles enabled children to embellish and experiment. For instance, in two story turns Elena retold the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. In the first story circle, Elena told a rendition of the story that adhered closely to the version of the story in the classroom book with accompanying audio compact disc. In the final story circle, Elena returned to retelling this story. Only this time, she added new details such as naming the three bears: "The, this story's about, the three little bears and goldilocks. Once upon a time, there was a bear house. Her name is

Lala. And the little one's name is Loliga. And, and the big one's name is Papi. And, they're living together." Later, she included an embellished detail about climbing one hundred stairs to reach the beds in the bear house: "And then she went to the beds<sup>faster</sup>, above the stairs, a one hundred stairs." The bears later followed. Finally, Elena used different voices for the three bears, adding a performative aspect to her story: "And they say, 'Who eat, my porridge. (deep voice)' Then they're say, 'Who, eat my porridge (raises voice).' And then she say, 'Who, eat, my porridge (raises voice).'" Here, we see Elena make use of intonational features of language to tell a more engaging and dramatic rendition of her story. In this instance, repeated opportunities to tell stories provided an opportunity to be creative and to focus on entertaining aspects of performance that engage audience members.

In this story, Elena told a relatively long story with multiple complications. She maintained the structure of the story which contains a somewhat complex shifting of perspective as the three bears go through the same sequence of events as Goldilocks until the two parties finally meet. In the process, Elena used several conventions of fairy tales such as the distinct way of orienting the listener through particularization of characters, the presence of events which occur in patterns of three, and the well-known coda in which the character forswears repeating the initiating event of the story. She went beyond construing events in this particular way by embellishing the story through unique and original details.

Elena's embellished story shows how children can use a known story as a frame for storytelling performance. By building on a well-known classroom story, Elena offers another model for ways to participate in story circles. As her story illustrates, one way of participating is to retell, extend, and embellish known stories. The use of inventive detail offers another problem of storytelling that children can work on in small group storytelling activities.

Children in the sample included embellishing details in stories of personal experience as well. For instance, Diamond shifted from telling a simple narrative-type story in her first story turn to a dramatic retelling of a strange occurrence in her second story turn. In her first story, Diamond relayed how she had learned at school when she was a little girl.

**Text 5.22**

*Diamond (Age: 5 years, 1 month old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 1*

Once I was a little girl. And, when I was in my s, my old school, I	<i>Orientation</i>
sleep on my cot. <u>But sometimes I sleep</u> <sub>faster</sub> in a baby bed. Cause I	
was three.	
<u>And um</u> <sub>slower</sub> , we play, where we sleep.	<i>Event</i>
But then there was a high bear I wanted to play with.	<i>Description</i>
It was too high to reach.	<i>Complication</i>
<u>And then</u> <sub>slower</sub> , I asked my teacher, to get it for me. Then I said	<i>Resolution</i>
thank you. And then she gave me a treat.	
The end.	<i>Statement of Conclusion</i>

In this story, Diamond provided an account of an occurrence that happened at school. The story has enough detail to be clear to listeners who did not share the experience. It is a structurally complete story which responded to the ideational thread in the facilitator story, “when I was young.”

In her second story, Diamond told a much longer story with an extended evaluative stage. She told a long story in which she recounted the first three years of her life. In this story, she told about an experience as a baby when she woke up and it was still dark. In this evaluative



stage, Diamond included creative details and used a dramatic voice to convey her surprise and disbelief. This part of her story is about her life as a one year old:

### Text 5.23

*Diamond (Age: 5 years, 1 month old; Home Language: English); Story Circle Time 2*

I was um, one. I went to a school.

*Orientation*

I went to a school, and they learned. They helped me to learn.

*Events*

And um, my mommy helped. My mommy helped me. My mommy hold my bottle.

And um, (looks at Facilitator). Give me a minute to think (taps finger on face just above lip). Hmm.

*Comment*

And then she put me to sleep.

*Event*

And when I woke up, it was still dark.

*Complication*

I went "Huh" (hands on hips, widens eyes). "Why is it still dark?"

*Evaluation*

And um then, I went, "Mommy mommy<sub>faster</sub>. It's still dark and it's morning time. What's going on. Um, I think the lights have been shut off on me there." "Whaaat." I went "Whaaat." I went "Yeah, it's like shut off some of the earth. It's like 2 o'clock<sub>slower</sub>."

**Come on. You got to be kidding me**<sup>louder</sup>." And I went (hands on hips, leans forward) "Hey. **What's the big idea**<sup>louder</sup>."

Then I found the guy that made the, made the earth.

*Event*

I went "**Come on**<sup>louder</sup>. What's the big idea. Why are the lights turned off. It's morning<sub>faster</sub>."

*Evaluation*

In her first story, Diamond quickly resolved the complication as she asked the teacher for help. In her second story, Diamond extended the suspense with an evaluative stage in which she conveyed her surprise and disbelief through a dialogue with exaggerated voice, gestures, and embellished details. She used volume, “**What’s the big idea**<sup>louder</sup>,” colloquial language, “**You got to be kidding me**<sup>louder</sup>,” and elongated, exaggerated language, “Whaaat.” Like Elena, Diamond made use of intonational resources to draw her listener in. In one such detail, Diamond claimed that it was like someone “shut off some of the earth,” a rare evocative description for the sample. Furthermore, with a first person author, this funny, surprising story does not cast a known character like Lightning McQueen as entertaining. Instead, the storyteller portrays herself as someone to whom remarkable, interesting things happen.

The shift in style of storytelling evident in Diamond’s story suggests that children who have mastered the fundamentals of storytelling can work toward expert performance along a number of dimensions. The contrast between Diamond’s first and second story circle turns illustrates how children can participate in story circles in different ways over time. Perhaps responding to two stories told by circle-mates in the first story circle which included animated voices and gestures, Diamond attended to performative, engaging aspects of storytelling in a much more concerted way in her second story. She included an extended evaluative stage, a later developing storytelling skill and rarely employed device amongst the children in this sample. In doing so, she did more than simply relay events, she assumed the role of an entertainer who embellished details and engaged her listeners. In terms of ways of participating, children occupied several positions such as a listener, storyteller, sense-maker, and, in this case, entertainer. These various positions offer another way to construe the self through story and manage and explore ways of being in relation to others.

The story circle activity became a nexus for children to negotiate different ways of participating, different ways of telling stories, and different ways of representing the self in relation to other group members, classmates, and the wider culture. This resulted in a dialectic relationship through which participation in a small group storytelling activity shaped and supported storytelling even as the children's varied ways of participating shaped the story circle activity itself. This ongoing participation acted as a kind of dialogue in which children's participation responded to their own prior stories, other children's stories, and stories from the broader culture. Each instantiation of story circle occurred in reference to the story circles which preceded it and the story circles yet to come as the children's stories and ways of participating continually reconstituted what it means to share experience in this way.

### **Summary**

Story circles are a particular type of participation structure, a recurring, meaningful social activity that elicits "typical rhetorical action" from participants (Miller, 1984) as they negotiate the goals and the purposes of the activity. Through their participation in the activity, the children in this sample shaped the ways that story circles unfolded in their local classroom contexts. In doing so, these children offered contested visions of what story circles, as a social enterprise, are about. These visions included story circles as an activity centered on telling a complete story, making sense of events, connecting through shared experiences, continuing ongoing dialogues from the classroom culture, expressing group membership, and entertaining listeners. In this respect, what story circles reveal about young children's storytelling is that it is a relational, meaning-making endeavor through which children realize multiple and varied social goals. In turn, a story circle acts as "a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social

exigence” like other genres described by Miller (1984). “It motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent” (Miller, 1984, 163). When prompted to tell a story, children fulfilled their own desire to connect, share experience, and interest others while meeting group expectations for ways of participating.

Perhaps chief among the varied social goals children pursued in story circles, children did not just recapitulate experience, but actively shaped their classroom culture in concert with other members of their classroom. Though the children in this sample varied in age, competency with language, and cultural background, they drew on a “shared repertoire of ways of doing things” (Wenger, 1998, 49). These ways drew on experiences in the home and the broader culture, but were established, maintained, and continually altered in the classroom as the children formed communities of practice for storytelling.

The children’s engagement in story circles, in four different classrooms, demonstrates how issues of legitimate participation and performance rise to the surface when young children learn together in small group storytelling activities. As children negotiated how story circles as an activity unfolded in their classrooms, individual children began to establish ways of performing, ways that are likely to continue to shift and change as the very activity, itself, takes new forms and fulfills new meanings over time.

Through their stories, the children in this sample engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the ideational threads already present in the classroom culture, suggested by the facilitator story, and introduced through other children’s stories. In this way, story circles enabled children to engage with and extend the ideational fabric of their classroom life. Each story stood in relation not just to the other stories in the circle, but to the stories of the previous weeks, to the stories yet to come, to the stories of the home, to the stories of the broader culture, and to the ideas, interests,

and identities that had come to embody the classroom culture. This dialogue in story shows how even young children living in poverty possess a fundamental capacity to connect; and, in connecting, they interweave a wealth of information about ways to say, do, be, and, ultimately, mean in their world. Classrooms can harness this power and place ways of making meaning as a central concern of classroom life around which other interests and ideas pivot.

