



## Using a narrative- and play-based activity to promote low-income preschoolers' oral language, emergent literacy, and social competence



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined whether a storytelling and story-acting practice (STSA), integrated as a regular component of the preschool curriculum, can help promote three key dimensions of young children's school readiness: narrative and other oral-language skills, emergent literacy, and social competence. A total of 149 low-income preschoolers (almost all 3- and 4-year-olds) participated, attending six experimental and seven control classrooms. The STSA was introduced in the experimental classrooms for the entire school year, and all children in both conditions were pre- and post-tested on 11 measures of narrative, vocabulary, emergent literacy, pretend abilities, peer play cooperation, and self-regulation. Participation in the STSA was associated with improvements in narrative comprehension, print and word awareness, pretend abilities, self-regulation, and reduced play disruption. For almost all these measures, positive results were further strengthened by the frequency of participation in storytelling by individual children, indicated by number of stories told (NOST). The STSA is a structured preschool practice that exemplifies child-centered, play-based, and constructivist approaches in early childhood education, and that can operate as a curriculum module in conjunction with a variety of different preschool curricula. This study confirmed that it can contribute to promoting learning, development, and school readiness for low-income and otherwise disadvantaged children.

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The study reported here examined whether an activity combining voluntary storytelling with group story-acting, carried out as a regular part of the preschool curriculum, can promote the abilities of preschool children from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds in three major areas that contribute to their readiness for success in formal education: narrative and other oral language skills, emergent literacy, and social competence. The research questions framing this analysis bear on larger debates about the most effective and developmentally appropriate practices by which preschool education can help to promote young children's school readiness.

The commitment to promoting school readiness, a goal affirmed for several decades by educators, researchers, and policymakers in

the U.S. (Meisels, 1999), has been fueled by a mixture of optimism and alarm. On the one hand, there is increasing confidence that during the first five years of life, preschool education can and should play a positive role, along with early care and socialization, in laying critical foundations for later learning and development (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000; National Research Council, 2001). On the other hand, there is concern that many young children, especially from low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds, enter school not ready to benefit effectively from formal education (Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995). Although there is no firm consensus on the precise components of school readiness, there is widespread (though not universal) recognition of the importance and interconnectedness of the three broad areas noted earlier.

Few would question the crucial role of reading and writing in all aspects of education. It is now widely accepted that young children's acquisition of early literacy-related skills plays a key role in preparing for and facilitating their transition to literacy, and is powerfully affected by the experiences, resources, stimulation,

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and support that they encounter before beginning formal education (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Extensive research also suggests that, in this respect, training children in the kinds of technical skills related most obviously and directly to literacy – such as letter and word recognition and phonological processing – is important but not sufficient. Young children must also master a broader range of cognitive and language skills, since reading for comprehension requires more than simple decoding (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Snow, 1999; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). In particular, a growing body of research has argued convincingly that children's acquisition of certain oral-language skills in their preschool years, including narrative skills, is an important foundation of emergent literacy and long-term school success (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009; Lynch et al., 2008; Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010).

Furthermore, there are good reasons to believe that social competence, including self-regulation and the ability and willingness for cooperation, also constitutes a key dimension of school readiness (Denham, 2006; Dickinson et al., 2006; Raver & Zigler, 1997). Promoting these abilities and dispositions in young children is widely regarded as desirable, not only for its own sake and as preparation for school life, but also because elements of social competence play important roles in enabling and promoting cognitive development, learning, and academic success (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Dickinson et al., 2006; Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007). This concern for promoting preschoolers' social competence has found practical expression in programs like the REDI (Research-based, Developmentally Informed) Head Start intervention (Bierman et al., 2008) and the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSR; Raver et al., 2011).

