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'When your powers combine, I am Captain Planet': the developmental significance of individual- and group-authored stories by preschoolers

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ABSTRACT. This study analyzed 328 single- and group-authored stories composed by nine 4-year-olds in a mixed-age preschool class participating in a peer-oriented storytelling and story-acting practice. Group-authored stories (33 percent) were overwhelmingly told by same-gender groups. The frequencies, developmental trajectories, and functions of group-authored stories were different for girls and boys. Girls told mostly group-authored stories in the fall and single-authored stories in the spring. Group-authoring provided 'brain-storming sessions' for narrative experimentation; these stories were longer, with more dramatic problems and more sophisticated character portrayals. By the spring, girls' single-authored stories also included these features, suggesting internalized narrative gains. Boys consistently preferred single-authored stories, though in the spring the frequency and quality of their group-authored stories increased. These were longer, with more sophisticated character portrayals, than single-authored stories. Group-authored stories made a distinctive contribution to narrative development, partly by helping boys and girls overcome limitations of their preferred narrative genres.

KEY WORDS: collaboration, gender, group-authored stories, narrative development, narrative styles, peer group, social context

The ability to tell well-formed, coherent, and interesting narratives develops in and through social practices. The role of parents and teachers in supporting narrative development has been well documented. Adults can facilitate and enhance young children's narrative efforts by inviting them to recount events and retell fictional stories, providing topics, questioning them about past events and their attitudes toward them, elaborating children's responses, and modeling 'tellable' stories (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Blum-Kulka and Snow, 1992; Burger and Miller, 1999; Eisenberg, 1985; Fivush and Fromhoff, 1988; Heath, 1982, 1983; McCabe and Peterson, 1991; Miller and Sperry, 1988; Nelson, 1996; Ochs and Cupps, 2001).
Recently the role of peers in narrative development is also receiving attention. Although toddlers’ spontaneous conversational narratives in preschool settings are typically directed to adults rather than other children (Küntay and Senay, 2003; Stone, 1992), by age 4 children increasingly tell and respond to peer narratives (Umiker-Sebeok, 1979). Certain conditions seem to be associated with greater frequency of spontaneous peer-directed narratives by young children, e.g. when they find themselves in each other’s company for substantial periods of time without toys, props, or games and with adults absent or preoccupied with other activities.

These conditions can generate peer-oriented narratives even by children under 4. Aviezer (in press) audiotaped the spontaneous naptime peer conversations of three groups of 3- to 3½-year-old children who had been raised together in a kibbutz since infancy. Over half of their conversational sequences consisted of narratives and other types of discourse that referred to subjects beyond the factual ‘here and now’. These included anecdotes about past events; negotiating and enacting imaginary scenarios in role play, fantasy, and other symbolic activities; discussing rules and behavioral scripts; and talking about internal thoughts, feelings, and evaluations. (Aviezer described all these types of discourse as ‘narrative’, which is broader than most uses of this category.) Peers responded to each other in ways that ranged from asking questions and seeking clarifications to participating in the joint construction of shared narratives. To be sure, the children’s narratives were mostly rudimentary. But this study suggests that under certain circumstances children as young as 3 can contribute to and support peers’ narratives.

An ethnographic study by Preece (1992) made the first systematic attempt to delineate the ways that young children respond to, facilitate, and support each other’s narrative efforts. Preece studied the conversations of three 5- to 6-year-old children, two girls and one boy, being driven to and from school. She found that the children ‘spontaneously produced a rich variety of narrative forms’ (1992: 279), both factual and fictional, were alert and engaged listeners, and provided each other with extensive feedback on both content and manner of delivery. They were quick to point out errors and omissions; demanded clarifications and background information; offered criticisms, corrections, information, and encouragement; solicited stories; and sometimes even took over telling a story when they found the narrator’s performance unsatisfactory. The children also cooperated directly in jointly creating and telling 12 percent of their narratives, which included ‘the lengthiest and the most structurally complex of the original fantasies recorded’ (1992: 290). Overall, Preece suggested that ‘the children’s interactions with each other contributed to the modification, expansion, increased coherence, and complexity of their anecdotes and stories’ (1992: 290). Many of their modes of mutual facilitation and support resembled those practiced by adults with children. But their status as peers probably allowed them to ‘challenge, confront, and assist each other’, and to provide each other with narrative ‘models-within-reach’, in ways that would have been more difficult and unlikely in the context of adult–child interactions (1992: 291).
Expanding this picture, Blum-Kulka (in press a; in press b) found evidence that kindergarteners and fourth graders readily engage in collaborative narrative interactions during social pretend play. Their collaborative constructions contained a number of features of complexity found in adult conversational narratives (cf. Ochs and Capps, 2001). The children were able to coordinate flexibly with each other the three elements of teller, text, and tale (Blum-Kulka, in press a) and to represent complex sequencing and temporality (Blum-Kulka, in press b).

This emerging body of research on the role of peers in narrative development has opened up some important questions that still need to be pursued further. The studies just discussed have not yet provided unequivocal evidence for the role of peer interaction in promoting narrative development. It might be argued, for example, that peer contexts merely offer children opportunities to use, and perhaps consolidate, narrative skills they have already acquired. We also need to specify further what children learn from each other in these contexts and how they do so. Addressing these issues requires systematic efforts to compare narratives produced with and without different kinds of peer support and to assess changes in the children's narrative skills over time.

Furthermore, most work in this area has tended, explicitly or in effect, to conceive the 'social context' of narrative development fairly exclusively in terms of small-scale interactions between two or three individuals (exceptions include Blum-Kulka, in press a; in press b). This narrow focus neglects the role of multiparty peer activities, and the importance of the peer group and peer culture, in children's experience, socialization, and development. Interactional reductionism also excludes systematic consideration of the larger sociocultural contexts within which interactions are embedded, and which help to structure their nature, meaning, and impact (Nicolopoulou, 1996, 2002; Nicolopoulou and Cole, 1993: for similar arguments, see Blum-Kulka, 1997; Blum-Kulka and Snow, 2002; Rogoff, 1998). Examples include families, peer groups, classroom miniatures, and socially structured practices or activity systems, all of which are themselves enmeshed in larger institutional and cultural frameworks. These sociocultural contexts have to be understood as genuinely collective realities that, in manifold ways, shape the actions and experiences of those who participate in them. To understand the role of peers in children's narrative development, we need to attend systematically to the ongoing interplay among three dimensions of the human world that are at once analytically distinct and mutually interpenetrating: individual, interactional, and collective (for elaboration, see Nicolopoulou and Weintraub, 1998).