## **Chapter 6 Discussion: What the Story Circle Tells Us about Children's Storytelling**

In this dissertation research, I demonstrate how children's stories, from their most basic constituent parts to coordinated configurations of meaning, constitute rhetorical actions through which children negotiate aspects of their identity and the culture of the classroom. This insight into children's storytelling illustrates the value in intentionally creating spaces for children's thoughts, feelings, values, and ways of using language in the classroom. As this dissertation research shows, even children who are historically deemed as "culturally deprived" (President's Panel on Mental Retardation, 1963; Reissman, 1962) and contemporarily characterized as bringing diminished linguistic resources to early learning settings (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Huttenlocher et al, 1991) can indeed engage in linguistically challenging learning activities.

When provided with the opportunity to assume an authorial role in the classroom and tell stories, children presenting diverse language profiles as majority language speakers and ELLs tell stories that vary in terms of length and complexity. Nonetheless, even children's incipient story turns establish connections with other children in the classroom by directly engaging in a dialogue in story through which children negotiate the culture of the classroom and their place in it. In many respects, children's cross-story connections deproblematize what is often considered the challenge of meeting the needs of ELLs, particularly in settings that serve children who speak more than one home language, because children are motivated to take up ideational meanings and forms that are valued in the larger classroom culture. Story circles show that far from presenting a problem for educators, ELLs inject valuable variation into the classroom context,

offering experiences, uses of language, and perspectives that contribute rich alternatives for children's consideration.

The classroom is a critical space for shaping children's growing facility with the functional potential of language even though research into children's storytelling often overlooks the potential of early learning contexts to make diverse ways of construing meaning transparent and learnable. The purpose of this study is to reinvigorate early learning contexts that serve young, low SES children from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds by drawing on an early principle in the design of Head Start. In doing so, I position children as active learners who explore their world through direct participation that takes their own ideas and interests as the driving focus or engine of learning. By employing a learning activity that empowers children to construe meaning through story, this dissertation research demonstrates the affordances of story circles as a way to support language development in the classroom.

### **Responding to the Literature on Children's Storytelling by Filling a Critical Gap**

The study described in this dissertation builds on an existing body of research in the development of storytelling as a core communicative competency. Researchers into the development of storytelling manage the dual challenge of delineating developmental trajectories toward improved storytelling while attending to variation in what constitutes expert performance amongst different discourse communities. Two related bodies of research arise from the challenge of dealing with this tension. The first articulates aspects of storytelling believed to be universal or shared across groups. The second describes culturally specific ways of storytelling that allow cross-cultural comparisons.

Studies that research children's storytelling as evidence of universal or shared patterns of meaning-making demonstrate, as this dissertation study does as well, that young children know the fundamentals of storytelling – they orient events with regularity, particularly in terms of place and time (Peterson & McCabe, 1983); they use cohesive devices to establish the relationships between events and tell a coherent story (McCabe & Peterson, 1997; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Aspects of storytelling like including complicating events (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Umiker-Sebeok, 1979) and taking an evaluative stance (Curenton, 2004; 2011; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007) occur less frequently in the storytelling of young children. My study confirms these findings.

A second body of research into young children's storytelling suggests that children are socialized into culturally specific ways of telling stories. Researchers working from this perspective believe that in order to understand children's contributions as purposeful, meaningful, and based on valid patterns of language use present in the community, researchers need to expand their conceptualization of story to include analysis based on themes, multiple structural instantiations, and diverse rhetorical strategies. In this dissertation research, I analyze children's stories with these multiple considerations in mind. My analysis validates calls for a thematic approach to understanding children's stories by demonstrating how an analysis of ideational meanings shows children's stories as intentional, organized construals of experience. My study shows that analyzing children's stories in relation to multiple story types demonstrates how basic and more advanced instantiations exist for each structural organization of story, further substantiating studies of adult storytelling which delineate these multiple types of story (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Therefore, conceptualizing young children's stories in terms of a single unitary, model of story may mischaracterize children's early forays into



storytelling. I did not find evidence of what researchers have termed “topic associating” stories in which children relay a brief series of metaphorically or implicitly linked experiences. Furthermore, children in this sample sparingly used rhetorical strategies such as repetition, ideophones, and metaphor. However, as we will see later in this chapter, story circles, as an interactive storytelling activity, make using and comparing diverse rhetorical strategies and ways of telling stories possible.

A third body of research takes up the intersection of play, storytelling, and emergent literacy in early care and education classrooms (McNamee, 1990; 1992; Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006; Paley, 1984; 1986). This dissertation study expands on this research by moving beyond insights that children’s stories have a beginning, middle, and end, are lyrical and imaginative, and become a central part of classroom life (McNamee, 1990; 1992; Paley, 1984, 1986). In my research, I use a systemic functional linguistics analysis to reveal the varied ways that children draw on the functional potential of language to make meaning by providing descriptions of the degrees of language complexity that characterize the children’s contributions, by identifying developmental trajectories in learning to tell stories, and by recognizing how contextual and interactional factors contribute to the ability to present a cohesive story. A fine-tuned linguistic analysis of this kind provides the critical insight needed to reshape early learning contexts into laboratories for language development because it provides the rigorous evidence needed to recommend broader use of socially meaningful, storytelling activities like story circles.

This dissertation study goes beyond existing research into children’s storytelling in two critical ways. First, it conceptualizes stories as more than just their textual instantiation. Instead, it shows how children’s stories constitute rhetorical action used to meet social goals through

dynamic interactions in the story circle and the larger classroom context. Conceptualizing stories as rhetorical action enables insights about the ways that children work in coordination to tell stories and engage in larger conversations about the meaning of experience. Second, this study conceptualizes storytelling as more than a dyadic activity between a researcher and child or parent and child. In doing so, it follows a recommendation from Nicolopoulou (2002) by illuminating the larger social context in which stories occur and the affordances of situating children as active participants with a critical role in one another's learning.

This research fills a critical need by highlighting the meaning-making competency of children from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds who attend community Head Start centers aimed at ameliorating early-developing learning differences. Though considerable evidence documenting early differences in language development exists (Hart & Risley, 1992, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Huttenlocher et al, 1991), there is a dearth of research that illustrates the strengths that low SES children who represent diverse profiles as ELLs bring to formal early learning settings and the ways that children from diverse backgrounds make meaning through story in cooperative learning contexts. By detailing children's language use in situ, this research casts children living in poverty as capable meaning-makers with experiences and linguistic resources that offer a fertile base for language learning. If children are able to use language in relatively sophisticated ways, then opening spaces for them to hear examples, practice, and experiment with language offers a viable mode of instruction for developing increasing command of the functional potential of language.

Given the capability of young children to participate in storytelling activities in ways that shape the use of language and literacy in the classroom, current literacy practices offer far too shallow a conception of teaching language and literacy. Reshaping the way early learning

settings support language is a timely and pressing concern for the field of early childhood care and education especially given changes in kindergarten learning standards driven by the Common Core (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012) and continual evidence that the quality of early learning settings falls below known standards of quality associated with learning (Blau & Currie, 2006; Clifford et al, 2005), particularly for language development. Activities like story circles demonstrate that the resources for higher levels of academic engagement lie within the children and teachers who populate early learning settings like Head Start. Delineating how such activities foster and support language shows that teachers do not necessarily need to rely on outside resources like costly curricular interventions or rely on teaching methods such as teacher-led whole group instruction. Instead, positioning children as authorities and supports for peers' learning enables language-focused interactions that align well with changing academic expectations and recommended teaching practices in the early childhood years (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

### **Implications of Studying Young Children's Storytelling in Socially Meaningful Storytelling**

#### **Activity**

In the sections that follow, I tease apart profoundly interconnected aspects of children's storytelling. I discuss children's resources for storytelling, the multiple ways they tell stories, and the dialogic nature of a repeated storytelling activity through which children negotiate identity, ways of participating, and the culture of the classroom. Throughout this discussion, I thread implications for research and teaching practice, demonstrating how activities that position children as capable meaning-makers simultaneously draw from current pedagogical thinking

while extending current teaching practice in ways that support not just the development of academic skills, but the growth of a literate identity as well.

### **Children's Resources for Storytelling**

In chapter three, I analyzed children's stories in terms of the ideational meanings that children construed through configurations of participants, processes, and circumstances. An analysis of the patterns in ideational meanings prevalent in children's stories demonstrates that children told stories that drew heavily on their personal experiences and favorite stories from books and films. The influence of home was evident throughout these stories as children told about home practice and, at times, used home languages to construe their lived experiences.

