



WHAT ARE THE THEMES IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S STORIES? AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF CHILDREN'S WRITTEN PRODUCTIONS

María Paz Gómez and C. June Maker*
University of Arizona, Tuscon, USA

Abstract. The authors examined themes in written narratives of second grade students including gender and ethnic differences. Eighty-seven stories were considered for this research, six general themes were found, and content and comparative analyses were performed among themes. Children tended to write more frequently about personal experiences and activities, and about settings that involved nature and animals; however, interactivity and social context was almost always present in children's stories. Boys and girls tended to write about almost the same topics, with a higher tendency of girls to write about family including female characters performing gender-oriented tasks. Finally, the researchers found some ethnic differences in children's stories, especially fantasy stories, nature, and family.

Keywords: children's writing, narratives, written stories, cultural differences in stories, DISCOVER project, content analysis, differences in stories of boys and girls.

Narrative and Human Development

Narrative, in simple words, has been a way through which human beings have organized their experiences in a coherent manner in an oral or written mode. Moreover, the act of telling and retelling stories throughout our lives has been an important part of our personal and social growth (Clandinin & Conelly, 1991). Narrative has not been considered just a summation of elements, but instead a sequence of events within a plot or 'fabula' (Bruner, 1990). By creating a plot, we have created a narrative that unified our own stories about life, experiences, and overall context. In these narratives, events and actions have merged into a whole, and the plot has a product that showed the sense that we gave to our particular experiences (Amos & Wisniewski, 1995).

* E-mail: mpgomez@email.arizona.edu

Story creation has been an important aspect of young children's social and emotional development, because narrative allowed them to construct their past experiences and add sense to those experiences (Engel, 1994). Through stories, children made sense of the world that surrounded them; they solved problems and revealed feelings about their personal lives or their proximal context. Particularly, young children tended to narrate about novel experiences that they found attractive both to them and to the reader (Engel, 1994).

Though the narrative process could be expressed in numerous ways; language has been its most explicit form (Ely *et al.*, in Menn, 1999). However, narration has involved not only language production or specific skills, but also has been a complex progression immersed in childhood development with both social and symbolic aspects (Miller *et al.*, 1990). The social component was the complex learning process that occurred when children were embedded within a social context and permanently interacting with people, objects and events in their environment (Vygotsky, 1986). Therefore, two elements of narration have been the social engagement and the socio-cultural meanings immersed in the creation of a story.

Narrative has been a process through which children became embedded in their proximal context; it was a means to relate to others, learn about culture, and above all, to construct a sense of self (Bruner, 1986). Narrative skills have been developed through a socially constructed process, which involved a permanent engagement between children and their context. Bruner (1990) stated that "the achievement of this skill is not simply a mental achievement, but an achievement of social practice that lends stability to the child's social life" (p. 8). The creation of a personal narrative has been a recursive process; it has emerged from experience and gave a sense to it (Ochs & Capps, 1996).

The relationship of the child to his/her proximal context has been related to the concept of experience. Children have interacted daily in a variety of contexts; therefore experiencing different events that occurred within their worlds. However, for these experiences to become meaningful to the child, they needed to have an impact in the child's intimate world (Dewey, 1902). One window into this intimate world of children has been narrative, because their voices, speech and discourse told us about their understanding of their own world and the one that surrounded them. Because of children's voices tell about their understanding, the telling and sharing of personal narratives has become an everyday practice for the child (Walton, Harris & Davidson, 2009). The daily experience of the child also has been embedded in a certain culture in which he/she participated or was part of. Therefore,

when narrating, children not only have provide an expression of that particular culture – such as sharing certain ideas and values – but also have manipulated and affected that culture, transforming it according to their own interpretations and adapting it to more recent times (Miller, Fung & Koven, 2007).

Narrative as a Process of Creation

One of the expressions of the narrative process has been the stories that children told or wrote. Stories played an important role in the childhood socialization process (Miller *et al.*, 1990) and illustrated meanings that children gave to either daily or personal experiences (Korn, 1998). However, these meanings were not always given through logical or rational language, but instead metaphors and personal words could be more useful to express a child's ideas (Brostrom, 2002). Therefore, children could express their ideas in several ways and also in different formats. Written stories have been one format that children have usually used accompanied by drawings or illustrations of the created narration. In school settings, sometimes stories have been used to assess literacy skill acquisition, but writing stories also could be an open-ended activity that allowed teachers to focus on children's experiences (Engel, 1994). Stories have provided children a "telling voice" that allowed them to express their thoughts and dreams (Brostrom, 2002), which could be articulated in several forms through a narrative process. Adults sometimes have learned to expect very consistent characteristics and well-shaped stories from their children (Mc Adams, 1997), but stories, especially those from children in early stages of development, have not always had a defined structure and order. As readers might expect, not all stories have had an action-reaction structure, human characters, or a defined sequence (Mc Adams, 1997). Moreover, stories have varied because children's expressive language in the early years has been variable and in a state of constant change (Sutton-Smith, 1985).

