Narrative Skills and Social Class*

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Narratives play an important role in education, for pragmatic and theoretical reasons. Narrative skills of four-year-old children are hypothetically important for later school success. This research investigated the relationship between specific narrative skills and social class in a culturally and racially homogeneous sample, focusing particularly on narratives of economically disadvantaged children from disorganized households. Both middle-class and economically disadvantaged children (but not economically disadvantaged children from disorganized households) often produced long and informative narratives. In contrast, children from disorganized households were most likely to produce extremely minimal narratives, and even their longer ones tended to be chronologically disorganized and poorly patterned in terms of overall structure. Since narrative is one building block teachers use pedagogically, such differences in the match between child skills and school demands at school entrance are cause for concern.

Les récits jouent un rôle important en éducation et ce, pour des raisons pratiques et théoriques. Les talents de narration des enfants de quatre ans sont hypothétiquement importants pour la réussite ultérieure à l'école. Dans sa recherche, l'auteure s'est penchée sur la relation entre certains aptitudes narratives des enfants et leur classe sociale au sein d'un échantillon homogène du point de vue culturel et racial, en mettant l'accent sur les récits d'enfants défavorisés provenant de ménages désorganisés. Les enfants de classe moyenne comme les enfants défavorisés (mais non les enfants défavorisés provenant de ménages désorganisés) produisent des récits longs et détaillés. Les enfants de ménages désorganisés, quant à eux, sont plus susceptibles de produire des récits très courts, et même leurs récits plus longs ont tendance à manquer d'organisation chronologique et à être dans l'ensemble mal structurés. Comme les récits constituent l'un des outils pédagogiques des enseignants, de telles divergences entre les aptitudes des enfants et les exigences pédagogiques vis-à-vis des enfants qui entrent à l'école soulèvent des inquiétudes.

Narrative as a type of discourse is a common part of the school day: children are read stories, told about people's personal experiences, encouraged to write fiction, and so on. One reason narrative is so central is that it plays a critical role in skills underlying successful school achievement, including reading and writing (Feagans, 1982; Graesser, Golding & Long, 1991; Snow, 1983; Snow & Dickin-

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son, 1990; Watson, 1989). Teachers traditionally use narrative as a tool of instruction for both practical and theoretical reasons. On the practical side, most children enter school with competence at understanding and producing narrative, whereas knowledge of other genres of discourse often requires formal training. Furthermore, information conveyed via narrative is both comprehended and recalled more readily than information conveyed in other genres, like explanation or description (Graesser et al., 1991).

On the theoretical side, narrative is built upon a foundation of event knowledge, and cognitive development in children is critically dependent upon such event knowledge (French, 1986; Nelson, 1986). Furthermore, listening to or producing narratives fosters cognitive skills, as these require children temporarily to remove themselves from the here-and-now, that is, to decontextualize their thinking. According to Graesser et al. (1991), children can "(a) rely on mental representations instead of the immediate environment when they speak, (b) decenter from the present time, (c) formulate hypothetical and optional possibilities for events, and (d) abstract general features of events" (p. 173). Thus, it is not surprising that narrative is a cornerstone of school instruction.

Middle-class and working-class children enter school with pre-existing knowledge of the type of narrative structure valued in school (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Umiker-Sebeok, 1979), and teachers use this knowledge base as an instructional aid. What has become clear only recently, however, is that there is wide variation in narrative skills according to children's backgrounds. All children enter school with discourse skills appropriate to the community in which they are raised, but some children's skills are well matched to the discourse requirements of school whereas other children's are not. Such mismatches mean that some children have greater difficulty understanding and meeting their teachers' demands (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Heath, 1982; Michaels, 1991).

Narrative discourse *produced* by children is more comprehensible to teachers if it conforms to their pre-existing notions of good narrative structure. While children narrate, teachers often collaborate with them to foster narrative skill. Such collaboration is less successful if children do not already structure their narratives in ways expected by teachers. For example, "show and tell" (or "sharing time") is seen as an important pre-reading activity in school. During this activity, teachers encourage children to use language to communicate information in specific ways. If the children are already skilled in structuring language in these ways, their teachers' assistance is constructive and helps them communicate more effectively. Unfortunately, teachers are considerably less successful if children do not already use language in ways that teachers value (Michaels, 1991). Mismatches between children's ways of organizing narrative and the narrative structure valued in the classroom seems also to affect children's *comprehension* of narration produced by the teacher. As well, children showing mismatches are more likely to be defined as learning disabled (Roth, 1986).