**The Power of Personal Experience.** An analysis of young children's stories demonstrates the considerable experiential resources that children bring to classroom learning. What do children tell stories about in the story circle? Children in this sample told stories about unique, but shared experiences. These common experiences included going to the park, spending time with family, and having and getting new things. Their stories focus on special experiences such as building a snowman and drinking hot cocoa with their mother or watching their father play with the monkey at the zoo. From the perspective of these children, simple events shared with family constitute valued experiences worth sharing with classmates and teachers. By telling stories about these events, children provided considerable insight not only into the things that happen in their world, but also into who they are and who they are becoming.

The common experiences and values that children bring to the classroom offer a foundation of ideas that support children to use language in extended turns and construe experiences through story. Though researchers show that a focus on family and experiences in the home is central to Latino ELLs' socialization into story (Silva & McCabe, 1996; Sparks,

2008), this dissertation research demonstrates that in a classroom storytelling activity children representing diverse linguistic profiles share a focus on relating events that give prominence to their connections to family and experiences in the home. This shared emphasis on family life shapes children's contributions in the story circle, providing focus and predictability to an otherwise open-ended activity that could pose challenges for ELLs who often rely more heavily on predictable contexts as a guide for understanding expectations for participation.

Through their stories, children engaged in the kind of extended language use believed to be critical for all children in early care and education learning contexts, especially ELLs who need to use language in more extended turns than teacher child interactions typically afford (Wedin, 2010). Teachers might conceptualize ELLs as bringing unique challenges that require special supports to the classroom. However, this dissertation study into story circles demonstrates how children fruitfully leverage common ground as a support for telling stories. An instance of this occurred when Alex responded to another child's story about his father buying a train by telling his own story in Ukrainian and English about going to the store with his mother who bought him a train as well. In instances like these, children used the language available to them to tell stories that responded to the shared concerns of the classroom.

Opening a window into the thoughts, feelings, and values of children at this point in their lifespan complicates studies that portray low SES children as lacking not only the formal skills needed for later literacy success, but the essential experiential foundation as well. For instance, in a longitudinal study of young children's early exposure to language in the home, Hart and Risley (2003) demonstrate how before the age of three children from different socioeconomic backgrounds vary dramatically in the amount of language they hear and the amounts of feedback they receive from parental caregivers. In this landmark study, Hart and Risley conducted two

and half years of observations in 42 family homes, recording one hour per month in order to learn about how language interactions typically unfolded in homes of children from different SES status. In all, Hart and Risley collected and analyzed 1,318 casual interactions in the home. Equating different amounts and kinds of exposure to language with exposure to experiences more generally, they conclude:

So much is happening to children during their first three years at home, at a time when they are especially malleable and uniquely dependent on the family for virtually all their experience, that by age 3, an intervention must address not just a lack of knowledge or skill, but an entire general approach to experience.

Cognitively, experience is sequential: Experience in infancy establish habits of seeking, noticing, and incorporating new and more complex experiences, as well as schemas for categorizing and thinking about experiences (2003, 6).

Stories collected from this dissertation research suggest reasons to be cautious about claims that children living in poverty lack the kind of experiences associated with learning since an analysis of their stories shows that children do in fact bring relevant home experiences to the classroom. These children, deemed at risk for school failure, are active learners who seek and notice new things. Further, they relayed these experiences in largely expected ways, reminiscent of the kinds of structure and cohesion found in samples of more experienced storytellers (Martin, 1984; Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997).

Research that casts that low SES children as lacking in experience (Hart & Risley, 2003) or “culturally deprived” (President’s Panel on Mental Retardation, 1963; Reissman, 1962) may be overlooking the resources that young children do bring to classrooms. Opening the space for children to tell about their experiences shows several areas of knowledge that can be harnessed

for classroom instruction. These include knowledge of family and relationships, knowledge of home and community, knowledge of growth and change over time, knowledge of animals, and knowledge of story. Though some of these interests may be context specific, seminal thinkers on education cite the family, home, and immediate community as resources for early learning (Dewey, 1899 / 2007). This supports the notion that some experiences reflect broader developmental patterns and common patterns in experience such as relative dependence on parents for early interactions.

One way to further expand children's experiences in the world is by positioning children to construe lived experience in learning contexts like story circles. Through stories, children can extend each other's knowledge and experience of the world, building a foundation of world knowledge. Researchers recognize world knowledge as critically related to understanding oral and written language since prior knowledge enables listeners and readers to infer meanings of words and longer stretches of text (Hirsch, 2003). Exchanges like Tereza and Alejandra's family stories illustrate how children can support and extend each other's world knowledge. In one story circle, Tereza told a story about her mother, the reason she had to stay home, and the kinds of things that she did around the home. Alejandra followed with a story about her sisters. In the second exchange, Alejandra told a story about visiting her grandmother. Tereza followed with a story about visiting her grandmother in the Ukraine. In this story, she described the different fruits and vegetables in the family garden. In these exchanges, the two children told about family – what it is like to be with family, what family members do, and where interactions with family members occur. In doing so, they offered windows into separate, but related home experiences. This type of experience expands children's knowledge about varied forms of home and family life by providing alternative models of family activity. This type of dialogue ties

social, emotional, cultural elements of classroom learning together in ways that allow for cross-talk, comparison, and support. In similar fashion, children developed and exchanged ideas about what it means to be a baby or to be young. These kinds of dialogues through story offer opportunities to further develop world knowledge by exchanging related, but unique experiences.

Story circles offer instructionally fertile ground for knowledge building by indicating areas for further classroom study, especially study of comparative family and home practices. In these children's stories, we see instances of family practices such as gardening, watching favorite television shows, going to church, and playing with family pets. Once these experiences have been shared, teachers can extend children's world knowledge through strategic language and literacy tasks. Such activities might include creating a classroom book, inviting parents to come in to tell a story about a favorite family practice, and providing materials for children and parents to create a book about family life to be used in the classroom. Teachers can complement and extend children's knowledge through the purposeful selection of classroom texts that reflect on home practices. For instance, a book like *I Love Saturdays y Domingos* (Ada, 2002), which contrasts time spent at the protagonist's English speaking grandparents' and Spanish speaking grandparents' house, highlights the shared and contrasting home experiences of a bicultural, bilingual child. In the process, it introduces potentially new concepts such as going to the pier and the covered-wagon migration of a family. Building children's world knowledge in this way requires bringing children's existing knowledge and experience to the fore and then extending this existing interest with resources that expand the dialogue to include the kind of new concepts that are critical for language learning (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). As we saw in this dissertation study, the children readily maintained a dialogue in story about ongoing studies in the classroom



such as the life cycle and shoes, suggesting the potential for a critical convergence of ideas across activity structures in the classroom.

This study into children's storytelling in a small group storytelling context also suggests opportunities for teachers to strategically build children's knowledge of language in a way that recognizes the home languages represented in the classroom. One way to acknowledge and nurture children's connection to home cultures and ways of using language is to create a word wall or book that includes words that children use in their stories. For instance, in Classroom A multiple children used the Ukrainian word for store in their stories as they construed a common ideational meaning in the classroom about getting or having new things. A teacher working in a Classroom with English, Spanish, and Ukrainian speakers could create a kind of dictionary with a page showing a picture of a store with the word for store in the three home languages represented in the classroom. Building on the story circle dialogue by acknowledging and celebrating children's diverse ways of making meaning furthers the ideas that animate children's classroom life and makes explicit the ways that children use language to construe those ideas.

Story circles provide an optimal setting for eliciting children's experience and establishing the basis for further learning that directly relates to children's on-going concerns. Primarily writing about adolescent learners, researchers who study motivation suggest that students need "a sense of agency, purpose, and meaning" in learning activities (McCombs, 2010, 66) in order to develop a sense of identity as a capable and invested classroom learner (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Dweck, 1999).

My study shows that individuals' developing sense of identity begins long before adolescence. Moments like when Diamond told an exaggerated and entertaining story about a day the lights were out or when Tereza declared that she was not going to be silly in a story

about her brother show how children begin to establish and express their sense of self. Accordingly, teachers need to provide opportunities for agentic learning that is relevant to young children's lives. Story circles enable this type of learning by creating a protected space for children to mediate private intentions, giving voice to their ongoing concerns and interests. In this study, there was a space for Inez to work toward telling about going to the doctor to get a shot, just as there was time for Krzysztof to tell about the "boy who cried," or for Carlos to tell about being a baby with his dad. Opening space for children's growing capacity construing experience allows children to cultivate classroom shared interests in things like exploring the contrast between being old and young. In this study, we can see how particular groups of children developed and explored interests together in and out of the story circle, offering an ideal entry point for beginning language and literacy instruction. Story circles provide an especially strong context for language learning since children have been shown to learn language in situations that attend to their interests (See Harris et al, 2011 for a review of the literature). Through activities like story circles, children and teachers can build classroom communities that are unique, varied, and highly motivating contexts for learning (McCombs, 2010) since they reflect the experiences and interests of the learners.