Narratives and Gender

Children's narratives have been embedded in their culture, and this culture has shaped a child's narrative and at the same time, the child has been able to adapt and transform this culture. Along with the values shared in each group, gender expectations also have been rooted in each particular culture. Therefore, when telling stories, children acknowledged cultural gender expectations and shaped them according to these expectations (Bruner, 1990).

Cultural and parental gender expectations could be subtle but have had a strong effect on children's shaping of their narratives. Muchnik & Stavans (2009) found that when telling bedtime stories, mothers and fathers dramatically changed their style and language depending on whether they were telling the story to their sons or daughters. Mothers had an advanced use of linguistic and emotional features, which was intensively used more with their daughters. On the other side, fathers used more scientifically-based information and formal language with their sons.

Pierce and Edwards (1988) analyzed the content of fantasy stories of boys and girls, and found that boys tended to write about male characters in a violent manner or show violent conflict resolutions. On the other hand, girls' female characters were described in passive actions, and showed an avoidance of conflict. Explanations provided for these findings were the influence of the media and the male and female roles children perceived in their homes.

Narratives and Culture

Culture has shaped a child's narrative not only in gender expectations, but also according to the meanings and values attributed to people, relationships, events and things within that culture. For example, the value attributed to the expression of emotions can vary from one culture to another.

In a study of differences across cultures, Wang and Leichtman (2000) performed a comparative study of differences between American and Chinese 6 year old children, and found social, emotional, and cultural content differences among the two samples. Narratives of American children showed values like independence, sense of self, and characters showed a more autonomous orientation. Chinese children reflected through their stories values such as social harmony, attention to others, and moral correctness; and their characters were socially oriented and showed an important relationship with authority figures. The researchers also found gender differences similar to those found by Pierce and Edwards, indicating that girls' stories showed a tendency toward social engagement, emotions, and other values traditionally associated with or attributed to women. Williams (1991) conducted a study with African-American children and their mothers, observing and recording their conversations and stories. She found that one of the recurrent themes among children was personal experiences, and that mothers encouraged their children to narrate about who they were as people, as a way to promote the affirmation of the child in his or her culture.

Cervantes (2002) investigated preschool Hispanic children's storytelling and found that Mexican American girls had a tendency to talk more explicitly about emotions than did boys. She also analyzed mothers' stories and found that they made one or more references to emotions in their narratives, and that Mexican immigrant mothers' emotional talk was denser with explanations than that of Mexican-American mothers. The author suggested that in Mexican descendent families, the emotional talk had a strong interpersonal and socializing component, related to values such as respect and sense of group.

Native-American storytelling also has been researched. These narratives often have been used to help construct important meanings that are part of the culture, which have been passed from one generation to the other (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Eder (2007) performed a qualitative study in which she interviewed Navajo storytellers about the importance of storytelling to children. She found that stories were primarily told by elders, and that stories were repeated through the life of a child, so every time a new lesson could be learned from a story. She also found some common elements in Navajo stories, such as the purpose that is present in every action, the importance of honoring relationships, the interaction with the natural world, and the presence in narratives of a cyclic model of life. Benjamin (1995), after the analysis of a series of Navajo stories, found a tendency to include imaginary elements to real-life stories, interpreting this as the importance of incorporation of native themes that have been an essential component of Navajo storytelling.

Knowing, considering, and appreciating stories not only as an academic product but as a means for immersion in children's inner world can be of great value for teachers, psychologists and educators. By focusing on children's stories, teachers can learn what is real to them (Collins & Cooper, 1997) and therefore make a connection with their lives. Stories have constituted a social, emotional, or communicational bridge between adults and children and has given children a narrative voice to express ideas or events or describe episodes of their lives that might be meaningful and relevant to them (Engel, 1994). Truly hearing children's voices, however, would require that teachers, parents, and other educators gave children opportunities to write or tell stories without the fear that someone would correct their language, give them a bad grade because they forgot to capitalize a word, or judge their stories as inadequate because the plot was not described clearly. Children also would have to be given opportunities to write about anything they wanted to write about rather than responding to a teacher-designed prompt. Maker (2005) found that when teachers gave children writing prompts, the

children tended to write stylized stories including content that was conventional rather than creative descriptions of personal experiences or fantasy stories. When using the Discovering Intellectual Strengths and Capabilities while Observing Varied Ethnic Responses (DISCOVER) assessment, teachers and researchers have given children many opportunities to make their voices heard, and have found that these open-ended writing tasks not only were valuable methods for assessing children's linguistic abilities, but also were important windows into the children's worlds.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the content of the stories of second grade students in one Southeast and two Southwest schools in the United States when they were given an open ended writing prompt during the DISCOVER written linguistic assessment. The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What were the themes expressed in second graders' written stories?
- (2) What were the differences in the themes of stories written by boys and the themes of stories written by girls?
- (3) What were the differences in the themes of stories written by children from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds?

