

Review

A REVIEW OF THE PLACE OF NARRATIVE IN THE EARLY YEARS: A WAY INTO LITERACY

Jiryung Ahn

Department of Early Childhood Education, Uiduk University, Ugumri, Gangdongmyen, Gyeongjusi,
Gyeongsangbukdo
E-mail: jraedu@yahoo.com; Tel: 054-760-1684; 010-4569-7626

Abstract

Children's narratives contribute significantly to comprehending the varied aspects of children's lives. The intention of this review is to fill the gap by investigating the narratives of young children and what these narratives might reveal about the ways in which children construct literacy ability about their worlds and their place in it. Children represent themselves and their literacy experiences across time and place from diverse background. Narratives in the early years help explain the universe in which we live, as being similar to each other as well as different, as both entailing a separation of their procedures from lived experience.

Keyword: Narrative, Young children, Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Our narrative ability makes us what we are. Narrative is a portrait drawn by children interweaving many functions and attitudes and incorporating a number of voices. It is a dynamic meeting space between the children's inner lives (emotions and thoughts) and their external world, as these two spheres converge and reflect reality. The ability to grapple with narrative structures is an essential feature of our minds. Narrative provides the opportunities to develop children's literacy. The study of young children's literacy acquisition is a subject that has been investigated from multiple angles and perspectives. Many educators refer to children's early literacy experiences as 'emergent literacy' because of the gradual nature of how these behaviours evolve into conventional literacy (Gunning, 2000). In general, research on emergent literacy aims at identifying children's literacy knowledge and processes, the sequences in which these are acquired, and the environmental conditions that best facilitate their attainment (Solsken, 2003). Research in this area suggests, 'children are active constructors of literacy (Gunning, 2000, p. 26). Children's literacy development is from active engagement in meaningful activities rather than direct teaching. Although no one would deny that literacy is fundamental to successful participation in the culture, definitions of literacy vary among researchers. There is no consensus for a single definition of literacy. For some, literacy is the successful interaction with text

(Snow, 1983). For others, literacy is a broadly based competence with literate forms of communication (Olson, 1988; Tannen, 1982). Despite the emphasis on mechanical skills, common definition of literacy also imply social, educational, or intellectual status. In recent years, definitions have been tied to the social and political implications of literacy (Bendor-Samuel, 1992). Literacy is defined as a set of culturally-developed practices, and the study of popular culture and the importance of visual literacy are fully acknowledged. The impact of new technologies and the availability of an increasing range of texts are also explored as different ways of making narrative connections. Teachers, children and texts are working together to make meaning. Their work is imaginative and exciting, and goes beyond any functional view of literacy.

For Clandinin and Connelly, personal experience is understood most effectively through narrative, for "experience is the stories people live" (2000, p. xxvi). Story begins in the early childhood years and is actively constructed out of the relational matrix of home, school, and community. Early childhood settings are crucial sites where young children construct stories of who they are in relation to others. The stories we create about our lives begin in childhood and arise out of a matrix of relationships with others and the meaning we make of our life experiences.

Based on the above assumptions, children's narratives can be examined from a number of perspectives, such as linguistic, social, and developmental aspects. From the linguistic perspective, children's stories are the development of syntactical and grammatical structure. From the social perspective, it is important to represent the scripts of children's everyday lives. From the cognitive perspective, it is the developmental stage that results in children's symbolic use of language. More recently, the social constructivist approach has emphasized language development as a function of the social and cultural worlds in which children grow. As stated above, children's stories contribute significantly to comprehending the varied aspects of children's lives. Based on theoretical literature review approach, the intention of this review, therefore, is to fill the gap by investigating the narratives of young children via sociocultural perspectives and what these narratives might reveal about the ways in which children construct literacy ability about their worlds and their place in it.

THE PLACE OF NARRATIVE

Narrative functions as a vehicle through which the possibility for a new "we" of shared experience and language can become a reality across individual differences. Our narrative ability makes us what we are. Experience is meaningful, and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. Narrative displays the significance that events have on one another. At the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives that enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At the cultural level, narratives serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values. Narrative requires the meaningfulness of individual experience by noting how experiences function as parts of a whole. The particular subject matter of narrative is human actions and events that affect human beings, which it configures into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion. Because narrative is particularly sensitive to the temporal dimension of human existence, it pays special attention to the sequence in which actions and events occur.

