



Beyond book reading: Narrative participation styles in family reminiscing predict children's print knowledge in low-income Chilean families



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ABSTRACT

Narratives in reminiscing contexts are an important tool in developing literacy abilities. We examined whether parents' narrative participation styles in reminiscing contexts were related to gains in children's vocabulary and print knowledge. Participants were 210 low-income Chilean parents and their pre-kindergarten children ($M = 53$ months). Parents and children were videotaped discussing a past positive and negative experience at the beginning of pre-kindergarten. Children's vocabulary and print knowledge were assessed at the beginning and end of pre-kindergarten. Parents' narrative styles in conversations about negative, but not positive, experiences had differential predictive power over children's print knowledge, but not vocabulary, longitudinally. Implications for policy makers, researchers and educators working with low-income Chilean families are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Book reading has received the most attention as a privileged context for parents to develop children's literacy abilities before school entry (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Neuman, 1996; Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2010). However, in Chile books are expensive, children's literature is not extensive and there are few public libraries, particularly in poor neighborhoods (Fundación La Fuente/Adimark GFK, 2010). Previous research reveals that even highly educated Chilean parents report rarely reading to their children; only 3.7% of Chilean parents read daily to their child (Strasser & Lissi, 2009). Therefore, it is important to examine alternative pathways through which these parents might foster the development of children's literacy abilities beyond book reading. One alternative pathway is family reminiscing, that is, parent-child conversations about past experiences. Reminiscing is not only the way in which families retell their past, but also a way to affirm and claim social identity (Baquedano-Lopez, 1997). Oral traditions are an important part of the lives of Chilean families for social, personal, religious and moral reasons (Soublette, 2009). Hence, family reminiscing is an ecologically valid setting to study

how Chilean parents help children develop literacy abilities before school entry.

Like book reading, participating in reminiscing, as both a listener and teller, may provide children with unique opportunities to develop vocabulary diversity such as low-frequency or rare vocabulary words, and syntactic complexity such as use of adverbs, connectives, noun phrases, and mental state verbs before they become readers and writers. When children talk about past experiences and people who are not present, they use decontextualized language and must rely on linguistic cues to comprehend the meaning of words. In contrast, when children talk about objects and people who are present, they talk about 'here and now' and rely on contextual cues; an example of this type of talk is object labeling. Hence, decontextualized talk requires a more abstract level of analysis and lengthier utterances, as well as higher cognitive skills such as understanding cause and effect (Rowe, 2013). Decontextualized language is the basis for academic language and is key to understanding the world of print and to learning the functions of written language; thus, book reading and reminiscing both rely on decontextualized language (Snow, 1983; Sparks & Reese, 2013; Reese, 1995).

The aim of this study was to examine whether low-income Chilean parents' narrative participation styles in reminiscing contexts were related to gains in pre-kindergarten children's vocabulary and print knowledge. By focusing on low-income parents and their preschool children, this study contributes to our

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understanding of how adult-child interactions can play a positive role in the development of school readiness skills in environments characterized by poverty and multiple other stressors (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). We selected this Latin American country for two reasons. First, Chile has one of the most progressive early childhood policies in Latin America (Berlinski & Schady, 2015). Among other measures, the Chilean Government has expanded free early education to the poorest 40% of the population; in 2013 83% of 4- and 5-year-old children in Chile attended pre-kindergarten (IdeaPais, 2013). Despite these progressive government measures, inequalities in school readiness between children from high- and low-income households still exist. Chilean children under the age of 5 from lower-income households are more likely to exhibit language delays and socioemotional problems than children from higher-income households (Behrman, Bravo, & Urzua, 2010). These inequalities in school achievement are particularly problematic because they persist over time. In a recent study conducted in eight Latin American countries, including Chile, 15-year-olds from low-income households lagged about two years of schooling behind their peers from higher-income households in reading, math, and science (Bos, Ganimian, & Vegas, 2014).

Second, Chilean children are exposed to substantially fewer book-reading experiences in the home and school than children in other high-income countries. For example, kindergarten teachers spend fewer than 5 min per day reading books with children and only 54% of parents report having read to their child in the past week (Strasser & Lissi, 2009). Hence, the Chilean context presents an excellent opportunity to examine family reminiscing, rather than book reading practices, and its relation to literacy development.