**A peer-oriented narrative practice as a matrix for development**

The research reported here is one offshoot of a long-term project by the first author that has addressed these issues by exploring how peer-oriented activities can serve as powerful contexts for promoting young children's development.
particularly narrative development. Previous studies indicated that preschool children's participation in a peer-oriented practice of spontaneous storytelling and group story-acting significantly enhanced the development of narrative skills, both for children from middle-class backgrounds (Nicolopoulou, 1996) and for children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds (Nicolopoulou, 2002). We have argued that children's participation in this activity generated and maintained a shared public arena for narrative performance, experimentation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization. In constructing their stories, children drew themes, characters, plots, and other narrative elements from each other's stories and from a wide range of other sources. But analysis of their stories made it clear that they were able to appropriate these elements selectively, and to use and rework them for their own purposes (Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997, 2002; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001). This practice constituted an institutionalized opportunity space (to borrow a formulation of Ochs et al., 1989: 238–9) that offered both resources and motivations for narrative development.

**THE PRESENT STUDY**

This study attempts to further specify and examine some of the mechanisms involved. As we have just noted, ongoing participation in this practice could generate various types of narrative collaboration and cross-fertilization simply through the processes whereby stories were composed by individual children and then read and acted out for a peer audience. But at times self-selected groups also collaborated more directly by jointly composing stories. The present study explores whether and in what ways these two modes of narrative production within the context of this shared narrative activity, single- and group-authoring, might play distinctive and perhaps complementary roles in helping to promote development.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were the 18 children (8 girls and 10 boys) attending a half-day mixed-age nursery class in a preschool/elementary school in the northeastern US during the 1992–3 school year. This is a well-regarded private school that is strongly committed to maintaining an egalitarian, non-sectarian, and inclusive atmosphere. The children were primarily from European-American middle- to upper-middle class families, largely professional or academic. Analyses focused on the older cohort of five girls (ages 4–6 to 4–11; mean age 4–8) and four boys (ages 4–2 to 4–9; mean age 4–6), who had the dominant voices in the classroom and helped set the tone for all activities.

**Data Collection**

The stories analyzed were generated using a storytelling and story-acting
practice pioneered by the teacher/researcher Vivian Paley (e.g. 1986, 1988, 1990) which was integrated as a regular component of the curriculum in this classroom for the entire school year.

The storytelling part of the practice took place every day during 'choice time', when the children were free to participate in different activities available to them. After the children had settled down into choice time activities, the head teacher made herself available to transcribe children's stories. During this period any child who wished (typically 2–4 per day) could dictate a story to the teacher, who wrote it down with minimal intervention. Each storytelling event was self-initiated. If many children wanted to tell a story, a waiting list was established so those children could go on with other activities. Children could tell any kind of story they wished, but almost all were fictional stories.

The story-acting portion of the practice took place during 'group time', with the entire class assembled. All the stories told during that day were acted out in the order dictated. The teacher read the story once to the class. Then the child/author chose which character he or she wanted to play and which children would act out other roles. After characters were assigned, the teacher read the story once again while the child/actors performed it and the other children watched attentively. This process was repeated for all the stories dictated that day. As a result, the children told their stories, not only to adults, but primarily to each other; and this narrative activity was embedded in the ongoing context of the classroom miniculture and the children's everyday group life.

The present study analyzed the complete body of 4-year-olds' stories transcribed by the teacher during the school year. The first author and assistants also visited this classroom once a week to observe the storytelling and story-acting practice as well as the children's play and other activities.

Discussion

Patterns of Individual- and Group-Aauthored Stories

In most classes using this storytelling and story-acting practice that we have studied, stories were largely composed by individual children. But in some classes, including the one examined in the present study, self-selected groups of children also spontaneously told stories together. Our observations indicated that the teacher welcomed these occasions but did not actively encourage them. In constructing group-authored stories, children took turns telling 'their lines'; when one child finished, he or she yielded to the next child. Sometimes the cycle of turn-taking was repeated more than once. The teacher made sure that all the children involved took turns equally.¹

The 18 children in this class generated a total of 490 stories during the school year, of which 27 percent were group-authored. Our analyses focused on the stories told by the nine 4-year-olds: a total of 328 stories, of which 33 percent were group-authored (including some by mixed-age groups with younger children). Eight of these 4-year-olds (all five of the girls and three of the four
boys) had been in this class the previous year. They were familiar with the storytelling and story-acting practice and with each other. Group-authoring of stories had emerged in this class over the years, and it may have been transmitted from cohort to cohort by the children themselves.

GROUP-AUTHORED STORIES: GENDER-SEGREGATED GROUPS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES

Despite the fact that these 4-year-olds knew each other well, that boys and girls sometimes played together in the classroom, and that they often chose children from the other gender to act in their stories, the groups telling stories were overwhelmingly gender-segregated. Only four stories (about 1 percent) were by mixed-gender groups. Since this category was marginal, and too small to allow for gender-sensitive comparisons, these four stories were not included in further analyses, which comprised 220 single-authored and 104 group-authored stories.

Overall, a considerably higher proportion of girls’ than of boys’ stories were group-authored (47 percent vs 24 percent; see Figures 1 and 2). From September through January, more than half of the girls’ stories were co-authored every month, and usually more than 70 percent; for the rest of the school year, the proportion was smaller (not because the number of group-authored stories declined, but because the number of single-authored stories more than doubled). The average size of storytelling groups also decreased; in the fall, almost half of the girls’ group-authored stories were told by groups of three or four girls, whereas in the spring 93 percent were told by two-girl pairs (see Table 1). The 4-year-olds’ storytelling groups rarely included younger girls – with no mixed-age stories after February. In all these respects, the boys’ stories followed a different trajectory. The boys told a higher proportion of group-authored stories

![Diagram showing types of stories told by 4-year-old girls]

**Figure 1.** Types of stories told by 4-year-old girls
in the spring than in the fall, with a sharp increase in March and April (to 40 percent and 38 percent, respectively). In the fall, all their group-authored stories were told by two-boy pairs, whereas in the spring there was some increase in the proportion told by groups of three or four (11 percent). And all through the year, a higher proportion of boys’ storytelling groups than girls’ groups were mixed-age.

In short, the girls in this class began the school year emphasizing group-authored stories and moved toward telling higher proportions of single-authored stories. In contrast, the boys told more single-authored stories throughout the year, but increased their proportion of group-authored stories in the spring.