Narrative displays the extensive variety of ways in which life might be drawn together into a unified adventure. As Ricoeur explains, narrative takes on the nature of human existence. According to Ricoeur (1984), narrative is related to the world of human action and narrative is a response to the human experience of feelings of discord and fragmentation. By the same token, according to Gadamer's theory in which the structure of understanding is held together within a language of understanding, the world is projected and thus achieves its horizon. In this sense, the listener or reader receives it according to their own receptive capacity, which itself is

defined by a situation that is both limited and open to the world's horizon. The intersection of the world and the text depends on the listener or reader. This definition relates to Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of a "fusion of horizon" (1989).

The realm of meaning is structured according to linguistic forms, and one of the most important forms for creating meaning in human existence is narrative. Narrative attends to the temporal dimension of human existence and configures and unifies events. The events become meaningful in relation to the theme or point of the narrative. Using stories based on personal experience to interpret texts need not bring about a transformation of one's understanding. When the telling of stories has a profound impact—as happens occasionally—the experience appears to connect the reader affectively with the situation presented by the text. The story opens up the text to uncover what lies hidden.

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Narrative in the Early Years

The ability to remember is present in the young child from birth, if not before. Even before language emerges, children engage in pretend play. Such play is more than an expression of desire for experience not immediately available. Narrative competence develops in the period that lies approximately between the second and sixth birthdays. That narrative competence is the ability to understand and construct stories. Children's worlds are filled with diverse narratives they both hear and tell. Narrative is an essential form through which children describe their own experiences and communicate their views of the world. Through their narrative activities, children are not only able to represent their understanding of the world, but also to make sense of it both factually and emotionally and to find their place in it (Nicolopoulou, 1992, p. 157). According to Bakhtin (1981), to compose a narrative, children must grapple with newly emergent inner speech, with those words saturated with shared experiences. Children are able to communicate powerful imaginative ideas and problems through a variety of symbol systems.

Literacy is the notion that writing and reading are ways of making, interpreting, and communicating meaning. Reading is defined as the ability to "take meaning from print" (Heath, 1983) and writing as the ability to use print to communicate with others. Writing and reading can enter young children's lives in a variety of ways. Literacy development often starts in young children's early symbol using activities in taking in play and fantasy, in scribing and drawing, in pretend reading and writing. As children begin to experiment with writing and reading, often in playful ways they may find they can these new symbolic modes in some of the same ways

they used earlier developed symbolic forms- so that talking, drawing, and playing can serve as “bridges” to literacy, as children discover that writing and reading offer them new and interesting resources for constructing and communicating meaning (Dyson, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

Narrative via the sociocultural perspectives

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides the basis for the conceptual framework. The sociocultural level of explanation centers around the effects of cultural and social factors and their impact on human behavior. Literacy takes place on an interpersonal level between individuals before it is internalized on an intrapersonal level. Sharing narratives and reflecting on what such narratives mean, how they have affected and continue to affect an individual, opens the possibility for a much greater understanding of self (Bruner, 1991; Fivush and Haden, 2003; Ricoeur, 1984). Kress (2000) provides a strong argument for taking a completely fresh look at multimodality in theories of communication, and re-evaluating how we use different symbol systems to communicate and represent meaning. He stresses that it is critically important for this new agenda to include the full range of semiotic modes and a full understanding of their potentials and limitations.

Narrative and Literacy Pedagogy

Literacy pedagogy accounts for the fusion of text forms embedded in children's lives by creating new opportunities for learners by using multiple modes of representation in various social contexts. Children try to write and play with letters during their play. Most of time of children's play, they make a story with creating imaginary letters. Children copy letters, which they read in the storybooks, television, or what heard from parents. Miller and Mehler (1994) support this with their findings that many educators believe personal storytelling serves as an effective bridge into early literacy. A literacy event is integral to the nature of children's interactions and their interpretive process. Emergent literacy suggests that children's narrative competence emerges through and is enhanced by repeated experiences with narratives including storybook reading, engaging in dramatic play, and participating in dramatic reenactments. Children's construction of original and oral texts contributes to developing the sense of literacy. Speaking of literacy development through oral storytelling, children also enrich it through visual contexts. The process of writing is simultaneously a process of meaning-making and a process of social interaction. This may serve its most important mediating intellectual function, not by facilitating communication or obtaining information, but by helping children create new worlds. In the following quote, Smith

(1982) explains this power of writing:

The power of writing is not initially lost upon many children. A child writes, “The dog died.” It is astounded at what has been accomplished. The child has put a dog into the world that did not exist before—created a world that would not otherwise have existed—and then has killed the dog. None of this can be done in any other way. And if the boy is contrite, a stroke of the pen is all that is required to bring the dog to life, something else again that would be difficult to accomplish in any other way (p. 129).

