

## Latino children's narrative competencies over the preschool years<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Narrating is a sophisticated discourse skill that emerges during the preschool years, and is both correlated with and predictive of various aspects of school performance. The existing research on children's narrative development provides a limited snapshot of the narrative trajectories of Latino children living in the United States. The present study examined the narrative skills of 118 low-income Latino children over a two-year period. Results showed that there were significant developmental changes in children's storybook retelling skills over the preschool years. By age five, children were more autonomous in their narration, produced more coherent and complex stories, and incorporated more sophisticated language in their narratives than did younger preschoolers. Further analyses identified those specific macro- and micro-structural skills that develop during the preschool years.

**Key words:** Narrative development, storytelling skills, culture, dual-language learners, preschool.

**Resumen.** La narración es una habilidad discursiva que se desarrolla en los años preescolares y se correlaciona, así como predice, varios aspectos del desempeño académico en los niños. Las investigaciones actuales sobre el desarrollo narrativo nos ofrecen una visión limitada de las trayectorias narrativas de niños de origen latino que viven en los Estados Unidos. En este estudio, analizamos las habilidades narrativas de 118 niños latinos de bajos recursos a través de los dos años preescolares. Nuestros resultados demuestran que hubo importantes cambios en el desarrollo de las habilidades narrativas en el período preescolar. En general, a los cinco años, los niños eran más autónomos en su narración, produjeron historias más coherentes y complejas e incorporaron un lenguaje más sofisticado en sus relatos. Los análisis subsiguientes identificaron las habilidades específicas, tanto macro como micro estructurales, que se desarrollan durante los años preescolares.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo narrativo, habilidades narrativas, cultura, niños bilingües, preescolar.

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## Introduction

Across most cultural groups, storytelling serves as a critical means of preserving and transmitting cultural ideologies and practices across generations. As such, narratives are a form of oral discourse that characterizes and facilitates culturally determined ways of communicating lived or imagined events to others (Bruner, 1986). More specifically, narratives are linguistic tools that represent past ideas and actions in memory, structure and evaluate present experiences, and help people make sense of the world around them. Through the sharing of narratives, social and emotional bonds are created and maintained (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Nelson, 1993; Wang & Fivush, 2005; Welch-Ross, 1995), and children develop an understanding of the human mind and behavior (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998; Fivush, 1993; Nelson, 1996). At the same time, narratives lay the foundation for literacy acquisition (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001), as well as being important for children's future recall, planning, and overall memory skills (Jack, MacDonald, Reese & Hayne, 2009; Rudek & Haden, 2005). Thus, narratives are critical for the transmission of cultural norms and beliefs, as well as for the development of both socio-cognitive and emergent literacy skills.

Yet, to date, the research on the developmental trajectory of children's narrative skills in the United States has focused almost exclusively on English-speaking children from middle-income families. As a result, little is known about the narrative development of first and second generation immigrant children, including those from Latino families. Given that one in four preschoolers in the United States is of Latino heritage and that narrative competency is so

critical for children's school attainment, the current study sought to address this gap by exploring the development of narrative skills among low-income Spanish- and English-speaking Latino children in the United States.

### *Narrative Development: A Focus on Narrative Structure*

Contemporary research on the structure of oral narratives has, perhaps, been influenced most by the seminal work of Labov and Waletzky (1967), who posited that narratives serve two main functions: referential and evaluative. Narratives are referential, in that they are descriptive in the retelling of an experience in a temporally linked manner, but, at the same time, are evaluative in nature, placing judgments on an experience or relating why events that unfolded are meaningful and worth retelling (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Labov (1972) further postulated that narratives are characteristically structured around a "high point," and that inherent in a complete narrative is a six-part structure. Typically, stories contain an abstract (which indicates what the story is about), an orientation (which provides the "who," "what," and "where"), a complicating action (what happened first, what happened next), an evaluation, a resolution, and a coda (which bridges the narrative back to the present).