Social class status has traditionally been seen as a reasonable predictor of children's school achievement and as a predictor of children's narrative skill when they enter school. Social class incorporates, however, an extremely heterogeneous mix of factors. Children of non-Caucasian racial backgrounds or non-Western European cultural backgrounds are more likely to be poor, that is, are disproportionately represented in economically disadvantaged samples. Researchers have documented differences in patterns of narrative organization depending upon ethnic group membership (Michaels, 1991; Minami & McCabe, 1991). Consequently, many so-called "social class differences" in narrative skill may really be "cultural differences" in how narratives are organized. To understand social class differences per se in narrative skill, it is crucial to investigate social class variation in an homogeneous racial and cultural group of children. This is the focus of the research discussed here.

What narrative skills displayed by school-entrant children seem important for school success? The following is a partial list.

Responsive to narrative prompts. It is important for children to be responsive to teacher prompts for narrative production (Feagans, 1982). Of most difficulty to teachers is the reaction termed the "unteachable response" (Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978), in which a child produces such a minimal response to a teacher's probe that the teacher is unsure even if the child understood. Nor should the child require constant prompting to provide each additional piece of information the teacher requests: children with good narrative skills readily narrate in response to teacher requests to do so.

Informative. Narratives should be dense with information units (Fivush, 1991). Such information includes a description of people, locations, objects, activities and attributes that played a role in the events being narrated about. Good narratives paint a detailed linguistic picture of the events they are describing.

Decontextualized. A discourse should be able to stand alone, without support from its here-and-now context (Cazden, 1985; Snow, 1983; Snow & Dickinson, 1990). Specifically, a narrative about personal experience should make sense to listeners not present at the described experience. One criterion of a decontextualized narrative is that it is embedded in an explicitly described spatial-temporal context (Graesser et al., 1991). Although decontextualized narration has other characteristics, such context-setting is the one I focus on.

Linguistically explicit temporal and causal relationships. Events in a narrative are related both temporally and causally; they are not randomly ordered. To provide a coherent narrative account of these relationships, a child should explicitly relate the events linguistically (Fivush, 1991). Temporal terms include *then, and then, first, next, before,* and *after*; causal terms include *because, so, when, if, while,* and *until.*

Chronologically organized. A narrative is fundamentally a description of a series of events. Such series should be chronologically and logically organized,

with events occurring earlier in time being described before events occurring later, and causative events preceding their consequences (Labov, 1972; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Misordered chronology often makes narratives confusing to listeners.

Structurally well-patterned. The narrative as a whole should be well patterned. Two major types of narrative patterning have dominated investigations of narrative structure. Labov (1972) describes well-organized narratives as incorporating chronological description of events leading up to an evaluative high point, a crisis, which is subsequently resolved. The high point is thus the point of the narrative, that is, why the story as a whole is interesting and reportable. In contrast, story-grammarians, such as Mandler (1987) and Stein and Glenn (1979), describe narratives as built around goals formulated by protagonists in response to an initiating problem. The narrative then describes the protagonists' attempts to achieve those goals and the outcomes of their attempts. Other more recent formulations elaborate on the goal-directed structure of narratives (see Graesser et al., 1991, for a review). Both of these major approaches to narrative structure describe coherent patterning of a narrative as a whole unit.

The foregoing list is by no means exhaustive; it includes, however, several key ingredients of skillful narration in the school setting. The question directing the current research is how social class membership affects these narrative skills. Since such skills seem to be important predictors of school success, it is important both to understand children's competencies at school entry and to describe teachers' expectations explicitly. At present children's narratives are often judged amorphously, with no clear understanding of specific strengths and weaknesses. A more differentiated understanding of narrative components would help teachers assist children's narrative skill development.

In the study I present here, we elicited and analyzed personal experience narratives. These were chosen for several reasons. They are the first type of narrative to develop and in fact begin to appear in rudimentary form in children as young as two years of age (Eisenberg, 1985; Peterson, 1990). They are also easier for children to produce than fictional stories or other forms of narrative (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). In my own work, personal experience narratives are readily elicited throughout the preschool years, whereas fictional stories are both difficult to get and quite impoverished in contrast to personal experience narratives.