This is an aspect of literacy, the creation of imaginary worlds, and it has enormous implications for the development of thinking. It mediates the intellect not only by providing access to the real world and by offering expanded possibilities of broader or different experiences of the literate world, but also by creating new worlds that have not existed before. Through attempting to write, children become a more confident being. Heath (1983) finds that by providing young children with a wide variety of scripts and narratives to play with, they build a greater sense of narrative. This is helpful knowledge for aiding interpretations when reading and writing. There are also many ways of incorporating print into socio-dramatic play, such as the use of menus, writing letters, grocery labels, newspapers, price lists, and so on.

Play and narrative are closely intertwined in young children's experience and development. In fact, symbolic or pretend play consists mostly of enacted narratives (Nicolopoulou, 1993, 1997, 2002). And a growing body of research has argues convincingly that children's acquisition of narrative skills in their preschool years is an important foundation of emergent literacy (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; McCabe and Bliss, 2003; Snow, 1991; Wells, 1995, 1996). Play consumes much of young children's time and energy, and for many children, play is where writing and reading begin. This multifaceted body of knowledge and attitudes constitutes early or “emergent” literacy. It appears to have at least two potential links to the development of literacy. First, as a symbolic activity, pretend play allows children to develop and refine their capacities to use symbols, to represent experience, and to construct imaginary worlds, capacities they will draw on when they begin write and read. Second, as an orientation or approach to experience, play can make the various roles and activities of people who read and write more meaningful and hence more accessible to young children. This is similar to what they do when they listen to story books, and to what they do when they read or write stories themselves. Children's narrative activity form part of an interconnected and mutually supportive cluster of decontextualized oral-language skills that play a critical role in facilitating children's achievement of literacy and their overall school success.

Children explain an astonishing conceptual understandings and imaginations via drawings through language in narrative format. Cox (1992) is cautious about the potential for using children's drawings as evidence of

their emotional state and the same reservation apply in the case of narrative. Narrative not only provides a blueprint for making sense of the world; it also guides action within that world. In other words, while narrative is a mode of representation, it is, at the same time, a mode of action. We use narrative to guide and shape the way we experience our daily lives, to communicate with other people, and to develop relationships with them. This is also true for young children who use narrative to experience and re-experience self in relation to others. Thus, through their narrative activities, children are not only able to represent their understanding of the world, but also to make sense of it both factually and emotionally and to find their place in it (Nicolopoulou, 1993). Becoming literate means more than being able to read and write, rather it means acquiring the ability to use a variety of representative forms for conceptualizing and expressing meaning.

In constructing stories by making an oral or visual connection, children “draw on images and other elements that are presented to them by their cultural environment and that shape their imagination and sensibility in profound and subtle ways” (Nicolopoulou, Scales, & Weintraub, 1994, p. 108). Their narratives tell us about their ways of seeing and thinking and can offer insight into their meaning-making processes.

CONCLUSION

Decontextualization allows intellectual and emotional distance from knowledge, which fosters the critical or reflexive thinking. The politics of how the knowledge is represented, however, raises particular challenges in which learners and teachers come from diverse historical, sociocultural and linguistic contexts. From a practical standpoint, it means that children bring their own interpretive framework and manner of appropriation to the various cultural materials to which they are exposed. A major pedagogical challenge is to help children transform what they know into modes of representation that allow for a full range of human experience. Through reading and writing, young children are able to transform what they know about print into a mode of representation that allows for the full range of their experience. Writing involves the meaning of multiple worlds (Dyson, 1997) because the texts produced are ‘heteroglossic’; they contain ‘echoes’ of various language systems (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). At the core of current literacy development paradigms are the literate behaviours traditionally associated with learning to decode and encode print. Moreover, while a growing number of language and literacy educators and theorists are calling for a ‘multiliteracies’ perspective, much of the current literacy research itself continues to be grounded in a ‘verbocentric’ approach. For promoting crucial literacy related skills in young children, activities that

systematically integrate symbolic play with narrative can be especially valuable, effective, and rewarding. Children represent themselves and their literacy experiences across time and place from diverse background. Narrative and the paradigmatic as both being methods of reaching beyond the dominant present in order to construct models that will help explain the universe in which we live, as being similar to each other as well as different, as both entailing a separation of their procedures from lived experience. The implication of this review provides some information to make a plan for emergent curriculum to develop the literacy of young children.

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