Beyond serving as a resource for classroom learning, children's reliance on their own experiences suggests a need for research into children's storytelling that positions children to tell stories about what they know. The contrast in performance between telling a story from one's own experience and telling an original, fictional story highlights how an individual child's storytelling ability is variable and task dependent. Research protocols which ask young children to rely on outside supports or on researcher determined questions may inadvertently constrain children's storytelling by limiting children's ability to tell about their own relevant experiences.

For example, a derivation of Labov's "near death experience" story elicitation used with young children asks the child to tell about a time that they got hurt (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). In this sample, only one child told a story about a physical injury, suggesting that story prompts meant to draw on children's common experiences may, in fact, constrain children's storytelling. Just because most children have been hurt before does not mean that such events are recent or relevant for young children in the context in which researchers elicit stories for study.

Consequently, this study suggests a need for more child-prompted storytelling as well as studies that record stories across settings and conditions. In this way, researchers can account for differences in the cognitive demand and the sources of support presented by different storytelling contexts, ultimately recognizing children's differential control of storytelling in all its forms.

**Favorite Stories as a Resource for Storytelling.** For the children in this sample, favorite stories from the broader culture offered an additional resource for storytelling. When telling stories, these children drew on what they know – their own experiences and the internalized experiences of favorite story characters from fairy tales, favorite movies, and television. Previous research shows that exposure to stories offers critical preparation for literacy by developing a sensitivity to the linguistic patterns of books (Sulzby, 1985; Clay, 1979), raising vocabulary levels (Stanovich, 2000; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998), familiarizing children with the structure of stories (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995), and building the background knowledge necessary for comprehension (Hirsch, 2003). This study shows a few of the ways that children marshal known stories to advance their own storytelling. In the instance of Elena, she embellished the story and added inventive detail, using the known story as a basis for creative adaptation. In the case of Krzysztof, he used known elements of fairy tales including the basic event structure to tell an original, fictional story. Children like Sunita incorporated

well-known story phrases such as “once upon a time” into stories of personal experience. In instances like these, the children in this sample used exposure to known stories not only to comprehend text as demonstrated in previous research, but to construct texts of their own. This suggests that favorite stories can play a critical role in supporting children’s storytelling in early care and education classrooms because of the support for specific uses of language that known stories provide.

Resources for storytelling extend beyond just storybook reading as the children in this sample retold stories from television and film as well. Previous research suggests that children use stories from the broader culture as an entry point to storytelling themselves (Paley, 1984; 1986). This research demonstrates how children used known stories from television and film to tell structurally complete stories to entertain and connect with circle-mates over shared favorites. Though there is a strong emphasis in early childhood care and education on the value of storybooks, the field may be underutilizing multimedia resources that offer compelling stories that children remember, reenact, and retell. For children like Joel episodes from the *Cars* movies informed their stories which introduced multiple characters, employed a narrative-type structure, included cohesive conjunctions which introduced unexpected events, and used evaluative language and intonation to convey their perspective on events. Taken together, these aspects of story reflect instances of more complex storytelling for this sample of children. These more complex instances of storytelling, in turn, provided a model for other children in the story circle. Building home school connections requires teachers to acknowledge the sources of knowledge which children bring to early learning contexts. As this research shows, children’s exposure to movies and television acted as an important source of knowledge about story, enabling children to tell more complex stories than they might on their own.

Research into the origins of literacy suggests that children receive a kind of apprenticeship into ways of telling stories from experiences in the home, from joint construction with family members and caregivers, and from immersion in conversational contexts (Heath, 1982, 1983). Stories in this sample demonstrate how children draw on not only their home context, but on stories in the larger cultural context as well. An important area for future research will be to investigate specific ways that educators can use known stories as a resource for making ways of telling stories transparent for young children.

Children's comments in the story circle indicate a beginning capacity to talk about the forms that stories take. Comments such as Elena's exhortation to "tell what your story is going to be about" open important opportunities for dialogue about story since, in this instance, Elena attempted to prescribe the use of an abstract as a way of beginning stories. Instructionally, this could be achieved by responding to Elena's question by documenting different ways of beginning stories. The teacher could pull examples from the children's own stories or from known stories in the classroom and present these to children as examples of how stories can unfold in various ways. In this way, children can explore storytelling strategies as the teacher makes children's tacit knowledge about story explicit, contested, and choice-based. This critical shift provides children with new resources for literacy learning because they can talk about what makes a story a story with the ultimate end of developing a language for talking about ways of telling and evaluating stories. As Heath noted, "Learning how to take meaning from writing before one learns to read involves repeated practice in using and learning from language through appropriate participation in literacy events" (1982, 70). Ultimately, these literacy events must build familiarity with various ways of construing meaning and open space for "group negotiation of the meaning of a written text" (Heath, 1982, 70). This study goes further in arguing for group

negotiation of ways of meaning through text by positioning young children not just as readers, but as authors who can develop increasing facility with language. This entails making ways of using the functional potential of language to make meaning explicit.

### **Multiple Ways to Tell a Story**

In chapter four, I analyzed children's stories in terms of structural organization, cohesive conjunctions, and use of stress and intonation. This analysis demonstrates that children told organized stories that coordinated multiple meaning-making features of language and met expectations for mature forms of story. Though I analyzed stories with an awareness of rhetorical strategies employed by diverse discourse communities, I found little evidence of rhetorical strategies like repetition and metaphor or structural configurations of story associated with a "topic associating" style of storytelling. Instead, children told stories by extending an ideational meaning largely by adding additional events or information.

**Multiple Patterns for Making Meaning.** A linguistic analysis into stories elicited in story circles shows that young, low SES children tell organized, cohesive construals of experience. How do children use organizational features of language to make meaning? The children in this sample coordinated micro- and macro-level features of language to construe experience along a continuum of complexity in length, structure, cohesion, and stress and intonation.

Young, low SES children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds use language in sophisticated ways when teachers position children as authorities with valuable contributions. In this dissertation study, children employed structural features consonant with narratives, recounts, and a more simplified version of observations which I have labeled descriptions, validating studies of storytelling which recognize multiple story types (Martin, 1984; Plum,

2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Furthermore, children also relayed single events, showing how children move from incipient stories to more complete contributions.

Analyzing children's stories in relation to multiple story types demonstrates how some forms of story are not, in fact, lesser instantiations of story so much as organized around a different meaning-making imperative. Story is not a monolith. Instead, there are numerous types of stories, reflecting different historically and culturally patterned ways of using language (Hasan, 1984; Plum, 2004). Further, storytellers respond to the "perceived situational demands" (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, 19) of the activity, its purposes, and its relationship to ongoing activity – past, present, and future. Stories like Tereza's and Karla's which realized similar meanings about the contrast between being young and being older through different story structures demonstrate how storytellers, while responsive to patterned ways of making meaning in the culture, have options when construing experience. Consequently, it is important for researchers and early childhood educators, alike, to recognize diverse ways of making meaning through story.

For educators, several implications arise from acknowledging multiple ways of telling story. For early childhood care and education teachers to support young children's storytelling, they will need to know something about what is at stake in a storytelling activity. What makes something a story? How do stories meet our expectations, or not? What are some of the ways that stories work to realize their meanings? As an activity, story circles in their most basic form propose that taking extended turns using language to tell stories, hearing other stories as models of ways to tell stories, and participating in an ongoing activity over time, work together to act as a lever for language learning in the early care and education classroom. If teachers understand the structure of multiple ways of telling stories, then they can build on the story circle activity to

support children in learning to tell multiple types of stories. In this way, young children's earliest classroom introduction to literacy occurs from a meaning-based perspective that emphasizes aspects of choice in language.

For researchers, several implications arise from recognizing the multiple ways that children structure stories as well as the various sources of complexity involved in construing experience through story. Recognition of multiple ways of telling story enables researchers to trace the development of storytelling as core communicative competency in which increasingly complex instantiations of story exist across multiple story types. In other words, children tell more or less descriptive stories, more or less complex recounts, and more or less complex narratives. As Tereza's and Karla's stories illustrate a relatively complex descriptive story and a relatively complex recount both function equally well to construe meaning. This suggests that recounts as a story type are not necessarily more complex than descriptive stories, but simply reflect two distinct ways of construing meaning.

Recognition of multiple ways of telling stories counters the notion that all stories reflect some kind of derivation from what has been termed the classic form of story (Labov, 1972), true narrative (Bruner, 1990). Instead, as investigations into elementary school children's (Martin, 1984) and adults' storytelling (Plum, 2004) have illustrated, storytellers tell different types of stories, and the type of story told depends, in part, on what the story responds to and what the story is about. Collecting stories from multiple time points, this study further substantiates this point by illustrating how some children told structurally different story types across the four weeks. This shows that in investigating the developmental origins of storytelling, researchers must adopt an approach to analysis that captures a broader spectrum of story types and characterizes story as responsive to situation since children do not necessarily tell the same,



unitary, type of story repeatedly. Instead, the children in this sample told different types of stories as they engaged in a dialogue through story, responding to each other, ongoing ideational threads in the classroom, and to stories in the broader culture.