**Gendered Narrative Styles**

Without attempting a full explanation of these differing patterns, we would suggest that they were related in part to the distinctive types of stories told by the boys and the girls, which expressed different narrative styles. Although the stories were shared with the entire class every day, our analyses in this classroom

**Table 1. Group sizes for group-authored stories told by 4-year-old girls and boys during fall and spring semesters (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group size</th>
<th>2 Children</th>
<th>3 Children</th>
<th>4 Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group size</th>
<th>2 Children</th>
<th>3 Children</th>
<th>4 Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and others that used the storytelling and story-acting practice have consistently shown that stories divided sharply and pervasively along gender lines. They were dominated by two distinctive gender-related narrative styles, differing in both form and content, that embodied different approaches to the symbolic management of order and disorder, different images of social relations, and different conceptions of the person (Nicolopoulou, 1997; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001).

The girls’ stories typically portrayed characters (or at least a group of core characters) embedded in networks of stable and harmonious relationships, whose activities were located in specified physical settings. One common genre revolved around the family group (including pets) and the cyclical patterns of its activities, centered topographically on the home. In contrast, the boys’ stories were characteristically marked by conflict, movement, and disruption, by the relative absence of stable and harmonious relationships, and often by associative chains of extravagant imagery. The girls tended to supplement their depictions of family life by drawing on fairy-tale characters such as kings, queens, princes, and princesses, while the boys were especially fond of powerful and frightening characters such as large animals, monsters, cartoon action heroes, and other popular culture figures. Whereas the girls’ stories tended to begin by establishing characters in ‘given’ networks of relationships (often but not exclusively family groups) and then found ways to set them in motion, boys’ stories were more likely to portray relatively disconnected characters and then to bring them into contact, usually through conflict. Each of these narrative styles can be seen as a generative framework for further development, characterized by different themes and concerns, different narrative possibilities, and different formal problems (for elaboration, see Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001). Furthermore, this narrative polarization was one aspect of a larger process by which the children themselves actively built up and maintained two distinct gendered subcultures within the common culture of the classroom that defined themselves, in part, against each other (Nicolopoulou, 1997).

The girls’ stories

The girls’ group-authored stories: from group to individual.
The 4-year-old girls told high proportions of group-authored stories from the beginning of the school year. It seems plausible that the girls’ preferred narrative genres facilitated this collaboration. The family genre, in particular, provided a common organizing framework that allowed experiential and fictional elements to be readily added or transformed within a shared coherent storyline (see Nicolopoulou, 1998). This story, told by four girls in the fall, illustrates some of the prototypical aspects of the family genre:

Once upon a time there was a kingdom with a princess, a queen, a king, and a prince. And there was a dog. The princess, the queen and the king had a unicorn and a pony. They went for a walk and they saw a bear, a unicorn, and a pony. They went to the
Some loose connections, repetitions, and other weaknesses are apparent. But for a group story composed by four young girls, this is quite coherent. The family members (including a pet dog) are introduced at the beginning and remain through the story. The basic plot has a cyclical structure (home–out–home): the family group goes out for a walk, spends time together at the playground, and returns home. New characters are introduced to the story as they are encountered on the way. The activities depicted are fun, harmonious, and non-threatening.

Advanced features of group-authored stories: dramatic problems and levels of character representation

Like the example just quoted, the girls’ group-authored stories largely manifested, and even intensified, many of the distinctive features of the girls’ preferred narrative style. In at least one interesting respect, however, this was not so true. One notable feature of the quoted story was the absence of any elements of danger, surprise, or disruption, which can be summed up as dramatic problems (adapted from Bruner, 1990). In general, girls at this age seem to be less likely than boys to include dramatic problems in their stories, emphasizing other narrative priorities instead – including coherence, continuity, spatial anchoring, and other dimensions in which their stories tend to be stronger than boys’ stories (Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997, 1998; Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001). That was the pattern in this class (see Table 2). However, these girls were consistently more likely to introduce dramatic problems in their group-authored than in their single-authored stories, and they began to do so earlier in the group-authored stories. In the fall, 92 percent of their group-authored stories contained dramatic problems, compared with 25 percent of their single-authored stories. In the spring, a higher proportion of the group-authored stories still contained dramatic problems (76 percent), but now over half of the single-authored stories (56 percent) did also. Group-authored storytelling appeared to provide the girls with a context that allowed and encouraged them to experiment in ways that took them beyond the usual limitations of their preferred narrative genres. Thus, dramatic problems and other innovations were first tried out and developed primarily in group-authored stories; then, when the girls had mastered these narrative elements to a certain extent, they began to employ them more confidently in their single-authored stories as well.

This pattern, in which certain elements were developed first in the group-authored stories and then (after some lag) the single-authored stories caught up, also appeared for other features of the girls’ stories (see Table 2). In the fall, group-authored stories were longer than single-authored stories, with an
### Table 2. Dimensions of narrative development for single- and group-authored stories told by 4-year-old girls and boys during fall and spring semesters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single-authored stories</th>
<th>Group-authored stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (N = 5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Clauses</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Characters</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Problem</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Dev.</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>5.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (N = 4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Clauses</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Characters</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Problem</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Dev.</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

average of 16 clauses vs 9 clauses per story, respectively. (A clause was defined as a discourse unit containing a single verb.) In the spring, both group-authored and single-authored stories were longer than in the fall, but the increase for single-authored stories (from 9 to 18 clauses) was greater than for group-authored stories (from 16 to 21 clauses). Despite these increases in length, the number of characters per story remained stable, and even declined slightly for group-authored stories. But the average character performed more actions, and the depth and complexity with which characters were portrayed increased substantially between fall and spring (see Table 2). In both semesters, group-authored stories showed higher mean levels of character representation than single-authored stories. However, the increase for single-authored stories (from 3.61 to 5.48) was greater than for group-authored stories (from 5.44 to 5.78), narrowing the gap.