METHOD

Subjects

Three groups of children served as subjects. For Group 1, 17 children (10 boys and 7 girls, mean age 4;7) were recruited from preschools serving exclusively middle-class children. Two other groups of children, whose parents were on

social assistance (i.e., welfare), were also recruited from preschools. The government of the province in which they reside routinely pays for preschool attendance for children whose parents are on welfare. Group 2 consisted of 17 children (9 boys and 8 girls, mean age 4;7) recruited from preschools serving economically disadvantaged children. A third group of 17 children (12 boys and 5 girls, mean age 4;4) was recruited from a preschool specifically funded to serve those children whose social work caseworkers recommended they be in that particular preschool because of their disadvantaged, chaotic homes. For children in this third group, foster care, poor parenting skills, and a disorganized family life were common domestic experiences. These children were often highly aggressive and showed low compliance with adult directives; some had experienced abuse or neglect. Thus, they had difficulty integrating into regular preschool programs while simultaneously needing skills to prepare them for school. The preschool to which they were sent had workers trained to deal with such children.

All children were Caucasian, from English or Irish ethnic backgrounds, although their families had been in Newfoundland, Canada for generations. None of the children was handicapped and all had intelligence within the normal range, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT). Mean PPVT scores for the three groups of children were 107.8, 85.2 and 89.0 respectively.

Procedure

After several days spent establishing rapport with the children, each child was individually taken to a room apart in the preschool and given an art project to do while conversing with the researcher. All children readily talked with the researcher at length. During the half-hour session, the researcher inserted approximately 20 prompts for personal experience narratives. Examples of prompts include the following: “Once I fell when I was running and I skinned my knee. Have you ever fallen and hurt yourself? You have? Tell me about it.” While the child narrated, the researcher only provided interested encouragement by means of nonspecific prompts like “yeah?” “and?” or repetitions of what the child had just said. Such a procedure has been found to be very successful in eliciting narratives from children without directly structuring their narratives (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). The interactions were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data coding

A personal experience narrative was defined as an instance of talk about events removed in time; it included at least two adjacent propositions on the same topic, one of which was a sequentially orderable (chronological) event or action rather than a description of an ongoing state (Peterson, 1990; Umiker-Sebeok, 1979). These narratives were about specific past events, not routine occurrences. Each child’s three longest narratives were analyzed. The data coding of these narra-

tives is described in conjunction with the properties of narration discussed above. (More detail about the scoring categories can be obtained from the author.)

Responsive to narrative prompts. Four measures were tabulated. First, the children's narratives were divided into clauses, defined as subject-verb propositions. Inter-coder reliability was 95%. The total number of clauses in each narrative were counted. Second, a conversational turn was defined as all of a child's successive utterances that were uninterrupted by an adult (excluding back-channel responses). The number of clauses within each conversational turn was tabulated. Third, the researcher's difficulty in eliciting the narrative was measured by counting the number of prompts the adult gave. Fourth, narrative clauses describe either events or states. The number of events comprising each narrative was tabulated irrespective of the number of clauses used to specify these events, thus eliminating repetitive clauses.

Informative. All unique units of information specified in a narrative were tabulated, including person, location, object, activity, or attribute. Inter-coder reliability was 93%.

Decontextualized. The adequacy of the children's specification of temporal-spatial context was assessed. For temporal context (*when* the narrative occurred), adequacy was scored on a scale of 0 to 4 points (with a reliability of 96%) and averaged across narratives. For spatial context (*where* the narrated events occurred), adequacy was also scored on a scale of 0 to 4 (with a reliability of 95%), and averaged across narratives.

Linguistically explicit temporal and causal relationships. The number of temporal and of causal/conditional terms was counted for each child, and divided by the number of clauses in their three longest narratives.

Chronologically organized. The events in the children's narratives were identified; narratives were deemed too minimal if they contained three or fewer events and thus were not included in this analysis. Narratives containing more than three events were judged as chronologically organized or not (with a reliability of 88%).

We also looked at one specific problem that leads to chronological disorganization: misordered events. The number of misordered narratives out of all those with at least two events was tabulated, and converted to a percentage. If the researcher could not infer the events' original chronological order, the order specified by the child was assumed to be correct. Thus, this "percentage misordered" is a conservative measure.