**Multiple Sources of Complexity.** The children in this sample did not just tell multiple types of stories, they told stories that varied along multiple points of complexity including completeness, length, use of cohesive conjunctions, and use of phonological resources. There are three points I would like to make about complexity: 1) complexity exists on a continuum in that even as children demonstrated sophisticated use of multiple resources of language, they continued to find new ways to advance and extend their current storytelling into more complex renditions (for example Diamond's embellished story about the lights remaining out) 2) some children exhibited complex use of some resources of language and relatively simple use of other resources in the same story, suggesting that each source of complexity reflects a distinct problem space that children need to learn and practice; 3) children evidenced different levels of complexity when telling stories drawn from personal experience, known stories, and original fictional stories, indicating that children's storytelling ability remains situation and task dependent. Without the support of a well-known experience or story, children demonstrated more difficulty telling complete, cohesive stories that could be readily understood, let alone include some of the inventive details and phonologically rich story renderings present in the more complex stories in the sample.

The presence of a continuum of complexity that varies by language feature and story task suggests the need for research into how children develop the capacity to tell more complex stories over time. Research into language learning shows that much of children's language learning occurs by using available perceptual, social, and linguistic cues (Golinkoff & Hirsch-

Pasek, 2006) in meaningful contexts (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009) that enhance children's background knowledge (Hirsch-Pasek et al, 2009). Further, children learn both words and grammar through exposure to more complex language (Huttenlocher et al, 2002) like clause complexes in which a dependent clause provides the context for events (for example: "When I was a little girl, I went to the park . . ."). This leads to the question: in what ways can teachers make the early childhood care and education classroom a space for concentrated exposure to the kind of complex use of expressive language associated with language learning? This research suggests that story circles offer a strong beginning. They are, perhaps, one of many ways to develop rich contexts for language learning.

Though there are overall patterns in the development of storytelling ability (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), variation exists amongst children of the same age. An investigation into elementary school writing instruction suggests that teachers do not provide explicit instruction on the features of language through which individuals construe meaning (Martin, 1984). Consequently, differences between children in facility with the functional potential of language remained constant across the early elementary school years. Both children who struggled to write in cohesive and organized ways and children who excelled at writing in valued ways continued along trajectories toward more expert performance, developing or failing to develop skill in writing without the benefit of explicit input about what constitutes expert performance. In this dissertation study, there was an overall developmental trend toward more complete and complex storytelling amongst older children in the sample, and yet, some of the older children struggled to tell a complete story and some younger children, like Ana, demonstrated advanced storytelling skills. This suggests the need for further research into how early childhood care and education classrooms can work as supportive contexts for children with diverse language

learning needs who are working on different aspects of linguistic complexity. Think of students like Inez, Alejandra, Francisco, or Diamond. Each of these children displayed different levels of comfort and competence with the task and participated in story circles in different ways – as listeners, as reluctant storytellers, as capable tellers of long, structurally complete stories, and as advanced storytellers who entertained classmates. How can educators meet each child’s language learning needs? Is putting children with various linguistic strengths in conversation a sufficient way to support the language needs of children whose stories fall along a continuum of complexity? Or, do some children require further support?

One possible route to aiding the development of more complex storytelling lies in children’s ability to draw on models of language. Given that children in this sample demonstrated the ability to draw directly on language from known stories and other children’s stories, it may be possible for early childhood educators to model language use through speech and stories in such a way as to focus children on particular aspects of language. Developing an explicit focus on aspects of storytelling for instruction might entail examining the use of complex clauses to orient the listener to events, the use of phonology to express an evaluative perspective on events, or the use of conjunctions to express causal relationships between events. This type of intervention assumes that improved storytelling results not simply as a function of maturational development, but from experience with storytelling over time. In the home, this experience occurs as part of the fabric of daily life. In the classroom, exposure to story can proceed in a more systematic, planned, and strategic fashion that opens up dialogues not just about ideas, but about ways of using language to construe ideational meanings. Instruction that focuses on ways of using symbolic tools like language to negotiate meanings in children’s worlds allows for the

development of the notion of authorship from a young age as children develop into full participants in the practice of storytelling over time.

**Multicultural Rhetorical Strategies.** Beyond aspects of completeness and sources of complexity in storytelling, some children in this sample demonstrated the use of rhetorical strategies that have been previously identified in patterns of use amongst diverse discourse communities like some African American speakers (Champion, 2002). These instances included: Carlos' use of ideophones to convey crying, barking, and scolding; Marta's use of repetition to emphasize her father's refusal to buy her a toy; and Inez's retelling of a call-and-response book from the classroom in which she performed both the call and response portion of the text. The presence of these rhetorical strategies, though not prevalent, suggests that activities like story circles can be used to introduce and practice cross-cultural strategies for construing meaning. Inez's use of a classroom text that relies on a cultural and historical meaning-making practice offers a compelling indication of how books that reflect diverse ways of construing meaning can present alternative language models for consideration and use by language learners. This suggests promise for similar tactics as a way to introduce rhetorical strategies such as repetition, rhyme, and analogy. Exposing children to diverse ways of construing meaning provides children with additional strategies for making their stories lyrical, evocative, and compelling. Simultaneously, such efforts honor the varied meaning-making strategies of diverse discourse communities, and, in the process broaden children's conceptualization of legitimate ways of participating in storytelling activities.

### **Storytelling as a Dialogic Activity**

An analysis of children's stories in terms of ideational meanings and organizational strategies demonstrates how children construe meaning through story. In chapter five, I

deepened this analysis by considering these textual instantiations of story as part of the larger interactional context of the classroom, demonstrating how children's participation in story circles is a dialogic activity. What are the affordances of story circles for eliciting ways of participating that acculturate children in the practices of composing, comprehending, and responding to texts? Story circles elicit stories that serve as rhetorical actions through which children negotiate their place in the culture of the classroom through listening, storytelling, and commenting on stories. In the sections that follow, I show how an analysis of the participation that story circles engender demonstrates how children negotiate identity, ways of participating, and ultimately the culture of the classroom through a dialogue in story.

**Consequences for Identity.** The children in this sample expressed aspects of their identity as capable, active, and connected to others by telling stories. This was evident in stories about when children were young, in stories that relayed experiences going different places like the park, the zoo, and the Ukraine, and in stories in which children described spending time with important family members. Children also expressed their connection to each other by telling stories that responded to other children's stories and to the ongoing dialogues of the classroom.

Providing the opportunity for children to negotiate and express parts of the self holds significance for classroom learning because social, emotional, and motivational (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Dweck, 1999) aspects of learning are integral ingredients for students' academic success (Lee & Smith, 1999). This insight has long been acknowledged in the field of early childhood care and education through a focus on supporting the development of the whole child (See Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006 for a review of whole child perspective on learning). A whole child approach to learning assumes that "cognitive skills are very important, but they are so intertwined with the physical, social, and emotional systems that it is shortsighted, if not futile, to

dwell on the intellect and exclude its partners” (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006, 22). Children’s construal of identity through stories shows how activities like story circles enlist children in opportunities to use language in extended turns that foster the exploration of social and emotional aspects of lived experience. This was evident in the stories of children like Krzysztof who told “the story of the little boy cried,” Joel who relayed a story about a little boy who liked to “hold his blanky,” or Alejandra who told a story about her sisters in which she declared “I love my sisters.” In these moments, the children in this sample construed experience about their worlds, worlds in which who they are exists in relation to ways of thinking, feeling, and being. In this way, storytelling activities attend to social, emotional, and linguistic learning in an integrated way that speaks directly to existing philosophical and pedagogical emphases in early learning contexts like Head Start (Meisels, 2011; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006; Copple & Bredekamp, 2006).

Since story circles afford opportunities for learning consonant with existing thinking in the field, they hold unique potential as a lever for improving instruction in the early childhood care and education classroom. Activities like story circles allow teachers to be intentional about attending to language development while honoring principles of learning associated with practices built on children’s current needs and capabilities (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006) and insights into common learning patterns across the developmental spectrum (Bransford et al, 2000). As an activity, story circles offer children the space to ask and answer the question “Who am I,” again and again. They ask and answer this question not just as part of an internal narrative of the conscious self (See Gopnik, 2009 for a discussion of the philosophical considerations that inform young children’s early identity exploration), but as participants in a distinct social space in which a confluence of ideas, interests, and identities intermingle and pose

alternatives for how to be and become as a person. Through this negotiation of the social and emotional aspects of lived experience, children learn more than just how to use language to tell stories. They learn in ways that supports the development of the whole child and goes beyond narrowly conceived cognitive and academic goals to include the social, emotional, and motivational interests that are interweaved throughout human participation in cultural practices like storytelling.