**Group-authored stories as 'brain-storming' sessions for narrative experimentation**

It appears that group-authored stories offered the girls occasions for narrative experimentation peppered with excitement, boldness, and adventure. The next story, told by three of the same girls who composed the story quoted above, can serve as a good example. It retains some of the same plot structure as the other story (a group goes out for a walk, encounters other characters, then comes back home), but now these girls have introduced a string of dramatic problems along the way (relevant sentences are underlined). Also, the girls have used a playful alternative to the prototypical family group ('two cats and three butterflies' who 'were all friends') as the core set of characters:

*Once upon a time there was two cats and three butterflies, and they were all friends, and they went for a walk. They found a short cut and it was the wrong short cut and they were*
lost. And they found a house. The house had some people in it and the people shook the cats and the butterflies away. They found another house and it was a haunted house. There was a skeleton and a witch and a vampire and there was a bad guy. The witch and the vampire and the bad guy and the skeleton all moved to the good house to be good, and they were all good to the butterflies and cats. And the butterflies and the cats went back home. The things in the house helped them find their way. The End. (Nelly, 5:0; Valerie, 4:9; Sarah, 4:6; 10/23/92)

In many of the girls' group-authored stories, the family group/cyclical movement genre, or a modified version of it, was complicated by introducing one or more dramatic problems, the most favored being lost and found animals, lost and found dog, lost little girl, and scary witches. (The story just quoted also includes some scary characters usually more typical of boys' stories, such as a skeleton and a vampire.) Sometimes, as in this story, the dramatic problems were even escalated, but the girls almost always tried to resolve them before ending their stories. Order might be disrupted, but it was almost always restored.

In their group-authored stories over the course of the fall semester, the girls also deepened and enriched their treatment of dramatic problems in various ways. Initially, scary or otherwise problematic elements were often simply indicated by the narrator (e.g. 'The mouse frightened the princess, the queen, the king, and the prince' [Valerie, 4:8 and Sarah, 4:6; 10/1/92] or 'They lost their pony and their unicorn. They went to the playground and they found them' [Nelly, 5:0; Valerie, 4:8; Elaine, 4:8, and Sarah, 4:6; 10/17/92]). Increasingly, these elements were noticed or announced by characters in the story (And one night the owners of the palace woke up in the day and they noticed that the dog disappeared. The queen noticed that the dog ran away. And then everybody noticed that the dog ran away' [Nelly, 5:0; Valerie, 4:8, and Sarah, 4:6; 10/26/92]). This contributed to a differentiation of the narrator's point of view from those of the characters, transforming the narrative from 'telling' to 'showing' (see Booth, 1983). The girls also began to experiment with shifting between reality and appearance, which was sometimes used as a device for intensifying or nullifying danger (e.g. 'They met a walking tree and the tree had freckles and chicken pox. It had hair too. It scared people because it was bleeding. The prince said "Kiss me darling", because the prince thought the tree was the princess . . . .' [Nelly, 5:0; Valerie, 4:9, and Sarah, 4:7; 10/28/92]) or 'A little girl came and she saw the wolf. It really was a dog. It was her dog and she brought it home. Her family was really mad 'cause she thought it was her dog but it wasn't . . . .' [Sarah, 4:7 and Jill, 3:11; 11/3/92]).

One indication of the narrative collaboration and cross-fertilization permeating their often gleeful experimentation was the frequent difficulty of linking particular themes and other story elements to specific children. A girl who used, reworked, and elaborated certain elements most thoroughly was often not the one who had introduced them in the first place, and her innovations were picked up, developed, and circulated further by others. This process was facilitated by the shifting and overlapping membership of the girls' storytelling groups throughout the fall, including groups of two (52 percent), three (37 percent),
and four (11 percent) children (see Table 1). Group storytelling, like the larger practice of which it was a part, thus helped to generate a public arena for shared narrative experimentation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization.

THE SHIFT TO SINGLE-AUTHORED STORIES

Toward the end of the fall, some girls began using all these elements effectively in their individual-authored stories as well. The following story by Sarah, one of two stories that she told alone in the fall, is a good example. In addition to integrating dramatic problems and the interplay between reality and appearance into the family genre, Sarah was able to coordinate two contrasting perspectives within the story – those of the little girl and her Mom:

Once upon a time there was a kingdom. There was a king and a queen and a princess. One time they all went walking in the woods and they got lost. There was a witch in their house. When they came home they said, ‘My, everything looks different’, and the witch jumped out and said, ‘Surprise!’ One time when the little girl [princess] was sleeping, the witch comed into her room and scared her and she woke up and the witch ran away and the girl said, ‘Oh, there’s nothing here.’ And the witch came back and knocked on her door and there was no one there and she said, ‘Oh, there’s no one knocking on my door either.’ Later when she woke up, she was terribly cranky because she didn’t have enough sleep. When her parents saw her being so cranky in her room, she couldn’t go to school, and this was her favorite day. She said, ‘Mom it’s not really my fault. A witch comed in my room.’ But her Mom didn’t believe in witches. The End. (Sarah, 4;8; 11/24/92)

In the spring, single-authored stories gained ground in both quantity and quality (see Table 2). And although the number of group-authored stories by the girls remained almost the same, the average size of their storytelling groups declined markedly (see Table 1). The reasons for these shifts are not clear, and they probably involved a conjunction of several factors, including both social-relational and intrinsically narrative concerns (for some elaboration, see Nicolopoulou, 1996). One precipitating factor, at least in part, may have been changing friendship patterns in the classroom. In addition, there are various indications that another contributory factor was the girls’ interest in using individual storytelling to explore and further elaborate narrative elements with which they had first experimented in group stories, and which they had now mastered sufficiently to use with skill and confidence on their own. This could help explain why certain narrative features which in the fall were much more prominent in the girls’ group-authored stories, and appeared more rarely and tentatively in their single-authored stories, now began to proliferate and develop more rapidly in their single-authored stories. It would also suggest that certain narrative capabilities that were acquired in the context of group-authoring had been internalized or appropriated, so that they could now be used for more individualized storytelling.
Thus, we propose that the two modes of storytelling served somewhat different and complementary functions for the girls. Group-authored stories offered a context that facilitated and encouraged narrative experimentation and adventurousness, in which they could master and elaborate their preferred genres together, but also collaborate in trying out elements that took them beyond the usual limitations of those genres. Single-authored stories, on the other hand, provided opportunities to consolidate their gains and to explore these emerging narrative possibilities with greater control and with increased flexibility to tailor their narratives to their own individual style, taste, and interests. In the fall, as noted earlier, group-authored stories tended to be more advanced in a number of features, including the use of dramatic problems and the depth and complexity of character representation. In the spring, however, it was not uncommon to find cases in which girls’ single-authored stories were more complex, sophisticated, coherent, and richly elaborated than the group-authored stories they participated in composing (though this pattern was far from uniform).