Method

Participants. Eighty-seven second grade students from three urban schools were participants in this study. The sample was selected from a larger study in which students in the schools were assessed using the DISCOVER model. Demographic characteristics of the children who participated in the study are presented in Table 1. The group was comprised of 45 girls and 42 boys. Participants were from different ethnic backgrounds: African-American (24%), Caucasian (8%), Hispanic (33%) and Native-American (34%).

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample

	N	%
Gender		
Male	42	48
Female	45	52
Ethnicity		
African-American	21	24
Caucasian	7	8
Hispanic	29	33
Native American	30	34
Total	87	100

Data Collection. Data for this study were written stories (one for each participant) developed by children as part of a larger study of DISCOVER implementation.

DISCOVER was an educational program whose goal was to develop and assess problem solving strategies among students across all levels (Maker, 1996). The DISCOVER theoretical framework was based on Sternberg's (1986) Triarchic Theory of Intelligence and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory (1983). Gardner (1983) stated that intelligence was comprised of a set of problem-solving skills that allowed individuals to solve authentic problems, and when necessary, create an effective product. These problem-solving skills were diverse and manifested in different areas and contexts. For example, linguistic intelligence could be expressed through oral or written products, and individuals who had abilities in writing were capable of recalling experiences and expressing words and ideas, and the problem to be solved could be the way of presenting the information to attain a desired effect.

Research Design. The unit of analysis for this study was young children's written productions; therefore, content analysis was chosen to identify and define main themes in their stories. According to Holsti (1968), underneath creations or products was a message with a communicational intent that could be the subject of analysis. Therefore, content analysis allowed researchers to describe the characteristics of a message, make inferences about it and summarize its main aspects. Berelson (1952) defined some of the purposes of content analysis: (a) to describe substance characteristics of message content, (b) to describe form characteristics of message content, (c) to make inferences about the content, and (d) to determine the effects of content on the audience.

Comparative analysis has been a secondary technique that allowed for construction of inferential histories and explanations of certain processes (Peel, 1987). This technique also allowed researchers to compare and contrast different variables based on a specific criterion. For the purpose of the study, after determining the main themes of children's written productions, topics were compared based on gender and ethnic variables.

Data Analysis. The stories were part of a set of assessments performed within an overall DISCOVER assessment. The purpose of these assessments was to evaluate students' linguistic abilities and problem solving skills through oral and written productions. Each child was invited to write (and draw, optionally) about anything he or she would like to write about, and were told they would not be graded. Researchers and teachers who administered the assessment also assured children that only their ideas were impor-

tant, not their spelling, punctuation, or story form. Teachers and scorers kept this material for rating and analyses.

For this study, stories were read and transcribed to a digital format, without making any changes to their structure or language. The data analysis process consisted of five steps: (a) stories were read individually by the author two or three times to analyze and identify their main themes (central to the plot) and secondary themes, (b) investigator triangulation was performed between three researchers doing similar investigations to agree on the stories' themes, (c) categories were created and defined for identified themes, (d) stories were coded and (e) comparative analyses were performed based on gender and ethnic variables.

To reduce biases related to the analysis, the researcher did not have access to children's names, gender, or ethnicities. The ethnicities considered for comparative analysis were Native-American, Hispanic (Latino) and African-American because since the representation of Caucasian students was low in this sample.

The final data analysis procedure consisted of two phases: a quantitative section to determine the recurrence (frequency) of themes among all children in the sample, and then a comparative analysis to account for gender and ethnic differences in the stories. To provide more clarity to the analysis, themes were grouped in six general categories.

Table 2: Categories and Definitions of Themes

Category	Definition
Experiences/Activities	Activities children experienced on an everyday basis, such as playing and shopping
Friends	Stories whose main plots are about relationships with friends
Family	Narratives mainly about children's relationships with their parents, siblings, and extended family
Fantasy Story	Stories that include characters and events taken from a traditional story or created by children
Nature	Stories about animate and inanimate elements that can be found in nature
Desires/Dreams/Aspirations	Wishes and motivations expressed by children in their stories

Results. Research Question 1: What Were the Themes Expressed In Young Children's Written Stories? Because themes expressed by children were diverse in nature, story content was grouped in six general themes (Table 2): *experiences* were daily activities that children liked to do, usually with people in their proximal context; *friends* and *family* were narratives that involved relationships and activities performed exclusively with friends and

family, which could also include characters from extended family; *fantasy story* was a narrative in which an unreal setting was created by the child; *nature* corresponded to stories that occurred in a natural setting or involved elements of the environment; and *desires/dreams/aspirations* were narratives in which children expressed their motivations, hopes and wishes. The frequency of occurrence of these themes can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of Themes in Children’s Stories

	Frequency	%
Experiences/Activities	41	35
Friends	6	5
Family	21	18
Fantasy Story	15	13
Nature	30	26
Desires/Dreams/Aspirations	4	3
Total		100

Note. Stories written by children included one or more themes; therefore, frequencies presented in table 2 correspond to the number of themes that were coded, which is greater than the total number of students in the sample.