Although Labov's work focused on oral stories told by adults, it has served as the foundation for the structural analysis of stories told by children (see Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Describing for the first time the developmental progression of narrative structure and organization among children, Peterson and McCabe (1983) utilized high-point analysis to describe the classic narrative as a series of events that build up to a climax (or high point) and ultimately come to a resolution. Integral to a

cohesive narrative is the inclusion of referential and evaluative information, including orienting details to provide context, rich descriptions, and subjective information. Through their study of the oral narratives shared by over 1000 children, Peterson and McCabe (1983) highlighted age-related differences in the structural patterns of the stories told by children, with very young children telling stories that were temporally disorganized or impoverished (i.e., devoid of important information), and older children telling stories that were more coherent, cohesive, and fully structured (Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

Specifically, their findings demonstrated that without adult scaffolding, the oral narratives shared by children younger than the age of four tend to be disorganized, with children using a leap-frog style that lacks orienting information and a logical order. Over the course of the preschool years, children become more adept at organizing their narratives chronologically and include key referential information. By the time they turn six, children have the necessary skills to tell classic narratives, incorporating referential and evaluative information as they build up to a high-point and then come to a full resolution (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). A similar developmental pattern has been found in the structure of children's retelling of wordless picture books, with young children's stories lacking an overall structure or cohesion, making their stories difficult to follow. In their retellings, young children tend to personalize the events depicted, as well as require explicit prompting from the interlocutor to narrate. By age five, however, children's wordless book retellings are far more organized and complete, and, in turn, are more intelligible. Yet, their stories are typically descriptions of events, and it is not until the school years that children begin to include

explicit causal relations in their book sharings (Berman & Slobin, 1994).

In addition to exploring the macrostructure of children's narratives, researchers have also examined developmental changes in the microstructures of the stories children share, with a particular focus on their inclusion of two elements that are critical for the creation of a cohesive story: causal connectives and temporality. As one example, children younger than the age of five tend to switch back and forth between tenses as they engage in storytelling interactions. Because verb tense is integral for the temporal anchoring of a story, narratives shared by very young children typically lack cohesiveness and coherence (Berman & Slobin, 1994). By contrast, already in the preschool years children are including basic connectives, such as "then," "because," "but," and "so," to achieve narrative coherence (Berman & Slobin, 1994). With age, however, children begin to demonstrate increased sophistication in their use of connectives and incorporate a wider variety of temporal markers in their narratives to link their ideas sequentially (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1991). Taken together, then, there appears to be a clear developmental progression in both the macrostructure and the microstructure of the stories children share, with the greatest growth occurring during the preschool years.

#### *Variations in Children's Narrative Structure*

As is the case with most developmental skills, however, there are variations in the structural patterns of children's narratives. For example, although past research has suggested that basic narrative structure is somewhat universal (Mandler, Scribner, Cole, & DeForest, 1980), there are consistent differences in the overall

macrostructure of the narratives shared by children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Children from East Asian backgrounds (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean), for instance, share shorter narratives about their personal experiences than do children from European American families (Han et al., 1998; Minami & McCabe, 1991). The oral stories shared by children in Japan are especially succinct, typically including a few isolated events across three verses, in contrast to European American children, whose oral stories tend to be centered around one main experience (Minami & McCabe, 1991). Although African American children do tell “classic narratives” (Champion, 1998), they also tend to share long and elaborated narratives that contain several thematically-linked episodes (Michaels, 1991). These structural variations are critical, as they suggest that although children become more competent narrators with time, different cultural communities might have varying ideas about what constitutes a coherent and complete story (McCabe, 1995; McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

Narrative construction is also influenced by the structure of the language children speak (see Berman & Slobin, 1994, for a comprehensive review). Different languages offer distinct linguistic resources for constructing well-organized narratives. For example, languages vary in the amount of verb tenses available to the narrator, as well as the number of ways to mark aspect. Similarly, the number and variety of adjective and adverbs available to narrators differ by language. These linguistic variations will, in turn, impact both the structure and content of children’s narratives (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002; Minami, 2008).

Given these cultural and linguistic variations, it is surprising that relatively few studies have sought to document the development of Latino children’s narrative skills. Most of the research available on preschool-aged children’s narratives either uses narratives as a discrete outcome representing their language or literacy skills (e.g., Caspe, 2009), investigates narrative development in the context of children’s conversations with their primary caregivers (e.g., Melzi, Schick, & Kennedy, 2011), or compares Latino children’s narrative skills in Spanish and English (e.g., Fiestas & Peña, 2004). The research that focuses exclusively on the developmental trajectory of Latino children’s narratives has, for the most part, explored early narrative skills during toddlerhood (e.g., Uccelli, 2009) or in the school years (e.g., McCabe & Bliss, 2005; Uccelli & Paéz, 2007; Shiro, 2003). To date, and to our knowledge, only one study (i.e., Muñoz, Gillam, Peña, & Gulley-Faehle, 2003) has specifically sought to explore the developmental progression of the narratives shared by typically-developing U.S. Latino children during the preschool years, a period marked by substantial growth in the macro- and microstructure of stories shared. Findings of that study suggest that 5-year-old, low-income Latino Head Start children in the United States demonstrate greater syntactic skills and make fewer grammatical errors, as compared to their 4-year-old peers. In addition, 5-year-olds’ stories have a more sophisticated story structure, and are more complex and complete, than are stories told by 4-year-olds (Muñoz et al., 2003).