To illustrate, we can compare a group-authored and a single-authored story told in the spring by the same girl, Margo. In the fall, most of Margo’s stories were group-authored (10 of 12 = 83 percent), whereas in the spring she told an equal number of single- and group-authored stories. The following story was told with one other child, with whom Margo had previously composed a few other stories:

Once upon a time there was a kingdom and a king, a queen, prince, and a princess lived in it. They had a unicorn and a pony. They had a dog, and it snored. And there was a wolf and it came to the castle, and the wolf tried to get in the castle and it couldn’t. So the wolf ran away. And the next day it came back. But it decided to go back in the forest and the wolf got killed by a dinosaur. Another wolf came back and captured the princess. And the queen came back and got the princess back to the kingdom. Then a ghost came and tried to steal the castle but the dog ate the ghost. They held up a sign that said ‘The End’ (Margo, 5 and Nelly 5; 1/28/93)

This story effectively, and fairly coherently, combines a number of themes and narrative devices that should now be familiar (including the disruption of family-centered order and its restoration). However, there are some abrupt shifts in the plot, and the characters are not portrayed in much depth.

The next story was told alone by Margo about a month later. It begins in a similar way, and includes a number of similar characters and themes. Overall, however, this story is more ambitious, sophisticated, and creative than the group story just quoted. It is less tied to the standard model of the family genre, the characters are portrayed in greater depth and complexity, and several plot twists are used to generate suspense and surprise. At the same time, the coherence, continuity, and spatial anchoring of the story are maintained — more than in the first story, in fact:

Once upon a time there was a kingdom — a queen and a king and a prince and a
princess. They had a dog that snored and they had a pony and a unicorn. The dog kept the pony and the unicorn out of the street. And they went for a walk and met a tiger and a bear and a fox. They said, 'These are not real animals' and they saw zippers on them. And the bad guys took the suits off and they captured the princess. And when they get back to the castle, the prince said 'Ummm, isn't there something missing?' And he said, 'Yes, there is something missing. It's the princess!' And the prince went the way to the bad guys' hideout, and the king and the queen went a different way. And the pony and the unicorn and the dog went the same way because they had seen the bad guy hideout before. And they said, 'You can't capture our princess!' The prince had a knife in his pocket and he took it out and killed the bad guys. The End. (Margo, 5;1; 2/23/93)

Of course, this is only one comparison. Overall, the level of character representation and the use of dramatic problems remained higher for group-authored stories than for single-authored stories in the spring, though in both cases the gap narrowed considerably. But the comparative patterns became more fluid and complex, and the single-authored stories displayed some distinctive strengths of their own. These dynamics of the girls' stories over the course of the year suggest that a context which enabled them to flexibly alternate between group-authored and single-authored peer-oriented stories was especially well suited to facilitate and promote their narrative development.

The boys' stories

THE BOYS' GROUP-AUTHORED STORIES: STRUGGLING FOR COHERENCE AND COLLABORATION

The 4-year-old boys told lower proportions of group-authored stories than the girls throughout the year, and they did not reach their highest proportions until the spring, with a sharp increase in March and April (see Figures 1 and 2; 17 percent of the boys' stories from September through February were group-authored vs 30 percent for March–June). And whereas almost half of the girls' storytelling groups in the fall (48 percent) included more than two children, with a shift to two-girl pairs in the spring, none of the boys' storytelling groups in the fall included more than two children, with some increase (to 11 percent) in the spring (see Tables 1 and 2). Again, it seems plausible that these patterns were linked, at least in part, to the characteristics of the boys' preferred narrative genres. Unlike the genres favored by the girls, the boys' stories did not facilitate effective collaboration when jointly constructing stories, but instead posed difficulties that the boys had to overcome.

The great majority of the boys' stories belonged to what we have termed a heroic-agonistic genre (Nicolopoulou, 1997; Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001). By contrast with the predominant tendencies in the girls' stories, the prototypical boys' stories were populated by powerful and aggressive characters who were not embedded in stable and harmonious social relationships or anchored in explicit spatial settings, and who were brought into contact primarily through conflict. The plots focused on fighting, destruction, and disorder – not just as dramatic problems adding complexity to a fundamentally orderly framework, as in some of
the girls' stories, but as the defining themes of the story. Disconnected characters were often introduced sequentially into the story to keep the action going and to generate heightened excitement. Given these structural characteristics and thematic preoccupations, it is not surprising that the boys' stories tended to have powerful centrifugal tendencies, which made it more difficult to achieve coherence and continuity in their narratives. This single-authored boy's story from the fall illustrates some typical features of the heroic-agonistic genre:

Once upon a time there was a million and one dalmations and Mutant Ninja Turtles: Michelangelo, Raphael, Donatello and Leonardo. And then an alligator sneaked up and then they all had a battle. And the crocodile won. And then a rattlesnake appeared and it hissed around. And then the dalmatian dogs and the turtles appeared and they battled. And the dogs and the turtles won. And then a lion appeared. And a mouse and a lion had a fight. And the dogs and turtles just watched, and the mouse won. And then a very scary monster tree appeared, and then a cloud of elephants sucked up everything in the whole wide world. The End. (Jacob, 4/9; 10/6/92)

Like many of the boys' stories, especially early in the year, this story is a loosely linked string of incidents representing conflict, danger, and/or destruction, animated by a characteristic fascination with disorder. And in some respects this story is more coherent than a number of other boys' stories, since the Ninja Turtles and the 'dalmatian dogs' are (relatively) stable characters who remain throughout most of the story and thus provide some thread of continuity.

The difficulty of achieving narrative coherence was intensified when the boys attempted to cooperate in co-authoring stories. In order to accomplish this successfully, the boys simultaneously had to confront two distinct but intertwined challenges: the social-relational problems of improving the interactive skills and dispositions required to coordinate their narrative efforts effectively; and also the formal problems of developing shared narrative frameworks that would facilitate the joint construction of coherent and satisfying stories. This was a slow and uneven process, which may help explain why the boys' interest in group-authoring stories did not really begin to take off until relatively late in the school year, and even then did not displace their preference for single-authored stories.