Experience and activities. One of the most recurrent themes (35%) found in children’s stories were activities experienced by them on a daily basis.

I got to the store to get some mix for my mom, because she made it and she said thank you.

One day I was walking at school and saw a dog walking by me and I got scared, and he was running after me and he ran home and I still went to school. And when I went home this morning I went to school and I didn’t see no dogs. But I went to school safely and no dog bothered me...

Also, children tended to describe common events that happened to them and that could have an emotional or social significance.

One day I was walking to school and when I was half way there I felt like I was being followed. I was scared so I looked back and no one was there. By now I felt silly. As I was almost there it sounded like somebody was following me so I look back again and there was still nobody there. So I continued walking as I was just there I looked back once more and saw that there was still nothing and nobody there so I went to class and still felt silly. By the end of the day as I was walking home I still was feeling a little silly, and at dinner time I still felt pretty silly and I still felt silly walking to school the next day.

Children not only described activities or experiences that happened to themselves, but also events that were embedded in a social context (e.g. with parents, family and friends).

I went to Page to get some food with my mom. And we went to the motel to sleep so we will get up early. Then we got up early... Then we went to the store to get food.

I visit my cousin last night to sleep at my cousin. In the morning I play with my cousin sister at night I sleep with my cousin brother.

Yesterday I played with Sharon outside. We all play at the playground. After school Sharon and I go to the playground, we like to play on the monkey bar after school. And we play on the merry-go-round. And I feel like playing with Sharon.

Nature. This theme was the second most recurrent (26%) among the children in the sample. This type of narrative involved different naturalistic settings and also pets or other domestic animals that children had in their homes.

There was a caterpillar in my garden. I put the caterpillar in a leaf and it was growing until the leaf broke and I couldn't pick it up and then I got a fork and I cut it in half...

One day I saw a butterfly, it was beautiful. It had red, purple, yellow, blue and green. I caught it and I looked at it, it was in a jar. Then I let it go, it went into its home.

Narratives involving nature were not only descriptive, but included close and sometimes emotional relationships with the environment and animals.

I had a little kitten. It was white. It is dead. My grandma's sheepdog killed it. It had a brother. The brother was orange and white. The brother is alive. The white cat was a girl.

One day my dog and me played in the afternoon, and last night my dog died. Last night and my cat died too and I liked my dog and my cat. I hate to see my dog and my cat died. It was sad I did not like it. It is sad to me and my dad and my mom too, and my nana and tata too ...

Friends. Although in the narratives involving nature, children described events that involved friends, narratives incorporated in this category included a closer relationship with peers that usually involved emotions.

This is a true story. I was sad with Angelina and Fernanda, and Tony said they are not my friends. And they don't want to talk to me. I am very sad, but I am still her friend.

I was very, very happy because Alexandra was my friend. She was nice to me and we played together and had fun. She was my friend and we played.

Family. Just as in the previous category, family was narrated in an interactive and intimate fashion by children. This meant they were capable of describing events they shared with their families in a close way.

...I help my mom take care of my baby brother. Because he tries to eat trash, and we have to take it out of his mouth. School is fun to my sister and me! I have a sister at home that doesn't go to school yet... My mom's name is Angie and my dad's name is Kelvin. I have two little sisters, one of them is in kindergarten. And one baby brother.

In 1995 my sister broke her arm at grandma's house. No one was there, then my mom came she said "what happened!" We told her the truth. She said thank you for telling the truth. Then mom took my sister to the hospital. She got a cast 6 days and then we have to go back to the hospital. They said if is alright they could take the cast off. If it is not alright they have to put it again. I was sorry for my sister.

Fantasy Stories. Fantasy stories were invented stories that had imaginary characters and non real-life settings. In the case of this particular sample, children tended to create original fantasy stories, different from the classical tale structure (e.g. castles, princes, and fairies.), with more humor, feelings and interactions. Although not a recurrent theme, most of the analyzed fantasy stories included "paranormal" characters and themes (e.g. ghosts, dead people, and zombies).

One night day, one Halloween night, I opened up the door, and oh what a sight. I saw two black bats making a snack and two black cats making up a dance, and two black snakes dancing all the way and two black sheep making them snack, and that's the end.

There was a baby rabbit and he was playing in the forest and looking for food. He was playing with his friends. There was a wolf in the forest and he was so hungry. The wolf was looking for food in the forest. The wolf saw a rabbit. The wolf was running but the wolf did not catch it and the wolf was going home. The rabbit told the story to his friend. His friend did not believe him. And he told his mom believe him. The wolf did not want to chase a rabbit again. The little rabbit was playing again with his friends. And they had fun with his friends. His friends were so nice to his friend the rabbit.

Desires, dreams and aspirations. These narratives corresponded to real-life or created events that clearly showed the main character's dreams and motivations to achieve or obtain something important.