Though there is widely shared agreement about the value of using preschool education to promote school readiness, especially for low-income and otherwise disadvantaged children, the concrete practical implications for the preschool curriculum have been more contentious. One response has been a broad push to emphasize the transmission of specific academic skills through direct instruction (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). In many circles, this emphasis on more didactic, academic, and skill-based approaches to preschool education has been linked to a rejection of more child-centered, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Pressure to generate good scores on narrowly skill-focused standardized tests has further accelerated the “pushing down” of didactic/academic instruction into early childhood education and the squeezing-out of more playful and child-centered forms of learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). Those pressures have been especially strong for preschools and kindergartens serving low-income children.

Other researchers and educators have argued that, although teacher-directed and skill-based instruction can be valuable for certain purposes in the preschool years, the tendency to rely on it exclusively has become too one-sided, unbalanced, and developmentally inappropriate. Furthermore, the polarization between teacher-directed, skill-based approaches and more child-centered, play-based, and constructivist approaches too often treats these approaches as mutually exclusive. There is also a need for educational practices that are simultaneously “child regulated” and “teacher guided” (Golbeck, 2001), which can mobilize children's engagement, enthusiasm, and creativity while promoting their learning and development. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that early childhood education can be most effective when it successfully combines both types of educational activities (Graue, Clemens, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004). This is especially true if one considers

long-term, not just short-term, effects (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

Growing uneasiness with recent trends helps to explain the widespread interest generated by the Tools of the Mind curriculum (Bodrova & Leong, 2009). This Vygotskian-inspired curriculum seeks to promote intellectual skills – in language, literacy, and mathematics – and social competence in an integrated way. It makes extensive use of play and combines child initiative and cooperation with teacher guidance and support, with a pervasive emphasis on the promotion of self-regulation. So far, evaluations of its effectiveness have yielded mixed results (more encouraging from Barnett et al., 2008; more disappointing from Lonigan & Phillips, 2012; Wilson, Farran, Lipsey, & Turner, 2012), and it is probably too soon to draw firm conclusions one way or another.

Tools of the Mind is a full-scale alternative curriculum. The storytelling and story-acting practice (STSA) evaluated by the present study also exemplifies child-centered, play-based, and constructivist approaches to early childhood education, but it is considerably more modest in scope. The present study considered its potential value as a curriculum module that can operate in conjunction with a variety of different preschool curricula. A combination of theoretical considerations and practical experience suggested that it has the potential to promote young children's school readiness abilities across the domains of oral language, including narrative; emergent literacy; and social competence. It has been used in preschools serving both middle-class and low-income children, but more frequently in the former; so this study focused on assessing its value for children from low-income backgrounds. The rest of this section will introduce this curriculum module and explain the theoretical rationale for expecting it to have those beneficial effects; review the very sparse research that has so far attempted to study its effects; then move on to the present study.

### **The storytelling and story-acting practice: its developmental and educational promise**

The curriculum module under consideration is an activity combining storytelling and story-acting – also described as story dictation and dramatization – developed by the teacher and writer Vivian Paley (1990) and used in many preschool and kindergarten classes in the United States and abroad (Cooper, 2005, 2009; McNamee, McLane, Cooper, & Kerwin, 1985; Nicolopoulou, 1997a, 2002). Although this practice is conducted with variations in different places, its main outlines tend to be consistent. At a certain period during the day (usually a time when children can choose freely between different available activities), any child who wishes can dictate a story to a designated teacher or teacher's aide, who writes down the story as the child tells it. Although children are not required to compose any specific type of story or guided toward suggested topics, these are usually fictional or fantasy stories. Later that day, each of these stories is read aloud by the teacher to the entire class, assembled for group time, while the child/author and other children, whom he or she chooses, act out the story.

This is an apparently simple activity with complex and potentially powerful effects. Several features are especially worth noting. Although this is a structured and teacher-facilitated activity, the children's storytelling is voluntary, child-initiated, and relatively spontaneous. Because this practice runs through the entire school year and the children control their own storytelling, it provides them with the opportunity to work over, refine, and elaborate their narratives and to use them for their own diverse purposes – cognitive, symbolic, expressive, and social-relational (Nicolopoulou, 1996; Nicolopoulou, Brockmeyer, de Sá, & Ilgaz, 2014; Richner &

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