**ONLY CONNECT: SOME NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERNS**

In the fall, the boys' group-authored stories took two main forms, neither of which manifested very close narrative coordination between the co-authors or strong overall story coherence. The more frequent type (62 percent of group-authored stories in the fall) contained a sequence of disconnected episodes told by the different narrators, with little attempt to integrate them into an overall plot or even to maintain continuity between them. Here is one example, in which the boy who composed each segment is identified:

*Ethan*: Once there was a dragon [Ethan]. It lived in a castle. Then some bad guys came and destroyed the dragon. Then he came alive again.
Zachary: Then some Ninja Turtles came. Then Shredder [Zachary] and Krang and all the bad guys came. Then the bad guys killed the Ninja Turtles. Then some more Ninja Turtles came. And Shredder shot the generator at the Ninja Turtles. And the Ninja Turtles turned back into small turtles. The End. (Ethan, 4:8 and Zachary, 4:4: 10/8/92)

Although Zachary’s contribution does begin with ‘Then’, there is otherwise not much that integrates it with Ethan’s. The result seems more like two consecutive mini-stories, told in a similar style, than a jointly composed story. Within each of these two segments, however, we can see one of the early strategies that preschool boys we have studied often use to establish some rudimentary coherence in their single-authored stories: Instead of just stringing together episodes with different characters, the narrator introduces one or more characters who persist through all or most of the story, linking different episodes together (Nicolopoulou, 1998; Nicolopoulou and Richner, 1999). This strategy of stabilizing characters could also be used to help connect different segments of a group-authored story, but it emerged relatively slowly and hesitantly in the boys’ group-authored stories.6

The use of this strategy, though usually to a minimal degree, defined the second form of group-authored stories that the boys told in the fall (38 percent). One or more characters appeared in all segments of the story, thus providing an element of overall continuity. Here is a typical example:

Zachary: Once upon a time there was a monster [Zachary] and Batman. And the monster killed Batman, and bats came. That’s all that was left of him. Then some bad guys came and destroyed the monster. And then he came back alive and killed the bad guys. Then a monkey came and tried to punch the monster. But the monster ate the monkey, and the monkey came back alive. And he went away because every time he got him, he kept coming back alive.

Shawn: Then the monster and the monkey became good friends. Then they smelled flowers and then saw a bee in the flowers and bothered the bee so they got stung. Then the T. Rex came and he jumped over the monkey and he didn’t get them because he was good friends with them. Then a battle came. The End. (Zachary, 4:4 and Shawn, 4:2: 9/22/92)

The presence of the monster and the monkey in Shawn’s segment of the story-dictation is used to help establish some connection and continuity with Zachary’s. However, the coordination between the two segments is still fairly weak and elementary. They are not yet fully integrated into a single story with a common storyline.

Shawn’s segment of this story also illustrates another strategy that the boys used to help enhance the coherence of their storylines. This was to build more stable and durable connections between characters, usually by linking them as ‘friends’ or bringing them together in ‘teams’ or other groups (kinship ties, which played a key role in the girls’ narrative genres, were relatively rare in the boys’ stories). Once characters were linked in this way, they could go on to act together
in later episodes of the story. This most often involved characters gan-gling up to
fight other characters or teams but sometimes, as in Shawn’s segment of this
story, their joint activities also could be peaceful. In this case, making the monkey
and the monster ‘good friends’ affects only Shawn’s segment, but this strategy
could also be used to help connect different segments of group-authored stories
and, increasingly, to strengthen a story’s overall coherence.

In fact, the depiction of characters as ‘friends’ or ‘teams’ (or some equivalent)
occurred in a higher proportion of the boys’ group-authored stories than of their
single-authored stories. In the fall, this theme appeared in 52 percent (11 of 21)
of group-authored vs 31 percent (21 of 67) of single-authored stories. In the
spring, these proportions increased to 64 percent (18 of 28) of group-authored
vs 47 percent (42 of 90) of single-authored stories.

In part, through the increasing use and mastery of these and other narrative
strategies, the coherence and overall quality of the boys’ group-authored stories
improved strikingly in the spring – which may help explain why the frequency of
their group-authored stories also increased, beginning in March. In the fall, even
the 38 percent of group-authored stories with some continuity of characters
between segments rarely displayed more than rudimentary story coherence,
whereas in the spring almost all the boys’ group-authored stories displayed
substantial character continuity, and the different co-authors’ contributions
were much more likely to be integrated into a relatively coherent story with a
common overall storyline. In the fall, the average length of group-authored
stories was already somewhat greater than that of single-authored stories (16
clauses vs 14 clauses), which perhaps is not surprising, but between fall and
spring this gap increased considerably (to 22 clauses vs 16 clauses per story). The
average number of characters actually decreased slightly in the spring for both
types of story, but characters performed more actions and were portrayed with
greater depth, complexity, and sophistication. In the fall the average level of
character representation was slightly higher in group-authored than in single-
authored stories (4.38 vs 4.13), but in the spring this gap increased considerably
(to 5.07 vs 4.56) (see note 4, for an explanation of this scoring).

In short, the boys’ group-authored stories seemed to be stronger than their
single-authored stories in at least some important dimensions, and this became
increasingly true over time. The extent to which group-authoring made a distinctive
contribution to promoting the boys’ narrative development is more difficult to
assess, in part because the breakthrough in the frequency and quality of their
group-authored stories occurred relatively late in the year. Nevertheless, the
patterns indicated so far are very suggestive in this respect and warrant further
examination. It also seems plausible that the boys’ interest in this mode of nar-
native collaboration, which they found difficult early in the year, may have helped
motivate their efforts to develop strategies for more effective coordination and
greater coherence in their storytelling.
Building collaboration and coherence: a case study

To illustrate some features of this development, we will focus on two boys, Zachary and Jacob, who told a number of stories together in the spring. Both boys had been in this class the previous year (as 3-year-olds) and were capable and prolific storytellers. They co-authored two stories in the fall, but were not very successful at producing coherent narratives. Part of the reason may have been that they had somewhat different narrative preferences in both style and content, and they may have found it difficult to coordinate these in an integrated story. Zachary’s stories were very much in the heroic-agonistic style, with flashes of startling and even grotesque imagery. Jacob’s storytelling style was more eclectic, blending heroic-agonistic themes with elements from the family genre and elsewhere, with less focus on violence, conflict, and disruption. Toward the end of the fall semester, however, Jacob seemed to settle on a preference for a variant of the heroic-agonistic genre, and this may have helped the two boys find a shared voice and common storylines. One of Jacob’s first stories in this vein was one he told at the end of October, probably elaborating a sketchier version previously told by another boy. Appropriately enough, a major theme of this story was collaboration:

The Planeteers were fighting Duke Nukem and Doctor Blight. And all the bad guys had radiation. And then Wheeler went ‘Fire’ and Quamie went ‘Earth’ and Linka went ‘Wind’ and then Ghee went ‘Water’ and Mattie went ‘Heart’. And then Captain Planet went, ‘When your powers combine, I am Captain Planet.’ And then all the Planeteers went ‘Go Planet.’ And then he fought the bad guys [Duke Nukem and Doctor Blight] and then he said ‘The power is yours.’ And the Planeteers said, ‘I’m sweating. I’m gonna go swimming’, and then they got out of the pond and said ‘I’m thirsty’, and then they went to the ocean for water. Then Wheeler said, ‘Hey, this is polluted water. I’m not drinking this. It’s cactus water.’ And then Captain Planet appeared and said ‘Hey, that’s easy to clean up’ and he just snapped his finger and it was gone. And then Captain Planet disappeared and he said ‘The power is yours.’ The End. (Jacob, 4:10, 10/29/92)

Jacob and Zachary resumed their joint storytelling at the beginning of March, and then collaborated successfully, off and on, through the end of the school year. Not only did they produce coherent co-authored stories, but they were also able to elaborate shared storylines that extended over several storytelling sessions. During March, they produced a continuous narrative in six installments, explicitly labeled ‘chapters’ – three at the beginning of the month and three around the end of the month, with several weeks in between. (These joint compositions began with ‘Chapter IV’, which followed a single-authored story by Jacob that he called ‘Chapter III’ – for reasons that are not entirely clear, since he had not previously told stories entitled Chapters I or II.) They collaborated on four more group stories during the first week of April (two of them with other boys), and then, a month and a half later, co-authored one more story in mid-May. Extended narrative collaborations, in which partners jointly reworked and elaborated common themes, were not peculiar to these two boys, though their
case was the most striking. Like members of any vital oral culture, they remembered their storylines and characters with a vividness that often surprised us.7

The story entitled 'Chapter VI' illustrates some key features of their co-authored stories. This story was a clear continuation of 'Chapter V', dictated the previous day. It is likely that the teacher read them at least part of their previous story before they began to compose 'Chapter VI', but even if this is so, it is still impressive that these two preschoolers were able to take up and continue their storyline so effectively at precisely the point where they had left off (we will start by quoting the last sentence of 'Chapter V'):

**Chapter V**

[ . . . ] And then Cut-man cutted Spiderman's leg off and Spiderman had to go to the hospital and they had to give him a shot (Jacob 5–2 and Zachary 4–9; 3/2/93)

**Chapter VI**

The people in the hospital gave Spiderman a shot, and Fire-man and Superman [Jacob] come walking into the hospital and saw Spiderman. And Superman used his X-ray vision to heal Spiderman. And then Superman took Fire-man by the hand and then Superman went flying up through the air to – You know where they landed? – at the North Pole in Superman's Crystal Chamber which is Superman's home. Then there was a voooom sound and Cut-man [Zachary] appeared and he said, 'You can't get me now, 'cause I have a forcefield around me' and with that a lot of electric shot at Superman and Superman died. And he didn't come alive again. The electric had kryptonite in it. When the kryptonite stopped coming out of the electric forcefield, Cut-man bent over and shot lots of kryptonite out of his scissors. When the kryptonite stopped coming out, Superman jumped up quick and he went to his Crystal Chamber and took one big crystal and threw it at Cut-man and it landed in Cut-man's heart and Cut-man died. Then Ice-Man came and freezeed the crystal and it broke and Cut-man cut the ground on the rocks to make him get better. Then Cut-man found Fire-man hiding behind the door of the Crystal Chamber and he cut his waist off. Superman made the Crystal Chamber invisible so no one could see it and he went inside and went to sleep. Cut-man decided to be a friend with Superman and he had X-ray vision that could see things that were invisible so he went to sleep with Superman in his Crystal Chamber bed. The End. (Jacob 5;2 and Zachary 4–9; 3/3/93)

The contrast with the group-authored stories quoted from the fall requires little comment.

One striking feature of the stories co-authored by these two boys is the extent to which they were able to combine and synthesize the complementary narrative strengths manifested in their single-authored stories. Zachary was the most prolific storyteller in the class, and in many ways the most creative. He could adopt different storylines and experiment with them in exceptionally flexible and inventive ways, and he was a major source of new characters, plots, and images that were taken up and used by other children in their storytelling. On the other hand, Jacob portrayed characters with exceptional depth and complexity. He was able to represent characters whose actions were informed by thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, plans, intentions, and other mental states, whereas Zachary tended
to portray characters purely in terms of their physical actions. Their jointly authored narratives combined these strengths in ways that neither of them was fully able to achieve in his single-authored stories. It is especially worth noting the extensive and (for preschool boys) rather sophisticated use of dialogue in their co-authored stories – both to allow characters to express their own internal mental states (which takes some of these stories to the highest levels in the character-representation scale) and to coordinate characters and their actions (thus helping to produce more complex and coherent plots). These features are apparent in 'Chapter VI' and the next story quoted:

Superman [Zachary] pushed the big kryptonite off of him, that the Gaga Googoo threwed. And Superman said to Cut-man [Jacob], ‘You better cut that Gaga Googoo.’ And there was a forcefield around the Gaga Googoo and Cutman couldn’t cut him into pieces. But Cut-man didn’t want to because he had an idea. He wanted to team the Gaga Googoo onto Superman’s side. And he teamed the Gaga Googoo onto Superman’s team. The Gaga Googoo had the big kryptonite and Superman said, ‘You can have it as long as you don’t bring it near me.’ Superman said, ‘You can drop that on other bad guys.’ And the Gaga Googoo could do anything. Then a big boot came and it was trying to squash Cut-man. And then from inside Cut-man’s cutters it was shooting this pink stuff. And the boot got crumpled into little pieces of gum. Superman and Cut-man ate the pieces of gum. The End. (Jacob, 5;3, Zachary, 4;10; 4/11/93)

As their narrative collaboration continued, they composed several imaginative stories with themselves as fictional characters, which treated their collaboration as a major theme. Usually, as we have indicated, when characters cooperate in the boys’ stories it is primarily to fight with other characters or teams. But some group-authored stories also included cooperation between the main protagonists for shared purposes other than conflict, thus stretching the usual boundaries of the heroic-agonistic genre. Some of these elements appear in the next story, which was the last one co-authored by Zachary and Jacob (even though they entitled it 'Chapter I'):

Chapter I

Jacob and Zachary were on earth and they were making a rocket ship. Then they made their space suits. They put their space suits on and they put gas in the space ship where it goes. And then they went in the rocket ship and Jacob drove it and Zachary was looking out the window for meteorites. They were driving around the sun but they didn’t land ‘cause it was too hot. Zachary said, ‘Can I drive to the place I want, and you look out for meteorites so it doesn’t crash?’ So Zachary drove to Mercury and landed. Marshals were waiting for them and they had these things on their foreheads that could shoot lightning and thunder. And Zachary came out and had two maces and battled them down till they were mush. They turned into scrambled eggs and Zachary ate them up because they had salt on them. Jacob was in the space ship munching on candy canes and Zachary went back in the space ship. And Jacob gave a few candy canes to Zachary and they blasted off. And as they blasted off Zachary said, ‘Thank you.’