Había una vez un conejito que no tenía familia, era huerfanito y siempre iba a pedir dinero en la iglesia, y compraba puro pan, y con ese dinero compraba puro pan porque ay la gente era muy pobre y casi no tenían dinero y un día soñó que era rico y fue verdad, y fue muy, muy feliz por eso. [Once upon a time there was a bunny that did not have a family and he always went to beg for money at church. And he bought only bread, and with that money he bought only bread because oh people were so poor and

they didn't have money. One day he dreamed that he was rich, and it became true, and he was so happy about that.]

There was once a little duck who wanted to ride a Lincoln. But no one else wanted him but before everyone wanted him and let him ride the car. So the little duck saw a Lincoln and he was very happy. And he went to the movies and he liked the movie. I want to go to the circus to play with my friends.

Research question 2: What were the differences in the themes of stories written by boys and the themes of stories written by girls? Across almost all topics similarities were found in the recurrence of themes between boys and girls (Table 4).

Table 4: Frequency of Themes in Children's Stories Differentiated by Gender

	Female		Male	
	Primary theme	Secondary theme	Primary theme	Secondary theme
Experiences/Activities	15%	3%	11%	5%
Friends	3%	1%	2%	0%
Family	4%	8%	2%	4%
Fantasy Story	5%	0%	8%	0%
Nature	10%	3%	15%	2%
Desires/Dreams/Aspirations	3%	0%	1%	0%

Note. Results presented in Table 4 show the frequency of themes found in the stories of boys and girls. It also illustrates whether that theme appeared as primary (central to the plot) or secondary within the story.

The major differences appeared in the theme of family. Girls not only narrated more about their families, but they provided descriptions of gender-oriented settings. Similarly, boys tended to tell stories about their fathers or other male characters, also involving gender-oriented events.

(Boy) *Me and my dad went to get wood. He cut a long tree it almost hit the truck. And it was snowing. And we started to chop the wood and we started to take the wood into the truck. We cut little ones because the woods might fall out the truck.*

(Boy) *I like to watch horses with my dad. Me and my dad chase cows up the canyon. I like chase up cows up the canyon with my dad.*

(Girl) *My mom makes very good food, like pizza, and French fries and tamales and elotes and also cheese burritos, and tortillas. I like helping my mom.*

(Girl) *...I help my mom take care of my baby brother. Because he tries to eat trash, and we have to take it out of his mouth.*

Research question 3: What were the differences in the themes of stories written by children from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds? No significant differences were found between the stories of children from different ethnic backgrounds in the following categories: experiences, friends, and desires, dreams, and aspirations (Table 5). However, some differences were found in the categories of family, fantasy story, and nature.

Table 5: Frequency of Themes in Children’s Stories Differentiated by Ethnicity

	Native-American		African-American		Hispanic	
	Primary theme	Secondary theme	Primary theme	Secondary theme	Primary theme	Secondary theme
Experiences/activities	9%	3%	8%	2%	8%	3%
Friends	0%	1%	1%	0%	2%	0%
Family	2%	6%	3%	4%	2%	1%
Fantasy story	7%	0%	3%	0%	3%	0%
Nature	7%	3%	3%	1%	9%	0%
Desires/Dreams/Aspirations	1%	0%	1%	0%	2%	0%

Note. Results presented in Table 5 show the frequency of themes found in children with different ethnical backgrounds. It also illustrates if that theme appeared as primary (central to the plot) or secondary within the story.

Native-American and African-American children in this sample tended to write more about their families than did Hispanic children.

(African-American boy) Today I’m going to go over my cousin’s house. She is fifteen. She is having a baby it’s a girl, her name is Laniya Wood. I’m glad that I have a new cousin she is too and I got to walk her for the first time.

(Native-American boy) I like to play with my brothe... sometimes we go to Page... I go to my cousin’s house. It is fun at my cousin’s house.

Also, Native-American children’s narratives were based more on fantasy than narratives of children from other ethnicities in the sample. Native-American children’s narratives based on fantasy stories were considerably longer than the rest of the stories that comprised the sample.

(Native-American girl) Once upon an egg was real. It said nobody wants me as a pet he sadi. The egg had a dog bark it was in the side of the house the dog was scared of the egg he fall over the ground. Mrs. Pette the woman who work at the factory she came home and seen her dog on the ground. The egg was getting cold on the floor so the egg open the cabinet it crawled inside of it and it went to bed inside. In the morning it woke up and

it went on the plate and he tried to push the plate in the sink. He crawled into the refrigerator with his other friends and played in there until they turn the light on, they were quiet and days went by until it was 4th of July then all the eggs went of the refrigerator and under the living room floor and they watch the fire cracker go boom. The eggs went back home in the morning Mrs. Pette went shopping in the morning she bought lots of stuff. She bought a butter an lots of caps. Soon it started to rain, the refrigerator was full of meat and watermelon and that's all what happened in the story. The end.

Finally, Native-American and Hispanic children tended to include Nature as a central topic in their stories.