Structurally well-organized. The narratives were classified into the structural patterns of high-point (reliability of 89%) and story-grammar (reliability of 85%) categories, as adapted by McCabe, Capron, and Peterson (1991), and Peterson and McCabe (1983):

Structural patterns of narratives in high-point analysis
Classic pattern: builds to a high point, evaluatively dwells on it, then resolves it.

Ending-at-the-high-point pattern: builds to a high point, then ends; there is no resolution.
Chronological pattern: describes successive events that are sequentially and logically ordered.
Other multiple-event pattern: lists events that cannot be ordered by the listener. No major inference demands, however, are made upon the listener.
Leapfrog pattern: jumps from one event to another within an integrated experience, leaving out major events that must be inferred.
Disoriented pattern: is too confused, disoriented, or contradictory for the listener to understand.
Three-, two- or one-event pattern: contains only three, two, or one event(s), respectively, although these may be reiterated or evaluated.

Structural patterns of narratives in story-grammar
Complete episode: describes aims of a protagonist, including precipitating events, goal formulation, attempts to achieve those goals, and outcomes.
Complex episode: elaborates a complete episode.
Abbreviated episode: describes precipitating events and goal-oriented outcomes, but no goals or goal-directed attempts.
Reactive sequence: recounts events causing other events to occur (no planning).
Descriptive or action sequences: describes character, context, and habitual actions, or is a list of actions temporally rather than causally ordered.

RESULTS

Results of analyses of the children's three longest narratives are grouped according to which aspect of narrative skill they address.

Responsive to narrative prompts: Teachers often use children's narrative productions as scaffolding to help them build communicative skills. It is difficult to assist children's narrative organization or presentation of information if they do not produce narratives at all, or only under repeated and persistent prompting. All children in our study conversed extensively with the researcher about the here-and-now; many readily produced narratives about the there-and-then whereas others did not.

An example of a narrative produced by a child who needed much prompting is the following, where "C" indicates Child, "R" indicates Researcher, and ". . ." indicates a pause. Note that R makes several explicit requests that the child tell about her experience. As well, back-channel responses (such as "yeah?" or repetitions of what the child previously said) are ineffective with this child, although in the interview session she talked extensively about the immediate context.

Narrative #1
R: Did you ever fight with your sister?
C: Yeah.
R: With your sister Brenda?
C: Yeah.
R: Yeah?

C: Yeah.
R: What happened?
C: She fall down.
R: Did she? . . . Yeah?
C: Yeah.
R: Tell me more. . . . Tell me more about what happened. . . . You, you were fighting with Brenda?
C: Yeah.
R: And she fell down?
C: Yeah.
R: Yeah?
C: And . . .
R: What else?
C: And Mommy smacked her.
R: Mommy smacked her. Yeah? . . . Yeah? . . . Can you tell me more?
C: Yeah. . . .
R: Mommy smacked her?
C: Yeah.
R: Yeah, what else?
C: Mommy, Mommy went on the bed.
R: What?
C: And Brenda.
R: Mommy went on the bed and Brenda?
C: Brenda done something.
R: Done something, yeah?
C: Yeah and she, she, she, Brenda got on the bed.
R: Yeah?
C: Yeah, and she fall down.
R: Yeah? . . . And Brenda got on the bed and she fall down.
C: Yeah.
R: Yeah? . . . And you were fighting with her?
C: Yeah.
R: Yeah? . . . Is that all that happened?
C: Yeah.
(R gives up.)

Table 1 shows the average number of clauses per narrative produced by children in the three groups, as well as the number of narrative clauses per conversational turn and the average number of prompts by an adult necessary to elicit the narratives. Overall, children from both middle-class and economically disadvantaged homes produced reasonably long narratives, but children from disorganized families did not. Group differences were analyzed by means of an ANOVA, with group the independent factor. Group membership was significant, $F(2,48)=10.86$, $p<.001$. Follow-up Newman-Keuls showed that the first two groups did not differ from each other, but both differed from the group of children from disorganized homes.

How much prompting children needed to produce their narratives was also assessed. The number of narrative clauses produced per conversational turn was tabulated (see Table 1) and analyzed by means of an ANOVA. The groups differed significantly, $F(2,48)=22.17$, $p<.001$. Follow-up Newman-Keuls analyses showed the middle-class children needed less prompting than children in both other groups, which did not differ from each other.