As is evident from this brief review, the preschool years are critical for the development of children’s narrative skills, in particular macro- and microstructural skills. Moreover, research suggests that there are culture and language-

based variations in the ways in which the children organize their narratives. However, two main gaps remain in our current state of knowledge. First, there is a lack of descriptive work that follows children over time, especially those who are non-English speakers, as a way, to investigate what specific skills develop during the preschool years. And second, there is almost no research on the structural development of the narratives told by low-income dual-language Latino preschoolers, despite their growing numbers in the U.S. The present study attempts to redress these gaps in our knowledge by describing the structural elements of the narratives shared by Latino low-income preschool age children, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data for this investigation were drawn from a larger study about home and school influences on children's school readiness skills (Schick, 2012) that spanned across two years. Participants were recruited from a Spanish-English bilingual Head Start center in New York City. This center serves low-income children, ages three to five years old, approximately 90% of whom are of Latino origin. At the time of data collection, the center had twelve classrooms, six full-day and six half-day classrooms. Each classroom had at least one Latino lead or assistant teacher who was either Spanish dominant or a bilingual Spanish-English speaker. One hundred and eighteen children of Latino origin participated in the first year of the study. Of these children, 76 graduated at the end of the school year, two moved out of state, and 40 remained in the school for a second year of Head Start. All 40 of these children and their families agreed to participate in the second year of the study. However, one participant left the

study during the data collection phase due to family relocation, yielding a total of 39 children who participate in Year 2.

The 118 children who participated in the first year of the study ranged in age from three to five years ( $M = 53.75$  months,  $SD = 5.94$ ). Fifty-four percent of these children were female. Within the home, 58% ( $n = 68$ ) of the children's families spoke predominantly Spanish, 23% ( $n = 27$ ) spoke both Spanish and English, 3% ( $n = 4$ ) spoke Spanish and an indigenous language (i.e., Mixtec), and 16% ( $n = 19$ ) spoke predominantly English. At the Head Start center, approximately 48% of the children ( $n = 57$ ) were enrolled in half-day classrooms, and 52% ( $n = 61$ ) were enrolled in full-day classrooms. All children were identified by their caregivers as Latino.

Primary caregivers ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old ( $M = 29.81$ ,  $SD = 7.48$ ) and had immigrated to the United States at approximately twenty years of age ( $SD = 6.94$ ). Approximately 54% ( $n = 64$ ) of caregivers were born in Mexico, 27% ( $n = 32$ ) were born in the United States, and 19% ( $n = 22$ ) were born in a Central or South American country. About 10% of the caregivers ( $n = 12$ ) had no formal education, 24% ( $n = 28$ ) had completed less than high school, 39% ( $n = 46$ ) had completed high school or the equivalent, and 27% ( $n = 32$ ) had attained more than a high school level of education. Finally, close to 30% ( $n = 35$ ) of caregivers were employed full-time, 23% ( $n = 27$ ) had part-time employment outside of the home, and 48% ( $n = 56$ ) were not employed outside of the home.

The 39 children who participated in the second year of the study included all children who participated in the first year and remained in Head Start the second year. These children were between 3;6 and 4;6 in the first year of the

study ( $M = 48.90$ ,  $SD = 2.95$ ) and 4;6 and 5;5 in the second year of the study ( $M = 61.21$  months,  $SD = 2.94$ ). Fifty-one percent of these children were female. Within the home, 46% ( $n = 18$ ) of the families spoke predominantly Spanish, 36% ( $n = 14$ ) spoke both Spanish and English, 5% ( $n = 2$ ) spoke Spanish and Mixtec, and 13% ( $n = 5$ ) spoke predominantly English.