(Native-American girl) *I have a baby cow its name is big day. And the mother's name is big red. We saw the cow born the baby. The baby was cute. The color was red. It could walk... On Friday my mom is going to take me out and going to the mountains.*

(Hispanic boy) *I had a little puppy named hochy. She has a little tale and she was waiting in the store for someone to buy her so I did.*

Discussion

One limitation of this research, because of its qualitative nature, is generalizability; therefore, results need to be viewed in their own frame of reference. Nevertheless, the goal of this type of research is to provide richness and depth to the studied phenomenon, in this case, children's written narratives.

Historically, research on written narratives has been focused on elements that emerge at different developmental stages, but less emphasis has been placed on themes and characters children write about (Benjamin, 1995). Young children's narratives can be complex and diverse, and can show the way children organize their experiences and give sense to them (Engel, 1994). Plots from children in this sample were not always descriptive in nature, but on the contrary, stories were engaged and embedded in the children's environmental and cultural context. Characters were not always isolated but related to each other, and plots revealed several aspects of children's realities. One of these aspects was daily experiences embedded in children's narratives, therefore showing the high value of personal events to children in the sample. This means a higher connection of the child with his/her reality and context, moving from a period of animistic beliefs expressed through narratives (Piaget, 1975) to a deeper internalization of their proximal context due to the increase in social and relational interactions with others and the internalization of meanings attributed to this process (Vygot-

sky, 1986). Therefore, narratives show the progression of children from a more self-driven perspective to more socially-driven behaviors that are shaped by children's socialization processes.

Besides social interactions, the stories in this sample of second grade students sometimes showed a clear articulation of human behaviors, such as motivations, emotions, hopes, and dreams. This relationship of narratives to human relationships and emotions is related to the idea that narration for children is not simply the description of facts, but it is also an interpretive action (Kerby, 1991). Children are giving and acquiring socio-emotional meaning to events that surround them. Through the articulation of emotions into written language, children are disclosing what is important in their lives, and therefore providing a way of looking into the subjective experiences they are having and want to communicate to "others" (e.g. adults).

Due to the age of children in the sample, generally around eight years old, the researchers did not anticipate finding a large number of fantasy stories in the children's written productions. However, many of the stories that were analyzed, although they had fantasy characters, also showed clear elements of reality, interactions, humor, and motivations that children took from their proximal context. This relational component of narratives can be attributed to the developmental stage of children in the sample (latent stage); they are in the process of creating new psychological structures and internalizing the importance of the context in their social behaviors (Freud, 1920).

Gender differences found in children's themes are not surprising and are consistent with previous research. These differences can be explained as the result of the development of gender roles and representations that begins in early childhood and sets expected behaviors and forms of relationships associated with the masculine and feminine role, providing an organizing system that is relevant to a child's self (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993). Organization of roles provides *sex type schemes* that children apply to different contexts and situations. One of these situations can be the act of creating a story, in which adults may expect that boys would talk about friends and adventures and girls more about *soft* topics such as feelings and family. Role stereotyping is a socially constructed process, and the social context encourages boys and girls to talk or write about certain themes. Some of the themes can be inter- and intra-family relationships in the case of girls, and public and social life in the case of boys, which leads to gender ideologies associated with each role (Montecino, 1997).

Both African-American and Native-American children in this study made reference to family and extended family in their stories, topics that have been found to be culturally relevant to these populations. The extended

family and the importance given to the female role as the *strength of the family* are highly valued constructs in the African-American population (McGoldrick *et al.*, 2005). In the Native-American community, great value is placed on the extended family and to all the members of the clan, who all share the responsibility of raising the children. Their views of the world often are conceptualized as a *big family* in which each member has his/her unique and distinctive function (Garrett, 1994). Hispanic children in the sample did not refer to family in their narratives as African-American and Native-American children did, a result that was not expected due to what researchers have previously discussed as the importance of extended family in Latino communities. One possible explanation is that the school that had the most Hispanic students was embedded in an urban and Anglo setting, and some researchers have found conflicting views between familial and non-familial agents (e.g. home and schools) in the construction of ethnic identity in Mexican-American children, especially language and customs that exert pressure on the child's ethnic identity construction (Knight *et al.*, 1993).

Therefore, stories reflect part of the socialization process that is occurring in children's lives, but narratives also take into account the particular socialization process that occurs within each cultural context (Williams, 1991). Children's narratives provide a means to access cultural symbols and a way of conceptualizing the self and the context (Miller *et al.*, 1990).

Finally, Native-American children in the sample tended to create more fantasy stories and talk about nature more in their narratives than did children from other ethnic backgrounds. The incorporation of these types of themes is very common for children from Native-American backgrounds because the tradition of oral storytelling includes native themes that are integral parts of their stories, like animals (e.g. Coyote in Navajo stories), and healers with magical powers, among other fantastic characters (Benjamin, 1995).