By opening space for children to negotiate identity through story, story circles create a meaning-based orientation to language and literacy learning whereby individuals value, shape, and negotiate ways of saying, doing, and being, using literacy for specific purposes in specific contexts (Moje, 2000; Gee, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Moments where children commented on the length, clarity, need for variation, and other ways of telling stories demonstrates that even young children have the capacity to shape language and literacy practices in the classroom. In some respects, the very definition of what it means to be literate is to use culturally shaped tools like language and written texts to exchange, elevate, and contest meanings and ways of meaning. Through this continual process of construing and evaluating, children express aspects of the self in relation to ideas, interests, and ways of being circulating in the culture of the classroom.

In this way, story circles engender a meaning-based orientation to language and literacy learning that complements efforts to familiarize children with the written symbols (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Adams, 1990; Stevenson & Newman, 1986), phonology (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Adams, 1990), and print concepts (Gombert & Fayol, 1992; DeFord, 1980; Clay, 1979) that constitute important foundational literacy learning. In doing so, story circles represent one avenue toward building a balanced approach to literacy learning from the outset of school. Such approaches to literacy instruction foster a balance in terms of attention to

the many sources of knowledge that go into effective reading and writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). This balance attends to a full complement of literacy activities including reading, writing, listening, and speaking and entails developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000) associated with later literacy attainment (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Through analyses of young children's stories, we can see how participation in story circles might foster an orientation to literacy in which children conceptualize themselves as active, capable meaning-makers who shape the classroom space through an ongoing dialogue through story. Through this dialogue, the children exchanged and shared meanings about experience and participated in ways, such as commenting on each other's stories, that fostered an attention to forms of participation. This was evident when Jada exhorted Inez to talk louder, Adriana encouraged Alejandra to tell a story, and Elena requested that her circle-mates include an abstract. In terms of identity, the children in this sample developed ways of participating in story circles, establishing a sense of membership in the classroom culture in which children engaged in particular literacy practices and told stories in particular ways. As participants, children expressed their identity as budding literacy practitioners enacting the role of listener, storyteller, entertainer, encourager, and commenter. In this respect, story circles attend to the learner's need to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes about literacy.

**Ways of Participating.** As an activity, story circles foster children's sense of identity as literate beings, capable of shaping, construing, and contesting meanings in the classroom. On the path to ever more complete participation, children's first overture in this direction is just joining in and telling a story. As we saw earlier, children participated in story circles in a number of



ways as they navigated what story circles, as an enterprise, are about as well as their place in relation to the other members of the story circle group and larger classroom.

Current practices may fail to acculturate low SES preschool children as critical members of the literate world because attention to developing literate identities forged through experience with varying ways of using the functional potential of language to mean remains incidental, rather than the driving lever of participation. As noted earlier, children enacted a number of roles in the story circle. They listened, connected with others over shared experiences, entertained, encouraged, and commented. In positioning themselves in different ways in relation to the activity and to other contributors, the children's participation demonstrates how even young children enact different facets of identity, take different stances as participants, and shape ways of engaging with language and literacy in the classroom.

Multifaceted participation that gets children to discuss, negotiate, and practice varying ways of construing meaning is critical to developing future readers, writers, speakers, and listeners who enter the fray of the literate world, a world coursing with often unacknowledged power. The power that underlies valued ways of using language to mean is evident in work by scholars such as Michaels (1981, 2006), Heath (1983), and Lee (2006). In these studies, the authors demonstrate how ways of meaning vary and are valued differently with striking consequences for learning in the classroom.

In this study, I propose that one way to grapple with the fact that individuals in a shared culture vest power in practices lies in empowering children to drive language interactions. As these children's participation in story circles shows, a dynamic interaction of ways of construing meaning results when children tell stories in group storytelling activities because children's stories reflect the influence of the home, the school, and the broader culture. The children did

more than just marshal different ways of telling stories, they encouraged and commented to one another as they set norms for interacting in the story circle. In these dynamic interactions, we can see how shifting power to children does not necessarily solve the problem of unequally accorded power associated with different ways of participating. Instead, the children value, evaluate, and even silence some ways of participating in much the same way as teachers (Michaels, 1981, 2006; Heath, 1983).

Further, children occupy different positions in the classroom in terms of their age, facility with language, and alignment with different ideas, interests, ways of being, and other children in the classroom. Accordingly, children assume different positions in terms of power, specifically the power to comment, question, and dictate ways of participating. As noted earlier, to be literate is to value and negotiate meanings and ways of meaning. Story circles empower children to engage in this type of negotiating as critical literacy practitioners, but do not resolve the power differentials present in the culture of the classroom, nor the fact that these disparities find expression through group activities like story circles.

This shifting of the power to shape accepted discourse practices from the teacher to the children holds implications for teaching practice and broader questions about routes to support language and literacy learning of diverse students in increasingly multicultural classrooms and schools. For teachers, this study shows how on trajectories of ever more full participation in cultural practices, children gain increasingly developed literate identities from beginning storytellers to participants who tell more complete and complex stories and attempt to influence the practices of peers. This suggests that one way to meet the needs of learners with diverse experiences and strengths using language lies in repeated opportunities to tell stories in concert with storytellers that occupy different positions in relation to peers, ways of using language, and

the larger classroom culture. As Lave and Wenger note: “Shared participation is the stage on which the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the established and the hopeful, act out their differences and discover their commonalities, manifest their fear of one another, and come to terms with their need for one another” (1991, 116). Perhaps inevitably, this entails conflict. Learning to manage this conflict lies at the heart of developing a literate identity in relation to skillful practice of language and literacy activities. In turn, it holds implications for how a range of practitioners support and shape the use of the functional potential of language through interactions laden with power differentials and conflict. These power differentials and conflicts are not unique to story circles, but to language and literacy practices writ large.

**The Culture of the Classroom.** Children develop a sense of identity by negotiating ways of participating in a storytelling activity, even as their participation shapes and is shaped by the culture of the classroom. Instances where children picked up and extended ideational threads from books, films, and ongoing studies demonstrate the potential for teachers to strategically shape the culture of the classroom. This can be achieved by drawing on children’s interests and further developing particular ideational threads. In multicultural classrooms serving children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, some ideational threads may hold a particular power for cutting across differences and commonalities amongst the children in the room. The extent to which children told stories which responded to the culture of the classroom and the facilitator story suggests that story circles offer a space for cultivating these types of cross-cutting conversations in the classroom.

Teachers can develop the culture of the classroom by attending to more than just the ideas and interests that animate classroom life. They can also develop a community of learners who construe meaning and solve meaning related problems on their own. The value of

cultivating this type of learner is evident in the storytelling of children like Maria who told a somewhat confusing story in her first attempt to relay how she was hurt at the park. Research shows that teachers and children do not always successfully co-construct meaning effectively (Michaels, 1981, 2006). This is especially true when the teacher has difficulty understanding the child's meaning and purpose in telling a particular story. In the case of Maria, she told two stories in an attempt to make sense of the same event. Through a monologic story turn, Maria told about what happened with increasing detail and, perhaps more importantly, expressed aspects of her identity as she declared, "Because I'm going to do whatever I'm going to do." According children the space to independently figure out how to construe experience holds its own affordances as a way for children to develop increasing competence with the functional potential of language and as a way to cultivate a culture of the classroom in which children are cast as capable meaning-makers who are able to work through problems on their own.

In terms of research, evidence of the culture of the classroom and story's role in drawing on and shaping this distinct space demonstrates how inextricably the context shapes children's storytelling. Further, using the functional potential of language to construe meaning through story entails more than just telling about occurrences, it is a dialectic and deeply social activity through which children negotiate aspects of their identity, ways of participating, and the larger classroom culture. As such, studies that rely on only the textual instantiation of story miss the interactive and relational features that make young children's stories dynamic engines for classroom learning.

### **Reflecting on a Teacher Facilitated, Child Initiated Storytelling Activity**

This study is concerned with context, a particular place and time, and the way that children in this place and time construed experience through story. This dissertation research provides a detailed portrait of children's storytelling in four early childhood care and education classrooms. As such it offers a glimpse of children making-meaning together at one point in time that is part of a larger unexamined year in the classroom together. Though this dissertation research offers critical insights necessary for reconceptualizing children's storytelling, it cannot account for the way that story circles might operate in other early learning settings (See Future Directions for a description of the next steps needed to validate the efficacy of story circles as a research-proven teaching technique). That said, a chief aim of this dissertation research is to provide educators with insights that inform their teaching in their own classrooms.

Confining my remarks to story circles in the classroom contexts under study in this research, in this section I reflect on the affordances and constraints of story circles as an activity aimed at engaging children in linguistically demanding learning opportunities. In doing so, I depart from children's stories as the main source of evidence and provide my own impressions, concerns, and wonderings about a child-led language activity like that studied here.

Though not an intervention, studying children's storytelling in the context of a small group storytelling activity suggests the promises and challenges of enacting child-led, language focused learning activities in classrooms that serve multicultural, multilingual configurations of children. Three main points of concern arise from a study of children's storytelling in a small group activity: the difficulty of understanding children's contributions, the risk associated with giving children a larger role in one another's learning, and the complexity of enacting teaching practices aimed at facilitating children's individual and collective literacy learning rather than directly imparting information through more direct modes of instruction.