#### *Procedure*

Data were collected at the end of the 2009-2010 school year and again at the end of the 2010-2011 school year. Demographic questionnaires were administered each year to gather information about the target children and their primary caregivers. These questionnaires included items about age, country of origin, years in the United States, level of education, and language spoken in the home.

At the end of each school year, children were asked to share the wordless picture book *A Boy, A Dog, A Frog, and A Friend* (Mayer, 1967) with an investigator who was matched by language. The use of a wordless picture book is a common practice for eliciting narratives from children (see Berman & Slobin, 1994). Children were asked to tell the story depicted in the book; they were encouraged to flip through the book before they began telling the story. The story was elicited in that language, such that the instructions were given in children's dominant language. Children's language dominance was determined using a triangulation of methods: (a) parent report of language dominance, (b) teacher report of dominance, and (c) two subscales of the preLAS to measure receptive and expressive language skills in both Spanish and English (Duncan & De Ávila, 1998). As children narrated, they were allowed to code-switch between languages or

to switch completely to the other language, if they so desired. No time limit was given to the book sharing interactions. All interactions were audio-recorded.

#### *Transcription and Coding*

All narratives were transcribed at the utterance level using a standardized format, Codes for the Analysis of Human Language (CHAT; MacWhinney, 2000). Native speakers of Spanish and English, as well as Spanish-English bilingual speakers, transcribed all narratives in their respective languages and then verified the transcriptions.

Children's narratives were coded holistically for three skill domains:

1. Conversational Autonomy assessed the child's ability to narrate independently (see Melzi & Schick, 2012; Schick, 2012). Children obtained a score from 1 to 4, with a score of 1 indicating that the child relied on detailed prompting from the investigator to tell the story (i.e., the investigator used more explicit prompts than asking, "What happened next?"), and a score of 4 indicating that the child told the story independently, without any prompting from the investigator other than backchanneling denoting attention and interest (e.g., "yeah," "okay").

2. Story Grammar, or macrostructure, consisted of seven components that pertained to the complexity and coherence of the narrative macrostructure (Gillam & Gillam, 2010). These components included character, setting, initiating event, internal response, plan, action/attempt, and consequence. Each story grammar element was given a score on a scale of 0 to 3, with 3 indicating the greatest complexity and coherence. The possible range for the total story grammar score was 0-21.

3. Literate Language, or microstructure, consisted of five components that pertained to the sophistication of the language used to tell the narrative (Gillam & Gillam, 2010). These components included coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, mental/linguistic verbs, adverbs, and elaborated noun phrases. Each literate language element was given a score on a scale of 0 to 3, based on the number of times the element was used, with 3 indicating that the element was used three or more times, or in three or more unique ways in the narrative. The possible range for the literate language total was 0-15.

Intercoder reliability was established between coders on 20% of the transcripts for all narrative domains using percentages of agreement among the coders: conversational autonomy ( $r = .90$ ), story grammar ( $r = .88$ ), and literate language ( $r = .87$ ).

### Results

Two main sets of analyses were conducted to investigate the developmental changes in the narrative skills of preschool-aged Latino children. For the purpose of these analyses, the sample of the first year ( $n = 118$ ) was divided into two age groups: the 4-year-old group included children who were between the ages of 3;6 and 4;6 ( $n = 63$ ;  $M = 48.97$ ,  $SD = 2.77$ ),

and the 5-year-old group included children who were between the ages of 4;6 and 5;5 ( $n = 55$ ;  $M = 59.22$ ,  $SD = 3.23$ ). This first set of analyses was cross-sectional, comparing the two groups of children in Year 1 on the three narrative skill domains (i.e., conversational autonomy, story grammar, and literate language). The second set of analyses was longitudinal, following the same group of children across the two years of Head Start ( $n = 39$ ).