We also tabulated the average number of prompts the researcher gave the children (see Table 1). The data were analyzed by means of an ANOVA, with group the between-subjects factor. The groups differed significantly, $F(2,48)=20.81$, $p<.001$, with follow-up Newman-Keuls showing that middle-class children differed from those in both other groups, which did not differ from each other. Middle-class children needed very little prompting to narrate, whereas other children required a great deal.

Lastly, we tabulated the number of narratives containing only one or two events. These are extremely minimal narratives, and give a listener (or a teacher) little to work with. The number of such minimal narratives is: 11, 7, and 25 for the middle-class, economically disadvantaged, and disorganized household groups, respectively. Clearly the children from disorganized families are much

TABLE 1

Properties of Narratives Produced by Children from Middle-Class, Economically Disadvantaged, and Disorganized Household Families

Properties of narratives	*Middle-class*	*Economically disadvantaged*	*Disorganized*
Mean # of clauses/narrative (S.D.)*	14.1 (5.7)	13.0 (6.0)	6.7 (2.4)
Mean # clauses/conversational turn (S.D.)	7.5 (3.6)	3.4 (1.8)	2.4 (0.7)
Mean # of adult prompts/ narrative (S.D.)	1.9 (1.1)	4.6 (1.2)	3.9 (1.4)
Narratives with one event	4	3	12
Narratives with two events	7	4	13
Narratives with three events	8	8	10
Narratives with four or more events	32	36	16
Total units of information	11.70 (5.21)	10.37 (3.65)	5.33 (2.04)

*S.D.=Standard Deviation

more prone to providing minimal narratives; in fact, fully half their narratives were classified as extremely minimal.

Informative. Narratives fundamentally convey information about past experiences. Table 1 tabulates the average total number of units of information found in each narrative. An ANOVA was calculated on these frequencies, with group the between-subject variable. Follow-up Newman-Keuls analyses were done to see which groups differed from each other. The groups differed significantly, $F(2,48)=12.90$, $p<.001$. The middle-class and economically disadvantaged groups did not differ from each other, but both differed from the third group. Overall, middle-class and economically disadvantaged children are equally informative when they narrate, and provide considerably more information about people, location, objects, activity, and attributes than do children from disorganized households.

Decontextualized. The adequacy of children's specification of the temporal-spatial context of their narratives was assessed. Recall that a rating scale of 0 to 4 points was applied to the temporal and spatial contexts of each of the children's narratives (see Table 2). On average, children from both middle-class and economically disadvantaged homes often tried to provide at least some temporal context, although the quality of that specification was rather poor; in contrast, children from disorganized homes seldom provided any at all. An ANOVA was calculated with group the between-subject variable. Group differences were significant, $F(2,48)=5.32$, $p=.008$. Follow-up Newman-Keuls analyses showed the middle-class and economically disadvantaged children did not differ from each other, but both differed from the children from disorganized households.

A different pattern of results emerged in analyses of how adequately children specify the spatial context of their narratives, that is, *where* the described events took place. All the children did an equivalent job of specifying *where*; there are no group differences, $F(2,48)=2.10$, p=ns.

Linguistically explicit temporal and causal relationships. A narrative not only has a global temporal context (scored above), that is, is situated at a particular point in the past, it also has local temporal organization, that is, chronological order between the events is represented by adjacent clauses. Temporal terms explicitly inform the listener of event chronology. The average number of temporal terms per narrative is presented in Table 2. An ANOVA was calculated with group the between-subject variable. The groups differed significantly, $F(2,48)=4.89$, $p=.012$. Follow-up Newman-Keuls showed the middle-class children differed from both other groups of children, who did not differ from each other.

Narratives also discuss events causally related to each other. The average number of causal/conditional terms per narrative was analyzed by means of an ANOVA. Group differences were significant, $F(2,48)=13.30$, $p<.001$. All groups differed from each other, according to follow-up Newman-Keuls analysis.

TABLE 2

Temporal and Spatial Contexts of, and Temporal and Causal/Conditional Terms in Narratives Produced by Children from Middle-Class, Economically Disadvantaged, and Disorganized Household Families

Categories	*Middle-class*	*Economically disadvantaged*	*Disorganized*
Rating for temporal context (*when*) (S.D.)*	1.59 (1.15)	1.17 (1.17)	0.39 (0.78)
Rating for spatial context (*where*) (S.D.)	2.57 (0.83)	2.75 (1.20)	1.97 (1.39)
# temporal terms/narrative (S.D.)	1.06 (1.09)	0.43 (0.60)	0.29 (0.42)
# causal/conditional terms/narr. (S.D.)	1.45 (0.82)	0.80 (0.89)	0.18 (0.31)

*S.D.=Standard Deviation

Middle-class children were more likely to explicitly specify causality and conditionality than were economically disadvantaged children, who in turn were more likely to do so than were children from disorganized households.