And then Jacob asked Zachary, ‘Can I drive now?’ and he said, ‘Yes.’ So Jacob drove to Uranus and did land for one minute and they stayed in the space ship and Jacob had this
button on his space suit and he pushed the button on his space suit and two humongous bags of candy fell from the ceiling and one giant bag was for Jacob and one was for Zachary and they ate it all up and they had a tummy ache. Then the tummy ache left and they battled the air monster with their maces and he died. To be continued. (Jacob, 5;4 and Zachary, 5; 5/13/93)

Conclusion

This study built on and extended a long-term line of research that examines how peer-group activities can serve as powerful contexts for promoting young children’s development, and in particular their narrative development. Our previous work indicated that preschool children’s participation in a peer-oriented practice of spontaneous storytelling and group story-acting significantly enhanced the development of their narrative skills. It did so, we have argued, by generating and maintaining an ongoing, socially structured, and collectively constituted opportunity space for narrative experimentation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization.

The present study explored whether and in what ways two modes of narrative production within the framework of this practice, storytelling by individual children and by self-selected groups, might play distinctive and perhaps complementary roles in promoting development. The analysis was based on the body of 328 stories, 33 percent of which were group-authored, composed during a school year by the nine 4-year-olds (five girls, four boys) in a mixed-age preschool class.

Almost all the group-authored stories were composed by same-gender groups, and were dominated by two gender-related narrative styles identified in our previous studies of preschool children’s spontaneous storytelling. The frequency, developmental patterns, and apparent functions of group-authored stories were different for the boys and the girls – probably due to a mixture of social-relational factors and characteristics of their preferred narrative genres. Overall, a considerably higher proportion of girls’ than of boys’ stories were group-authored. The girls told mostly group-authored stories in the fall, then moved toward higher proportions of single-authored stories in the spring. In contrast, the boys told mostly single-authored stories throughout the year, but increased their proportion of group-authored stories in the spring, beginning in March.

In the fall, the girls’ group-authored stories were longer and more complex than their single-authored stories, included more dramatic problems, and portrayed characters in more depth and complexity. The girls seemed to use group-authored stories as ‘brain-storming’ sessions for experimenting with elements that took them beyond the usual limitations of their preferred narrative genres, such as the use of dramatic problems. In the spring, the gap between group-authored and single-authored stories narrowed in all these dimensions, suggesting that these narrative capabilities had been firmly appropriated and
could now be used for more individualized storytelling as well. The patterns for the boys' group-authored stories were different. In the fall, they found it difficult to integrate the contributions of co-authors into a coherent story with a common storyline, and very few of their group-authored stories achieved more than rudimentary coherence. They gradually developed strategies to achieve greater coherence in both single-authored and group-authored stories, including mechanisms to establish greater continuity of characters and stronger connections between them, which also facilitated coordination between co-authors. Partly due to their increasing mastery of these narrative strategies, in the spring there was a striking improvement in the coherence and overall quality of the boys' group-authored stories, coinciding with an increase in their frequency. To an increasing extent, group-authored stories were longer than single-authored stories and more advanced in depth, complexity, and sophistication of character representation. The extent to which group-authoring helped to promote these dimensions of narrative development remains less clear, in part because the boys' breakthrough to greater frequency and quality of group-authored stories occurred relatively late in the school year.

This was an exploratory study conducted in one preschool class, but the results are highly promising. Within the context of this peer-oriented storytelling and story-acting practice, group-authored storytelling did appear to make a distinctive contribution to promoting narrative development both for the girls and, more tentatively, for the boys – partly, in each case, by helping to strengthen dimensions of their narrative skills in which they were relatively weak. Having the option to alternate flexibly between single-authored and group-authored stories heightened the value of this narrative practice for children.

This study lends support to the emerging body of research which has argued that children's peer interactions and peer-group activities can contribute to their socialization and development in ways that usefully complement the role of adult–child interactions. In this respect, the role of peers is not limited to one-way transmission or facilitation, but also includes diverse modes of mutual support and genuine peer collaboration. Both narrative research and educational practice should treat children's peer-group life as a developmental context of prime importance, rich complexity, and great potential.

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NOTES

1. At the beginning of the school year, the girls’ ages ranged from 3:3 to 4:11 (mean age 4:4) and the boys’ ages from 3:3 to 4:9 (mean age 3:11).
2. In transcribing stories, the teacher did not always indicate which child told what or when they took turns. We were not always present, so we lacked the data to analyze the turn-takings systematically.
3. Pseudonyms are assigned to children whose stories are quoted. Characters in the stories are in bold. Sometimes, when it is relevant, the child who acted a character is indicated in brackets.
4. Our developmental typology for depth and complexity of character representation comprises eight levels grouped in three major categories: from actors, defined entirely by descriptions of their actions (levels 1–2); to agents, who are also portrayed as having perceptions and emotions, as well as intentions manifested through their actions (levels 3–5); to persons, who are themselves capable of expressing their desires, thoughts, reactions, and decisions (levels 6–8). (For more details, see Nicolopoulou and Richner, in preparation.)
5. This shift began in February and continued thereafter. It appeared to reverse itself in June, although the June data need to be treated with caution because school lasted only a third of that month.
6. Both segments of the story just quoted do mention ‘bad guys’, but this is used here as a generic formula rather than specific character; there are really no characters common to the two segments.
7. In fact, children often remembered their characters better than the teacher, who was trying to help the child choose actors while looking at the transcribed story. Although she had often underlined the characters, sometimes she missed one or two, and the child/author reminded her. Furthermore, several children experimented with favored themes for extended periods, dropped them for a while, and then returned to them a month or so later with a good sense of what they had done earlier.

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