Results of the cross-sectional analyses showed that, as compared to 4-year-olds, 5-year-olds were more autonomous in telling the story,  $t(116) = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , told stories that were more complex and coherent,  $t(116) = 5.22$ ,  $p < .001$ , and used more varied and sophisticated linguistic constructions in their narratives,  $t(116) = 3.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . (See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.) Results of the longitudinal analyses confirmed these findings and showed developmental progression in conversational autonomy,  $t(38) = 2.99$ ,  $p < .01$ , story grammar  $t(38) = 6.37$ ,  $p < .001$ , and literate language  $t(38) = 6.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . A final set of analyses compared the two groups of five-year-olds to ensure that there were no differences between the two cohorts. As expected, no differences were found. Taken together, then, these results showed that there were significant developmental changes in children's narrative skills over the

Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations for Narrative Domains

Narrative Skill	4-year-olds Year 1	5-year-olds Year 2	5-years-old Year 1
	( $n = 63$ ) $M (SD)$	( $n = 39$ ) $M (SD)$	( $n = 55$ ) $M (SD)$
Conversational Autonomy	2.22 (.99)	2.69 (.89)	2.85 (.80)
Story Grammar	7.49 (3.71)	11.28 (2.87)	10.75 (3.06)
Literate Language	5.95 (2.69)	8.08 (2.53)	7.65 (2.24)

preschool years. By age five, children were not only more autonomous than the younger children, but also shared more complex and better organized stories that incorporated more sophisticated language.

Given these findings, post-hoc analyses were then run to identify the specific story grammar and literate language elements that developed between the ages of three and five. Table 2 shows the percentage of children who either did not include a particular element (i.e., obtained a score of 0) or included the element with minimal sophistication (i.e., obtained a score of 1). What seems to be evident based on the results presented in Table 1, is that the narrative

structural components that developed between ages 3;6 to 5;6, then, were the motivating events that triggered and propelled the story: the feelings, thoughts, and desires of the characters; the characters' plans and actions to solve a problem; and an explicit consequence of the problem or a conclusion to the story. These structural components were significantly more complex in the narratives of older children as compared to the narratives of the younger children, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. The literate language elements that developed across the preschool years were the inclusion of a greater variety of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, as well as adverbs.

Table 2  
*Percentage of Children Receiving Low Scores on Individual Story Grammar and Literate Language Elements*

Narrative Skill	4-year-olds Year 1 ( <i>n</i> = 63) (% of 0 – 1 scores)	5-year-olds Year 2 ( <i>n</i> = 39) (% of 0 – 1 scores)	5-year-olds Year 1 ( <i>n</i> = 55) (% of 0 – 1 scores)
<i>Story Grammar</i>			
Character	<b>97%</b>	<b>97%</b>	<b>98%</b>
Setting	<b>95%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>98%</b>
Plan	79%	62%	66%
Consequence	75%	23%	29%
Internal Response	73%	33%	47%
Initiating Event	51%	8%	15%
Action/Attempt	48%	8%	11%
<i>Literate Language</i>			
Subordinating Conjunctions	92%	77%	82%
Mental/Linguistic Verbs	<b>76%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>76%</b>
Elaborated Noun Phrases	<b>71%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>60%</b>
Coordinating Conjunctions	65%	33%	46%
Adverbs	32%	8%	11%

*Note.* Bolded variables represent those skills that do not change across time or age groups and thus do not appear to develop during the preschool years.

No significant differences were found in any of the skills between the two groups of 5-year-olds.



The following two stories told by the same child illustrate the developmental changes observed in the children's narrative skills. The first story, told at age 4, received a story grammar score of 4 (from a total of 21), denoting low complexity, as it lacked many of the main story elements and was not coherently connected. For instance, the child used ambiguous pronouns to refer to the characters (e.g., "he" and "she") and never referred to the characters with labels or names. While there was an initiating event in the narrative ("he's fishing"), this event did not elicit subsequent actions from the characters. Thus, while the child included a plan to complete an action ("he's gonna set up") as well as other actions (e.g., "he's setting up," "he take off," "he's digging"), these components have minimal complexity because they are unrelated to the initiating event of the story. Finally, the child made no reference to internal states or feelings of the characters, nor did she include an explicit conclusion to the story. Similarly, the child's use of language was also relatively low in sophistication and complexity, receiving a score of 6 (from a total of 15).

Fishing. He's fishing! He's fishing, both of them fishing. Boat broken. Turtle. He said, "Oh no, I need help." He said, "Help me, help me." She said, "He can't eat my ear." I'm fishing in my ear. He said "Oh, I'm a robot." He flip over the water. He said, "I'm save you." He save him and he slippery. No, he went away. He flip over and pants went down. And pants fell down him. He got boots. See? He got boots. He's take off boots. Ew! That's disgusting. Ew, you disgusting. He take off his dirty shirt off. He's crying. He's fishing. He's gonna set up the carts. He's setting up digs. Dig, dig. He's digging like this. Digging like that. Now he's fishing. Now he's fishing. He went on the beach. The end.