As the facilitator of the story circles in the four classrooms under study here, I was struck by the ways that some children participated in story circles, especially children who participated in unexpected ways. Unexpected contributions necessitated the facilitator to listen and accept the story turn as an act of meaning, whether the meaning of the contribution was clear or not. Children whose story turns I labeled ‘other’ constituted 9% of the story turns. In these story turns, children like Eric opened and closed his mouth mimicking the act of telling a story and Sarah told a story which combined words and word-like sounds in a sing song fashion. Though both contributions indicate knowledge of story in various ways, both story turns are difficult to interpret. In some way, these contributions pose a dilemma for teachers and prompt a decision: listen and accept the contribution as part of the child’s ongoing negotiation of ways of participating in story circles or intervene to attempt to elicit a story more in keeping with known expectations for story.

At the heart of this dilemma runs a familiar problem for researchers aiming to understand children’s trajectory toward more expert storytelling performance even as what constitutes expert performance varies amongst discourse communities. What constitutes legitimate participation? And, perhaps more importantly: Who decides? This study into children’s participation in story circles demonstrates that children participate in different ways, and, in doing so, enact different identities as individuals and as storytellers. For some children negotiating their identity involved entertaining. Unexpected contributions like those described above could also be characterized as efforts to resist expectations for participation and participate in ways that the children themselves deemed best. In this way, the children were not the only ones navigating what story circles are about, the facilitator must navigate the multiple tensions that arise when children engage in literacy activities aimed at empowering children to assume an authorial role in the classroom.

A second kind of unexpected contribution came from ELLs in the classroom who alternated between their home language, English, and language-like sounds used to continue the discursive flow of the story turn. One particular challenge of working in classrooms that support ELLs representing different home language backgrounds derives from the fact that teachers need to support children's home language even when they do not understand it. The children who combined multiple languages and language-like sounds were eager participants. On several occasions they raised their hand to go first. They spoke in a hurried, but excited way. They were motivated to have a turn, had an idea of what taking a turn sounded like, and even had story turns that continued and introduced ideational threads that other children included in their stories. In this way, these ELLs contributed to their story circle groups in similar fashion to children who could present a story in English or English and another language. However, as the facilitator I felt uncertain about how a teacher could best go about supporting these children's trajectories toward more complete storytelling. What sense would classroom teachers make of stories that consist of language-like sounds? Would teachers feel a sense of efficacy if they could not understand the language that children employed to construe experience?

Activities like story circles put children in conversation with one another and rely largely on children's capacity to model language and to interact in ways that advance the learning of participants with varying experience and facility using language. Constructivist learning activities of this kind that shift the onus for providing the experiential, linguistic, and intellectual contributions under study to the learners themselves pose risks because the facilitator relinquishes their role of knowing authority. In doing so, the facilitator assumes a kind of dependence on the learners to bring rich experiences to the fore and to use language in sophisticated ways. The success of the learning enterprise no longer rests upon the facilitator's

knowledge so much as their capacity to elicit rich stories from children, which this study demonstrates depends, at least in part, on the line of study that teachers and children pursue in the larger classroom context and on the model stories that teachers tell to continue child-initiated ideational threads and introduce new ideational threads to the classroom context. Therefore, the utility of story circles for teachers may depend on their capacity to tolerate risk, to value listening to children, and to elicit and facilitate dialogues which respond to children's ongoing concerns.

Not only are learning activities like story circles potentially risky in their dependence on children to participate in sophisticated ways, activities that require teachers to facilitate children's ongoing negotiation of a literate classroom culture introduce complexity to the work of teaching. As a teaching practice, story circles attend to children's language learning by being intentional about creating a space for children to use language in extended turns. Story circles elicit children's language and provide an opportunity for teachers to record and monitor children's language over time. Eliciting, listening, recording, and tracing storytelling over time on the surface appear to be simple teaching practices. However, an analysis of children's storytelling in story circles reveals that children were engaged in a much larger and more complex endeavor. Through their participation, children shaped the storytelling activity and the culture of the classroom. They critiqued stories and aspects of performance, establishing literate identities as individuals who debate, value, and promote different ways of construing experience.

Inevitably, the contested nature of what constitutes a good story rose to the surface in each of the classrooms. With the emergence of this core dilemma of literacy – what is valued, by whom, for what purposes – came conflict through the form of comments on other children's participation. In this study I argue that there is real value to helping children navigate this core dilemma since it reflects literacy's status as an instrument of power and prepares children to



assert and defend the power of their own ways of using language. However, open conflict of the kind generated by one child attempting to end another child's storytelling turn poses problems for teachers and threatens the imperative to maintain a classroom dialogue in which all children's voices are heard. In the classroom contexts studied here, children's engagement in a small group storytelling activity aimed at empowering children as authors of their own experience thrust the facilitator squarely into the heart of the very problem this dissertation aims to address – the forms that language take in construing experience are recognized and valued differently. Some stories are valued while others are mischaracterized and marginalized as are the experiences of the individuals who tell these stories.

Shifting the power of authorship to children does not resolve the problems that arise from literate individuals evaluating, valuing, and promoting different ways of construing meaning. It does, however, make this dilemma salient in a way that it may not be for teachers who typically do the evaluating, valuing, and promoting as part of an unexamined and unproblematic practice of teaching ways of using language and literacy to mean. Instead, teachers will be forced to weigh the value of cultivating children's capacity to respond to literature and to navigate a way forward with children as a community of learners.

### **Limitations**

Though this research employs a robust sample of 49 children's stories across four time points, it is largely exploratory. It goes beyond other research into children's stories by collecting multiple story samples. Nonetheless, a four week unit just begins to hint at how children may engage in activities like story circles over time. Studies that examine participation

in story circles as an on-going classroom activity are needed in order to fully understand how such activities promote language use and learning across the school year.

Story circles in this study were experimenter-led in an effort to keep the structure of the story circle activity consistent across time and contexts. Experimenter-led participation is ideal for research purposes, but limits insights into how teachers and children might enact story circles together in classrooms. For instance, in this study children were permitted to comment to one another in order to capture the kind of dialogue and co-construction of stories that might take place in the story circle activity. However, the classrooms in the study had different norms for participation in group activities. For example, in one classroom children's participation was only acknowledged if the child raised their hand and was called on by the teacher. In another classroom, teachers permitted children to regularly shout out reactions, questions, and comments during whole group activities. How might these teachers, with different classroom norms and expectations, lead and shape an activity like story circles? What sense would they make of children's participation? What might they value in the activity? What poses problems for them? Questions like these can only be answered by studying teacher-led story circles.

In this study, I suggest that story circles complement existing research in important ways by attending to the social context in which children tell stories. Such a move calls into question the notion of individual performance by showing how deeply performance can be shaped by social interactions and the broader dialogic nexus of stories in the culture. Since children's stories are embedded in and informed by a larger social interaction that cannot be standardized in the same way as methods such as an informational interview, story circles are not an ideal method for gathering stories intended to measure and compare individual performance,

particularly since critical factors such as the skill of story circle-mates and order of participation vary across story circles.

The very aspects that make this work detailed and rich limit the applicability of specific findings to other settings. For example, children in other settings may not use cohesive conjunctions and elements of structure in same way in other settings. However, by showing the context specific nature of storytelling, this work suggests ways that early childhood educators could fruitfully employ similar practices. Also, story circles, themselves, depend on how individual children and groups of children shape the activity through the varied ways that they participate. Different configurations of children in diverse contexts may not enact the story circle activity in the same way, but still participate in ways deemed meaningful in their context. For instance, research suggests that ways of using language can vary along a kind of continuum from a low shared context for storytelling to a high shared context (Hall, 1989). A high shared context for storytelling shifts the responsibility for making-sense to the listener who must pay careful attention to a range of cues meant to establish understanding. Prior research shows how these types of assumptions about language shape its use (Heath, 1981; 1983; Michaels, 1981; 2006; Minami, 2002), how even within group variations shape language practices (Heath, 1981), and how teachers and children do not always have shared expectations for language use (Heath, 1981, 1983; Michaels, 1981; 2006). Though this study captures only four local contexts, it suggests how story circles elicit language that responds to other stories and how teachers and children both play a role in shaping each instantiation of story circle. Though the results are not generalizable, they are highly suggestive of the affordances of this type of activity for teaching and research, especially in settings where divergent ways of using language may be present because story circles bring these ways in direct conversation with one another.

## **Future Directions**

This study rests on the premise that seeing the sophistication in low SES children's storytelling can open up spaces for them to participate in early learning settings in different and more robust ways. I propose that activities like story circles create this very type of space by providing protected time for children's voices. In this study, I completed a detailed linguistic analysis of children's stories to substantiate the claim that young children's developing storytelling is in fact sophisticated in that it is organized, structured, cohesive, and dialogic. To fully demonstrate the efficacy of teaching methods such as story circles, more work remains.