Chronologically well organized. Recall that we defined a chronologically well-organized narrative as containing four or more events logically and sequentially described. An example of such a narrative is the following:

Narrative #2
R: Have you ever cut yourself with a knife or a sharp piece of glass?
C: Yeah, one time and I screeched. When I was a baby.
R: Did you?
C: Yup and I started to tell my mommy that I wanted a bandage.
R: Uh huh.
C: "Ga, ga, goo gal a bandaid." That's what I said to my mommy. And she run upstairs and got one and put it on my finger or my thumb or my pinky.

The number of chronologically well-organized narratives is shown in Table 3. The majority of narratives produced by middle-class children were categorized as chronologically well organized. In contrast, only a third of economically disadvantaged children's and a seventh of disorganized household children's narratives were so classified. An ANOVA was calculated, with group the between-subject factor; the groups differed significantly, $F(2,48)=6.32$, $p=.004$. Follow-up

Newman-Keuls showed that middle-class children differed from children of disorganized households, and the intermediate economically disadvantaged children differed from neither.

Table 3 also shows the number of chronologically misordered narratives the children produced. Middle-class children produced 47 (of 51) narratives with more than one event (and thus there was the possibility of misordering the temporal sequence of events in these narratives) and economically disadvantaged children produced 48 multiple-event narratives, whereas children from disorganized households produced only 39 multiple-event narratives. As these latter children produced fewer narratives for which there was the possibility of misordering, the number of misordered narratives is presented as a percentage of multiple-event narratives. Fully a fifth (21%) of multiple-event narratives produced by children from disorganized households were misordered, whereas such misordering was atypical (6% and 8%) for children from both other groups.

Structurally well patterned. The children's three longest narratives were classified (see Table 4) according to the high-point system (Labov, 1972; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Examples of these narrative patterns can be found in Peterson and McCabe (1983). A chi-square analysis was done to find the three groups' differential use of various patterns. First, categories were summed: the *classic* and *build-to-a-high-point* narrative are both sophisticated in that they both have evaluated high points, the key definitional component of Labov's system. These two categories were consequently summed. Likewise, the *chronological pattern* and the *other multiple-event pattern* were summed, since they describe

TABLE 3

Types of Narratives Produced by Children from Middle-Class, Economically Disadvantaged, and Disorganized Household Families

Types of narratives	*Middle-class*	*Economically disadvantaged*	*Disorganized*
# of chronologically well-organized narratives with four or more events	27	18	7
% of all narratives that are well-organized	53%	35%	14%
# narratives with two or more events	47	48	39
# (and %) of multi-event narratives that are misordered	3 (6%)	4 (8%)	8 (21%)

TABLE 4

Number of Narratives Conforming to Each High-Point Pattern, for Children from Middle-Class, Economically Disadvantaged, and Disorganized Household Families

Narrative category	*Middle-class*	*Economically disadvantaged*	*Disorganized*
Classic pattern	10	5	1
Build-to-a-high-point pattern	2	0	2
Chronological pattern	15	12	5
Other multiple-event pattern	2	5	2
Leapfrog pattern	1	5	4
Disoriented narrative	2	8	7
Three-event narrative	8	8	7
One- or two-event narrative	11	8	23

Note: The numbers of three-event narratives and of one- and two-event narratives here do not necessarily agree with the numbers in Table 1 because classification as leapfrog or disoriented patterns takes precedence over classification as one-, two, or three-event narratives in this system of structural analysis.

multiple events coherently. As well, *one-event* and *two-event* narratives were summed since both are extremely minimal narratives. The three groups of children's production of the resultant five categories of narratives was significantly different, chi-square (df=8)=28.93, p<.01. Middle-class children produce more narratives that conform to sophisticated structure, according to high-point analysis, than do children from both other groups; they also produce fewer leapfrog narratives. In contrast, children from disorganized homes produce fewer well-structured narratives with high points and fewer chronological narratives than do children from both other groups. As well, they produce many more one- or two-event narratives.