A year later, the same child not only told a longer narrative using more sophisticated language, but

her story incorporated more basic elements that were interconnected logically. For example, she used characters with labels (e.g., "the boy" and "the dog") in addition to ambiguous pronouns, and included a complex initiating event ("the boy is fishing") that elicited actions from the characters. She incorporated many plans that were related to the initiating event (e.g., "he was gonna catch the turtle," "I'm gonna hook you"), as well as many actions that were also related (e.g., "the boy got in the water," "the little boy was catching the turtle," "he was trying to eat him," etc.). Finally, she included an internal response ("the doggy was mad at the turtle") and an explicit consequence ("the doggy was friends again"), both related to the initiating event. This narrative received scores of 16 and 11 for story grammar and literate language, respectively.

The boy is fishing. The boy was catching a fish. And then he had a dog. The little boy's catching the fish again. And then the boy got in the water. And then the doggy and the frog fell in the water. Go in the water! The little boy was catching the turtle for the hook to get the jelly. And then the stick was coming. And then he was gonna catch the turtle and eat him. He wanna eat him because he's hungry. Then the doggy was mad at the turtle. And then the little boy said, "Huh." And then the doggy grabbed his own neck, grabbed his own hair. And then he was trying to eat him. And he was trying to get on him, to get on his back. Then the boy carried his dog. And then the turtle was by his foot. And then he was just crying. And then the boy said, "Leave my dog alone. Stop biting his foot. Hey, I'm gonna hook you. I'm gonna hook your behind." And then the boy is sitting down. Riding in the lake. Fishing. He's running because he trying to run in the water so the turtle don't catch him. And then he got the water. And then he fell asleep. After that, the little boy is catching himself a lot of fish. And then he closed it and put a stick in there. And then the dog said, "Woof woof." And then he pet his head. The

little boy pants were falling down. And then he show his shorts. And then the little boy said, "Tap tap tap is still in the water." The little boy touch his head and said, "Oh no, the doggy fell in the water and then turn around." And to the lake. And then he leaked, leaked, leaked down in the water. And the little boy took his shirt off. And then he took off his boot. And then the water fell. The little boy pulled his pants down and show his shorts. And then he rip his thing off his pants and off his shirt. And then his dog washed him. And then the boy on his pants with no shirt on. And then the little boy notices his shirt is back. Then he was catching the turtle. And then he's gonna crack his stick. He's gonna throw it in the water and hit. And then he said, "Leave him alone. He's sleeping. Hey, wake up. I killed a turtle." Then the turtle he was sleeping and carry his turtle home to go to bed. And then he was laying his scooter. And then the turtle was there dead. And he got dead. And then he was shoveling. And then, after that, then he was trying to put a flower there for somebody else. And then he was trying to poke him with that. And put dirt on him. Then he hurt his head. And then he hooked the dog. And then the turtle grabbed the fishing pole. And then, after that, then he's trying to grab the bucket and get the thing. The doggy was friends again. The end.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, our results suggest that the narrative development of low-income Latino children in the United States follows a similar trajectory to that described in past research (e.g., Berman & Slobin, 1994). More specifically, for low-income Latino children in the United States, as is the case for children from across socio-cultural backgrounds, the preschool years appear to be a critical period for the development of narrative structure. Between the ages of 3 and 4, children became increasingly more competent narrators, and by the end of the preschool years (i.e., when children are approximately 5), they were capable of sharing coherent and complete narratives

with only minimal scaffolding or prompting from an adult elicitor.

A closer investigation of the children's narratives highlighted the specific skills that developed during the period between the ages of 3½ and 5½. Generally speaking, children gained skills that were directly aimed at building narrative cohesion. Specifically, at around age 5, the children began to include, systematically and consistently, initiating events that set the stage for the plot to unfold. They then built a comprehensible storyline through interconnected elements such as actions, attempts, and plans that helped to move the events along and ultimately reached a resolution. The development of these skills is most likely a reflection of developmental growth in both cognitive and linguistic domains during this chronological age range. For example, with regards to cognitive development, children's planning skills (e.g., thinking about the sequencing of acts) are undergoing rapid changes, with most marked gains made by age 5 (McColgan & McCormack, 2008). These advanced planning skills might help children to organize the main components of the story in a more integrated manner. Similarly, children's lexicon increases dramatically throughout the early childhood years (Clark, 2009). Because of this growth, children are able to incorporate more varied -and more complex- language, and to express more sophisticated thoughts in their narratives with increasing age.