Implications for Practice

Many procedures and instruments have been designed to help adults know and deepen their understanding of children's lives, interests, and worries, such as the ones used in clinical psychology. As seen in this study, written productions also can contribute to the knowledge of children's inner worlds as a mirror of the tasks that are relevant to their developmental stages. In the study, socialization appeared to be a relevant topic for young children, such as the importance of peers, and the value of the relationships they establish. Thus, stories can constitute a tool for teachers and practitioners to use for

taking into account this important process and the ways children deal with and manage their involvement with their proximal context.

Written productions in this study were freely elaborated as an open-ended task, which allows children to elaborate and narrate whatever they want to express. Most of the time writing becomes a mandatory task for literacy purposes, in which children must follow certain instructions, and produce a specific product. When children are allowed to recall diverse personal experiences and narrate them in a natural way, without direct pressure from the environment, they can express themselves more freely about their inner worlds. Therefore, free written productions should be encouraged in school and family settings to help children express themselves and also to establish a social and emotional connection between adults' and children's worlds.

Gender socialization also is an important part of children's development, but is almost an unconscious process that occurs in different contexts. To promote gender awareness, many times boys and girls are encouraged to choose tasks that are *gender appropriate*, and sometimes adults fall into coercive behaviors. As well as promoting written stories as a free task, teachers should encourage boys and girls to write about different interests, activities, and concerns as a way of breaking the traditional sex role pattern.

Considering children's stories implies valuing children as active members of society, listening to their voices and their engagement in their social environment. In addition, respecting their cultural and ethnic backgrounds is an important aspect of their lives and upbringing. Stories tell about shared values within a community, which have to be known, acknowledged, and respected, especially by those in charge of children's education. Stories are important in several cultures, and therefore educators need to acknowledge the context in which stories are told. This means establishing cultural integrity between educational practices and the local traditions and beliefs.

Story creation gives a unique shape to children's experiences, what they have learned, and values passed from one generation to another. The reading of these stories gives an opportunity to take a glance at children's social and cultural interactions that are critical and hence, make a contribution to their development.

References

- Amos, J. & R. Wisniewski (1995): *Life history and narrative*. New York: Routledge.
Benjamin, R. (1995): The man from south: reconsidering Navajo student's stories, *Youth & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 194-229.
Berelson, B. (1952): *Content analysis in communication research*. Illinois: Free Press.

- Brostrom, S. (2002): Children tell stories, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 85-97.
- Bruner, J. (1986): *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990): *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cervantes, C.A. (2002): Explanatory emotion talk in Mexican immigrant and Mexican American families, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 24, 138-163.
- Clandinin, J. & M. Connelly (1991): Narrative and story in practice and research; in D. Schön (eds.): *The reflective turn. Case studies in and on educational practice* (258-281). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Collins, R. & P. Cooper (1997): *The power of story: teaching through storytelling*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eder, D. (2007): Bringing Navajo storytelling practices into schools: the importance of maintaining cultural integrity, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 278-296. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://sdsu.palau.edu>.
- Ely, R., A. Mc Cabe, A. Wolf & G. Melzi (1999): The story behind the story: gathering narrative data from children; in L. Menn & N. Bernstein (eds.): *Methods for studying language production* (249-270). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Engel, S. (1994): *The stories children tell: making sense of the narratives of childhood*. USA: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Fagot, B. & M. Leinbach (1993): Gender role development in young children: from discrimination to labeling, *Developmental Review*, Vol. 13, 205-224. Retrieved from: <http://www.elsevier.com>
- Freud, S. (1920): *A general introduction to psychoanalysis*. New York: Boni and Liveright.
- Gardner, H. (1983): *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Garrett, H. (1994): Path of good medicine: understanding and counseling native Americans, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, Vol. 22, 134-144. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://www.multiculturalcenter.org/>
- Holsti, O. (1968): Content analysis; G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (eds.): *The handbook of social psychology* (596-692). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Kerby, A. (1991): *Narrative and the self*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Knight, G., M. Bernal, M. Cota, C. Garza & K. Ocampo (1993): Family socialization and Mexican American identity and behavior; In M. Bernal & G. Knight (eds.): *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (106-120). Albany: Suny Press.
- Korn, C. (1998). How young children make sense of their life stories, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 223-228.
- Maker, C.J. (1996): Identification of gifted minority students: a national problem, needed changes and a promising solution, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, Vol. 40, 41-50. Retrieved from: <http://gcq.sagepub.com>
- Maker, C.J. (2001): DISCOVER: assessing and developing problem solving, *Gifted Education International*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 232-251.
- Maker, C.J. (2005): *The DISCOVER project: improving assessment and curriculum for diverse gifted learners*. Senior scholars series monograph. Storrs, CT: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- McAdams, D. (1997): *The stories we live by: personal myths and the making of the self*. London: The Guilford Press.
- McGoldrick, M., J. Giordano & N. Garcia-Preto (2005): *Ethnicity and family therapy*. London: The Guilford Press.
- Miller, P., R. Potts, H. Fung, L. Hoogstra & J. Mintz (1990): Narrative practices and the social construction of the self in childhood, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 292-311. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://jstor.org>