The children's three longest narratives were classified (see Table 5) according to the story-grammar system (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Examples of narratives matching each of these patterns can be found in Peterson and McCabe (1983). A chi-square analysis showed the different groups' use of various patterns. Again, various categories were summed. The *complete* and *complex episodes* are both sophisticated in story-grammar in that they have elaborated goals, the crucial definitional component of the system. These two categories were consequently summed. The three groups' production of the resultant four categories of narratives did not differ significantly, chi-square (df=6)=9.29, p=ns. Thus, children from all three groups produced similar sorts of story-grammar structures.

TABLE 5

Number of Narratives Conforming to Each Story-Grammar Pattern, for Children from Middle-Class, Economically Disadvantaged, and Disorganized Household Families

Narrative category	*Middle-class*	*Economically disadvantaged*	*Disorganized*
Action or descriptive sequence	22	29	36
Reactive sequence	8	7	2
Abbreviated episode	6	8	6
Complete episode	7	5	7
Complex episode	5	2	0

Discussion

Children's narrative skills are increasingly seen as important predictors of school success and achievement. They have also frequently been associated with social class: narrative skills of middle-class children more closely match the demands of school and the teachers' expectations, facilitating successful collaboration in learning. Economically disadvantaged children have greater mismatches between the language of home and the language of school.

We begin with differences in narratives from middle-class and economically disadvantaged children in our study (Groups 1 and 2), temporarily excluding from our analysis children from disorganized households (Group 3). Both middle-class and economically disadvantaged children are capable of producing long narratives that are informationally dense, with details about people, locations, objects, activities, and attributes. The majority of their narratives describe at least four events, and the children do a reasonable job of locating their narratives in space, and attempt to locate some of their narratives in time.

The production of long and informative narratives by economically disadvantaged children contrasts markedly with their willingness to display such narratives readily. These children required extensive prompting from an adult to produce their narratives. The educational implications of this reticence are straightforward: teachers need to take the time to encourage these children and to provide numerous prompts for narration. With classrooms' busy schedules and with many children requiring attention, teachers often may not keep prompting the same child, especially if there are in the class other children who are

spontaneously more expansive in their narrative productions and thus are more rewarding to the teacher. If narration is a scaffold used to help build other skills, such as literacy, it is particularly important for a teacher to continue narrative prompting, even after the child has given some traditional cues of closure such as long pauses or even the ubiquitous "that's all."

Although (with extensive prompting) economically disadvantaged children produce narratives as long and informationally dense as middle-class children's, there are differences in these two groups' narratives. First, economically disadvantaged children are less likely to use complex linguistic markers of temporal and causal relationship. Second, although economically disadvantaged children produce as many long narratives (defined as containing four or more events) as middle-class children do, economically disadvantaged children's long narratives are less likely to be well-patterned with good chronological and logical sequencing. (In Labov's classification scheme, as adapted by Peterson & McCabe, 1983, well-organized narratives conform to the classic, build-to-a-high-point or chronological pattern.) The majority of middle-class children's narratives are classified as well-patterned; in contrast, only a third of the long narratives of economically disadvantaged children fall into these three categories. Instead, their long narratives are likely to be "laundry lists" of disparate events not causally or temporally intertwined (i.e., "other multiple-event pattern"), or to be leapfrog or disoriented narratives. Both of the latter are particularly problematic because they lead to listener confusion.

To illustrate, consider the following narratives:

Narrative #3
R: Tell me what happened to your arm.
C: He picked me up last morning. I was gone to the doctor.
R: He picked you up when you went to the doctor?
C: Yep.
R: What happened to your arm?
C: I fell down.
(discussion about present activity)
R: Tell me about when you fell down and hurt your arm. Tell me what happened.
C: The cops picked me up. That fell down.
R: The cops picked you up?
C: I was gone school.
R: You were gone to school.
C: And the bus picked me up.
R: The bus picked you up.
C: And I was (. . ? . .). And Robert comed with me. And Robert comed with me.
R: Robert came with you. Uh-huh?
C: He came with my school.
R: Yeah?
C: And he dressed me up.