The ability to link main narrative components was further aided by specific syntactic achievements. Children in our study used more unique types of coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions over the two years. Our results, thus, corroborate past findings showing that although younger preschoolers

predominantly use the connective *and* in their narratives, with increasing age they begin to incorporate different types of coordinating (e.g., *but, or*) and subordinating (e.g., *because, after, if*) conjunctions. In addition, children also included more adverbs that helped to establish temporal links between events as well as augment their descriptions of the story actions. Thus, across the preschool years, low-income Latino children are increasingly able to use the various syntactic and discursive tools necessary to build cohesion in the narratives they share (Berman & Slobin, 1994).

Nevertheless, other macro- and micro-structural skills appeared to still be developing by the end of the preschool years. Our results showed, for instance, that even at age 5½, the children did not make mention of specific characters or settings in their stories, and instead relied on pronouns or non-specific descriptors such as “he,” “a frog,” “there,” and “water.” This finding does not seem to be unique to low-income Latino children, but rather seems to be reflective of a limitation in preschoolers’ narrative skills across socio-linguistic groups (e.g., Álvarez, 2003; Hickmann et al., 1996; Hickmann, 2003). This lack of specific orienting information impacts the narrative coherence, by making it more difficult for an interlocutor to follow the story, and might reflect the limited contextual knowledge common in the preschool years. In other words, preschoolers have limited awareness of the need to tailor their narratives to match the knowledge of the audience, so they often do not include specific orienting information in their narratives (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). Instead, this is a skill that seems to develop in the early school years (Hickmann et al., 1996; Hickmann, 2003), perhaps, at least in part, as a result of the major changes in theory of mind understanding in the preschool years

and the resulting advances in perspective-taking skills during the school years (Wellman, 2011).

The lack of introduction to key referents such as character and setting is not only reflected in the story’s overall organization, but further impacts the microstructure. For example, meaningful and specific descriptions of character and setting are oftentimes represented in richly embellished noun phrases (Álvarez, 2003). Thus, it stands to reason that our findings suggested that the inclusion of elaborated noun phrases is another skill that has not yet by developed at the end of the preschool years. Instead, the low-income Latino children in our study typically included no more than one modifier per noun.

Our results also suggest that mental/linguistic verbs do not yet appear to be included consistently in the developing narratives of preschoolers. Although research does show that children begin using mental state words such as “think” and “know” early in development (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995), the early uses are often conversational (e.g., “Wanna know something?”) or idiomatic (e.g., “I don’t know”) (Dunn, Brown & Beardsall, 1991). The lack of developmental progression in the incorporation of mental/linguistic verbs might not only reflect vocabulary and social knowledge limitations, but also limitations in their expression of theory of mind. In fact, researchers, argue that the acquisition of mental state language and the development of a theory of mind are intimately linked and interdependent (Olson, 1988). In other words, a developed theory of mind enables children to think about their own and others’ speech and actions in terms of mental states. With the development of theory of mind comes children’s ability to regard their utterances as expressions of belief, to distinguish their

beliefs from their utterances, and to distinguish their beliefs and utterances from reality (de Rosnay & Hughes, 2006; Symons et al., 2005). Although theory of mind is already developing in the preschool years, our results suggest that it might be difficult for children to express this newly acquired knowledge.

Taken together, our study showed that, at least in macro- and micro- structural aspects of narratives, low-income Latino children are developing in the same manner as other children, and that the preschool years are indeed critical for gaining the skills necessary to tell cohesive stories independently. Given the lack of descriptive longitudinal studies on narrative development, the present study is, thus, a crucial first step in describing low-income U.S. Latino children's narrative development across the preschool years. However, it is important to note that, in our study, the stories children shared were elicited with the aid of a picture book and, as such, might not be representative about other narrative contexts, such as stories of past experiences. As a result, there is a need for additional research to investigate this topic across various narrative contexts. Moreover, in our study children were not restricted to use one language, but were allowed to code-switch between languages, which might have boosted their narrative skills. Nevertheless, there is a real need to investigate the narrative skills of multilingual children across languages, especially as we know that different language structures offer different structural possibilities.

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