We first review the research on literacy abilities and then discuss the studies on narratives and literacy development in Latin American countries, including Chile, and when appropriate, we also review research conducted in the U.S. with Latino immigrant families. Hereby, we use the term 'Latin American' to refer to families of Latin American descent living in their home country, and the term 'Latino' to refer to families of Latin American descent living as immigrants in the U.S.

2. Literacy: two inter-related abilities

Two inter-related abilities are central to literacy development: oral- and written-language skills (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Oral-language skills include vocabulary, phonological awareness, story comprehension, and narrative skills. Strong oral-language skills at school entry have long-term associations with subsequent reading achievement in English-speaking as well as Spanish-speaking samples in the U.S. (Proctor, Silverman, Harring, & Montecillo, 2010; Snow & Dickinson, 1991). Written-language skills involve knowledge about the components and rules of the code system. Written-language skills include knowing the names and sounds of letters, tracing and printing letters, spelling, capitalization and punctuation, and print concepts, such as book orientation knowledge and knowledge about directional arrangement of print on the page. Well-developed written-language skills at school entry are related concurrently and longitudinally with school achievement, specifically success in word reading and reading comprehension in English-speaking and well as Spanish-speaking samples (Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Most studies have focused on the connections between family reminiscing and oral-language skills (Hammer, Nimmo, Cohen, Draheim, & Johnson, 2005; McCabe, Bailey, & Melzi, 2008; Melzi, 2000; Uccelli & Paez, 2007). These studies have found that parents' scaffolding of children's participation in reminiscing is linked

to preschoolers' vocabulary (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999) and narrative and story comprehension skills (Reese et al., 2010; Reese & Newcombe, 2007; Sparks & Reese, 2013). Hence, participating in reminiscing seems to provide a unique opportunity for children to learn and practice their vocabulary, story comprehension and narrative skills.

A few studies have also found associations between family reminiscing and written-language skills, specifically print knowledge and print concepts (Leyva, Reese, & Wiser, 2012; Reese, 1995; Sparks & Reese, 2013). The particular mechanism explaining this link is not well understood; some authors argue that metalinguistic abilities such as phonological awareness might account for this association (Casper, 2009; Leyva, Sparks, & Reese, 2012) although other home literacy activities, including teaching letters and sounds, could also be involved. Because both oral- and written-language skills are crucial for literacy development and school success, we focused on the relation between preschoolers' vocabulary and print knowledge and family reminiscing practices in a sample of low-income Chilean families. In this study, we used the term print knowledge to refer to children's letter-word identification and emergent writing skills. Given that in the Chilean context parents and teachers seldom engage in book reading with children, understanding how preschoolers develop print knowledge through other adult-child interactions was of particular interest to this study.

3. Parents' narrative scaffolding in reminiscing

Two approaches have been used to investigate how parents scaffold their children's participation in reminiscing. One approach consists of analyzing individual differences in parents' scaffolding along one critical dimension: elaboration. Elaborative parents encourage children to co-construct the story by using many open-ended questions and statements that add new information to the ongoing narrative and by using evaluations such as confirmations or negations of the child's contributions (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). Typically, elaboration is assessed as the number of child-directed, open-ended questions parents ask as a way to extend the conversation such as "How did we get to the park?". The focus is on open-ended questions because this type of question is instrumental to fostering children's contributions to the story. Using this approach, low-income Latino parents are as elaborative as low-income European American and African American parents in conversations about past positive experiences with their preschool children, ages 3–5 (Leyva, Reese, Grolnick, & Price, 2008). An example of this type of conversation is talking about the child's past birthday party. However, in conversations about past negative experiences, such as talking about a child's past misbehavior, low-income Latino parents are less elaborative than their counterparts, presumably because their goal is to teach their children a life lesson (Leyva et al., 2008). Low-income Latino parents who are more elaborative in reminiscing about positive and negative experiences have preschool children with stronger story comprehension skills and print concepts (Sparks & Reese, 2013). Furthermore, links to narrative skills have also been found in low-income Latino families when reminiscing about shared events (Leyva et al., 2008).

A second approach to analyzing parents' scaffolding in reminiscing consists of identifying meaningful groups of parents along four narrative participation dimensions simultaneously: elaborative requests, elaborative provisions, conversational statements, and non-narrative related. Elaborative requests are questions extending the conversation, including open- and close-ended yes/no questions such as "Did you have fun?", fill-in the blank questions such as "We went to the...?" and tag questions such as "You wanted to stay, didn't you?". Elaborative provisions are statements

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