Validating this type of activity requires a move from exploration and detailed description of stories to developed understanding of affordances and constraints associated with yearlong participation in story circles; and ultimately, measurable language and literacy advantages for children who experience repeated engagement in small group, storytelling activities like story circles. A pressing question remains: do children who participate in activities that intentionally foster language use develop greater language gains than children in similar settings without story circle-type activities? A push to improve early childhood care and education carries a burden of proof. Ultimately, authenticating the learning benefits of activities such as story circles falls outside the purview of this study. Providing this kind of evidence will be critical to determining the extent to which story circles should be recommended as a proven practice for early childhood care and education classrooms.

Several lines of research are needed in order to build further support for the instructional efficacy of activities like story circles. Developing an understanding of the affordances and constraints of long-term participation in story circles necessitates a more complete understanding

of how children's use of language develops over the classroom year. In particular, developing a set of language profiles for children using standard measures of other predictive language competencies such as vocabulary and phonological awareness could offer insight into how different facets of language develop over time. A more complete language profile for children offers the potential for new insights into what kinds of language development story circles may uniquely support. It seems likely that story circles contribute to expressive language growth, but do they support vocabulary growth as well? If so, under what kinds of conditions do children learn more vocabulary words?

This research suggests the need for a deeper understanding of how story circles draw from and shape the classroom culture. In this study, children drew on on-going classroom concerns and, at times, acted out story circles during play. This shows that a brief engagement in storytelling activities might permeate the classroom in productive ways. Several questions arise about how story circles shape the larger classroom context. Do story circles inform the ways children and teachers use language in the classroom? For instance, do teachers encourage more extended child talk at other times during the day? Or model more extended use of language themselves? How might participation in story circles intersect with other ways that child and teachers interact around stories in the classroom – impromptu storytelling, story read-alouds, and stories enacted in classroom play?

This study took place in a particular type of context in which children from multiple linguistic backgrounds learned together in the same classroom. This is a certain type of problem space with unique challenges for teachers aiming to bolster language development because teachers do not typically have the resources to support dual language instruction for multiple language groups simultaneously. Nonetheless, evidence of code switching in the story circle

indicates that story circles could have important applications for bilingual classrooms attempting to support dual language learning. This could be achieved, perhaps, by engaging in story circle activities in children's first and second language. Children identified as ELLs bring very different experiences with language and different profiles of strengths and weaknesses across both languages (Tabors & Snow, 2002). Recommendations for how teachers can most effectively use expressive language activities like story circles offer teachers additional tools for meeting children's language needs.

Finally, though the story circle is a learning activity in its own right, it may be that this activity works best as a kind of hub activity on which teachers can build. In such a scenario, researchers could explore how story circles extend into a story-focused classroom. Classrooms like this might include a classroom computer library of audio recorded stories. Children and teachers would select stories to illustrate and publish. Teachers could help children move beyond telling stories to understanding storytelling by making different ways of telling stories explicit. Delineating detailed models of this type of instruction in action provides an alternative image of literacy focused classroom instruction based on a conception of the young child as an active meaning-maker.

### **Final Thoughts**

An analysis of a multicultural, multilingual, low SES population of preschool children's stories demonstrates the significant linguistic, experiential, and social resources that children bring to navigating their world during the preschool years. As Alison Gopnik notes, "In the last thirty years, there's been a revolution in our scientific understanding of young children. We used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking

and experience were concrete, immediate, and limited” (2009, 5). A growing body of evidence dispels these notions by showing just how early in life the quest to know, understand, and connect propels infant, analytic problem solvers to interact in their complicated, social worlds (Gopnik, 2009). This study contributes to this understanding by carefully recording the ways that young children share experience, inviting others into their world. In doing so, it attempts to destabilize deeply entrenched images of young children and the kinds of teaching practices that derive from these conceptions.

This study is a call for a re-envisioning of early childhood care and education learning spaces like Head Start. The field of early childhood education stands at a critical point between established practices and a new imperative to cultivate higher levels of learning (Common Core Standards, 2013; Puma et al, 2013). An examination of young children’s storytelling illuminates one way of charting a path forward. My research shows that story circles position children as authorities with valuable insights, a position which is replicable and applicable across content in early childhood classrooms. By altering the way teachers position children to engage in the classroom and changing the kinds of tasks children are expected to complete, early childhood care and education classrooms can truly become communities of active learners bound by their shared questions, knowledge, and experience. Under such a model of instruction, knowledge, authority, and cultural tools such as language are shared and distributed resources that can be learned through engagement in meaningful tasks.

The desire to mean and understand other’s meanings begins at birth (Gopnik, 2009). In fact, children develop the foundations for language in utero (Mahmoudzadeh et al, 2013). It is only fitting that the transition from meaning through language to meaning through print occurs by harnessing the lifelong imperative to understand, and, in turn, be understood. Storytelling

places this imperative at the heart of classroom instruction, setting a solid foundation for language and literacy as meaning driven activities.



## Appendix

### Exemplar Children's Story Type, Story Length, and Continuation and Initiation of Ideational Threads

<b>Child</b>		<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>	<b>Time 3</b>	<b>Time 4</b>	<b>Mean Words</b>
Karla	Story Type:	Narrative	Narrative	Recount	Narrative	63.5
	Words:	67	63	73	51	
	Ideational Thread:	Continued	None	Initiated	Continued	
Alex	Story Type:	Absent	Absent	Recount	Refusal	11.0
	Words:			22	0	
	Ideational Thread:			Continued		
Andriy	Story Type:	Narrative	Narrative	Recount	Recount	51.0
	Words:	67	45	33	59	
	Ideational Thread:	Continued	Continued	Continued	Continued	
Pablo	Story Type:	Refusal	Single Event	Descriptive	Single Event	8.25
	Words:	0	8	20	5	
	Ideational Thread:		Continued	Continued	Continued	
Adriana	Story Type:	Recount	Recount	Recount	Recount	71.5
	Words:	165	38	41	42	
	Ideational Thread:	None	Initiated	Continued	Continued	
Alejandra	Story Type:	Refusal	Single Event	Refusal	Recount	15.5
	Words:	0	20	0	42	
	Ideational Thread:		Continued		Continued, Initiated	

Vitya	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Absent	Absent	Narrative* 194 None	Recount 34 Continued	114
Tereza	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Descriptive 75 Initiated	Recount 46 Continued	Narrative 54 None	Descriptive 65 Continued	60.0
Francisco	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative 88 Continued, Initiated	Recount 188 None	Narrative 68 Continued	Narrative 324 Continued	167
Maria	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 75 Initiated	Recount 117 Continued	Recount 173 Continued	Recount 122 Continued	121.75
Araceli	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Descriptive 32 None	Descriptive 35 Continued	Single Event 24 Continued	Recount 30 Initiated, Continued	30.3
Elena	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative* 268 Initiated	Narrative* 106 Continued	Narrative* 160 Continued	Narrative* 376 Continued	227.5
Joel	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative* 83 Initiated	Absent	Absent	Recount 52 Initiated	67.5
Krzysztof	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative* 76 None	Recount 90 Continued	Recount 46 None	Narrative 87 Continued	74.8
Daniel	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Descriptive 33 None	Narrative* 24 Continued	Single Event* 17 None	Narrative* 70 Continued	36

Sarah	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 58 Initiated	Recount 100 Continued	Other None	Recount 37 None	48.8
Marcus	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 7 Continued	Single Event 12 Continued	Absent	Other None	6.3
Sunita	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 28 None	Single Event 21 None	Single Event 24 Continued	Recount 23 Continued	24.0
Inez	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Single Event 10 None	Recount 13 None	Recount 18 None	Call & Response* 131 Continued	43.0
Jada	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative 40 None	Recount 49 Initiated	Narrative 54 Initiated	Single Event 22 Continued	41.3
Michael	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Absent	Recount 68 Continued	Narrative 76 Continued	Absent	72.0
Diamond	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative 83 Initiated, Continued	Narrative 382 Continued	Recount 142 Continued	Recount 103 Continued	177.5
Maricruz	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 45 Continued	Narrative 49 Initiated, Continued	Single Event 23 Continued	Narrative 39 Continued	39.0
Carlos	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 68 Initiated, Continued	Recount 56 Continued	Recount 67 Continued	Recount 27 Continued	54.5

Ana	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative 117 Continued, Initiated	Narrative 108 None	Narrative 127 Continued	Narrative 161 Continued	128.3
Eric	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Refusal	Other None	Recount 19 Initiated	Other None	4.75
Marta	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Recount 32 Continued	Narrative 46 Initiated, Continued	Narrative 48 None	Recount 38 Initiated	41.0
Adan	Story Type: Words: Ideational Thread:	Narrative 39 Initiated	Recount 57 Continued	Recount 85 None	Absent	60.3

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