- Miller, P.J., H. Fung & M. Koven (2007): Narrative reverberations: how participation in narrative practices co-creates persons and cultures; In S. Kitayama & D. Cohen (eds.): *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Miller, S. & L. Pennycuff (2008): The power of story: using storytelling to improve literacy learning, *Journal of Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 36-43. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://wmpeople.wm.edu>.
- Montecino, S. (1997): *Palabra Dicha. Escritos sobre Género, Identidades, Mestizaje* [The Said Word. Writings about Gender, Identities, Ethnicities]. Santiago: Universidad de Chile.
- Muchnik, M. & A. Stavans (2009): Telling the same story to your child: mothers' versus fathers' storytelling interactions, *Women and Language*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 60-69. Retrieved from World Wide Web www.womenandlanguage.org
- Ochs, E. & L. Capps (1996): Narrating the self, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 25, 19-43. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://jstor.org>
- Peel, J. (1987): History, culture and the comparative method; in L. Holy (ed.): *Comparative Anthropology*. New York: Blackwell.
- Peirce, K. & E. Edwards (1988): Children's constructions of fantasy stories: gender-differences in conflict resolutions strategies, *Sex Roles*, Vol. 18, No. 7-8, 393-404. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://springer.com>
- Piaget, J. (1975): *The child's conception of the world*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Snow, C. (1991): The theoretical basis for relationships between language and literacy development, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 5-10. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://acei.com>
- Sternberg, R.J. (1986): *The triarchic mind: a new theory of human intelligence*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1985): *Why we won't listen to children's stories*. Work presented in The child's view of the world: stories and play. Proceedings on the Annual Conference on Early Childhood Education, September, Minnesota.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986): *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Walton, M., A. Harris & A. Davidson (2009): It makes me a man from the beating I took: gender and aggression in children's narratives about conflict, *Sex Roles*, Vol. 61, 383-398. Retrieved from World Wide Web <http://springerlink.com>
- Wang, Qi & M. Leichtman (2000): Same beginnings, different stories: a comparison of American and Chinese children's narratives, *Child Development*, Vol. 71, 1329-1346.
- Williams, K. (1991): Storytelling as a bridge to literacy: an examination of personal storytelling among black middle-class mothers and children, *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 399-410. Retrieved from: <http://journalnegroed.org>

Примљено 18.12.2010; прихваћено за штампу 07.05.2011.

Марија Паз Гомез и Ц. Џун Мејкер
 ШТА СУ ТЕМЕ ДЕЧЈИХ ПРИЧА?
 АНАЛИЗА САДРЖАЈА ДЕЧЈИХ ПИСАНИХ ПРОИЗВОДА

Анстракт

Ауторке су проучавале теме писаних наратива ученика другог разреда, укључујући полне и етничке разлике. У овом истраживању разматрано је осамдесет седам прича и откривено шест општих тема, које су затим анализирани путем анализе садржаја и компаративне анализе. Деца су чешће писала о личним ис-

куствима и активностима, као и о окружењу које укључује природу и животиње. Међутим, интерактивност и друштвени контекст били су готово увек присутни у дечјим причама. Дечаци и девојчице углавном су писали о готово истим темама, са већом тенденцијом код девојчица да пишу о породици, укључујући женске ликове који обављају задатке у складу са родном улогом. Најзад, аутори су утврдили неке етничке разлике у дечјим причама, нарочито фантастичним причама и причама о природи и породици.

Кључне речи: дечје приче, наративи, писане приче, културне разлике у причама, DISCOVER пројекат, анализа садржаја, разлике у причама дечака и девојчица.

Мария Паз Гомез и Ц. Джун Майкер

КАКОВЫ ТЕМЫ ДЕТСКИХ РАССКАЗОВ?

АНАЛИЗ СОДЕРЖАНИЯ ДЕТСКИХ ПРОДУКТОВ ПИСЬМЕННОЙ РЕЧИ

Резюме

Авторами исследовались темы письменных рассказов повествовательного жанра учащихся второго класса, включая половые и этнические различия. В предлагаемом исследовании было рассмотрено 87 рассказов и выявлено 6 общих тем, которые затем были подвергнуты анализу содержания и сопоставительному анализу. Дети предпочитали рассказы о личном опыте и своей деятельности, а также о своем окружении, включая природу и животных. Однако, интерактивность и общественный контекст почти всегда были налицо в детских рассказах. Мальчики и девочки главным образом писали почти об одних и тех же темах, с больше выявленной тенденцией у девочек писать о семье, включая о женские персонажи, которые выполняют задачи в соответствии со своей гендерной ролью. Наконец, авторами выявлены и некоторые этнические различия в детских рассказах, особенно в фантастических рассказах и рассказах о природе и о семье.

Ключевые слова: детские рассказы, повествование, письменная речь, культурные различия в рассказах, DISCOVER проект, анализ содержания, различия в рассказах мальчиков и девочек.