Narrative #4
R: Did you ever see a car go off the road?
C: Yeah.
R: You did? Really? Tell me about it. Tell me about when you saw a car go off the road. . . . What happened? . . . What happened?
C: I go . . . I gonna . . . I was . . . the street by myself.
R: You went to sleep by yourself?
C: I cross the street.
R: You crossed the street.
C: I walk by myself and got hit by a car.
R: You walked by yourself and got hit by a car?
C: No, I never.

Narrative #3 is an example of a leapfrog narrative, in which important pieces of information are skipped over, resulting in a narrative requiring substantial inference. This unsystematic hopping from event to event in narration is common in preschool-aged and kindergarten children from working-class backgrounds and is relatively rare in primary school-aged children (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). To our knowledge, this is the first assessment of leapfrog patterning in economically disadvantaged children. In narrative #4, the child contradicts himself and one is never sure whether the child witnessed an accident or instead was himself in one. This is a disoriented narrative. Both of them engender considerable confusion in the listener.

Although only 6% of middle-class children's narratives fall into the leapfrog or disoriented patterns, fully a quarter of economically disadvantaged children's do. Because economically disadvantaged children require more prompting from an adult to produce their narratives, it is particularly important for teachers to encourage narration from these children, so that they can help the child learn how to organize narratives both logically and chronologically.

The tendency to organize narratives around goal-directed behaviour in response to an initiating problem has recently been emphasized pedagogically in the school curriculum. This goal-directed pattern is something that changes substantially between the preschool and elementary school years (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Stein & Glenn, 1979). It is therefore unsurprising that most narratives of all children in this study did not conform to such an organizational plan.

We turn now to a comparison of the two groups of economically disadvantaged children on social assistance. The families of both groups have equivalent welfare income. The children's Peabody Picture Vocabulary Scores also did not differ. The caseworkers for the children in Group 3, however, judged their families to be sufficiently chaotic and disorganized that the children could profit from specialized small-group and one-on-one attention from specially trained preschool teachers. Their preschool program focused on providing consistency

for the children and emphasized behavioural control and self-esteem building. Many of these children had experienced foster care, neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse. Such children are less likely to succeed in the school system, and often are of special concern to their teachers.

The narrative skills of these two groups of economically disadvantaged children differ substantially. Of most importance, it was extremely difficult to obtain more than minimal-length narratives from children of disorganized homes. Although these children conversed at length readily and spontaneously with the researcher about current activity, they seemed unable or unwilling to linguistically encode experiences removed in time and space. Half their narratives included only one or two events, whereas fewer than a third were classified as long (four or more events). In comparison, fewer than one out of six narratives produced by the other group of economically disadvantaged children contained only one or two events, whereas more than two-thirds of their narratives were classified as long. The shortness of narratives from Group 3 children also explains the lower number of units of various sorts of information, the paucity of linguistically encoded causal and temporal links between events, and the poorer spatial and temporal context-setting. Thus, children from disorganized households produce little narration with which a teacher can work, and what little there is obtained requires extensive prompting.

Also of concern is that children from disorganized households are considerably more likely to chronologically misorder their narrative events, something that is rare in other children. When they do produce multiple-event narratives, these narratives are more likely to be confusing (leapfrog or disoriented) to a listener than to be well organized. In other words, these children's narrative skills vary considerably from those of other children at school entrance. With poorer narrative skills than their peers in terms of typical expectations of teachers, they are likely to have much more difficulty with the classroom's linguistic demands.

An implication of this research is that social class should not be treated as a homogeneous variable. In this study, Groups 2 and 3 were equivalently economically disadvantaged in terms of family income and government assistance; they were also from a homogeneous racial and cultural background. Nevertheless, the children in these two groups differed enormously in their narrative skills, depending on a third variable: household disorganization as judged by their social work caseworkers. The differences are likely to be amplified when children have disparate cultural backgrounds, since such different groups often differ substantially in how they use language. Investigations of narration such as this one need to be done with a much wider diversity of children, so teachers will have a better understanding of children's language skills at school entrance. Furthermore, this study dealt with the "what" of narration differences between groups of children; the next step is an understanding of the "why." Future research should be directed toward this question.

A critical concern of many language researchers is that teachers often unconsciously respond to children's language use in amorphous ways, without being able to articulate exactly, either to themselves or to the children, the language demands of the classroom. Investigations such as mine hope to raise some of these unconscious reactions to the realm of consciousness. An explicit understanding of what language demands teachers make of children can only aid successful academic collaboration.

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