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Enacting Relationships through Dialogic Storytelling

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Abstract

This study investigates the dialogic affordances of story circles, a small group storytelling activity, enacted in three lower socioeconomic status preschool classrooms. Results show that children employed a range of dialogic strategies from ideationally populating their stories with other children to negotiating participation and making evaluative appraisals of children's stories. Boys, in particular, engaged in a more pronounced co-constructive storytelling style as the children used stories to enact relationships through the discourse systems of ideation, negotiation, and appraisal. The children's storytelling reveals the importance of child-led, dialogic talk for supporting meaning making in early childhood education.

Keywords: storytelling, early childhood, dialogic talk

Enacting Relationships through Dialogic Storytelling

1.1 Purpose

Centering dialogue in early childhood offers a sociocultural antidote to limited classroom talk (Muhonen, Verma, von Suchodoletz & Rasku-Puttonen, 2020) and increasingly skill-based instruction (Flynn & Schachter, 2017) that leaves little room for authentic sense-making and worthy classroom performances in early childhood education. Dialogic talk emphasizes “multivocality, openness, human connection, and the co-creation of meaning” in ways that make visible the contrasts and convergences between one’s own perspectives and commitments and those of interacting others (Black, 2008, p. 94). “Struggling with another’s discourse” (Bahktin, 1981, p. 348) through the exchange of competing and complimentary ideas made possible by dialogue awakens the mind to a world of thinking and understanding not easily replicated by more teacher directed exchanges like when a teacher asks a question, invites a student response, and evaluates or provides feedback on the response, a pattern of dyad exchange that dominates Western style schooling commonly known as IRE (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975).

The purpose of this study is to build on a previous inquiry into the storytelling of lower socioeconomic status (SES) preschool children participating in story circles in multicultural, multilingual classrooms in the United States (U.S.). Story circles are a small group, child-led storytelling activity in which children meet weekly and take turns telling stories of their own choosing. A previous, month-long study demonstrated that young children have already internalized and can reproduce a repertoire of multiple distinct story genres, rather than one single, idealized pattern drawn from Eurocentric meaning-making (Flynn, 2018a). The idea that children draw from a larger repertoire of underlying meaning-making patterns when they story experience has been

shown by Champion (2003) and others (Hyon & Sulzby, 1994; Katz & Champion, 2008) when investigating the storytelling of African American, elementary school students. Young children's multiple patterned ways of using language reflect the meaning-making priorities of cultural communities in which they participate (Flynn, 2018b; Champion, 2003; Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2011; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Schick & Melzi, 2010). In story circles, multiple genres and culturally shaped meaning-making preferences unfold in a dialogic exchange (Flynn, 2018b).

The dialogic quality of young children's storytelling is evident through the questions, comments, and interactive exchange that children maintain as they tell stories, as well as through the continuation of ideas. Both the previous month-long study (Flynn, 2016; 2018a; 2018b) and this larger year long investigation of story circles (Flynn, Hoy, Lea, & García, 2021; Flynn, 2021) showed that children introduced, continued, and varied ideas that run like threads from story to story and week to week as children told stories that responsively continued participants, processes, and circumstances from one story to another. The longer, yearlong investigation of story circles showed that the length and syntactic complexity of children's stories increased over the course of the school year (Flynn, 2021) as children developed a more complete and complex "meaning potential" (Halliday, 2006). Further, children told stories in a responsive dialogue in which they continued ideational threads while borrowing, combining, and juxtaposing linguistic and cultural forms (Flynn, 2021).

This report on preschool children's dialogic talk in story circles closely examines the interactive, meaning-making strategies employed by young children including their questions, comments, suggestions. The ultimate goal is to better understand how dialogic talk, invited and sustained by oral storytelling, supports meaning-making in lower SES, preschool classrooms.

1.2 Dialogic Nature of Discourse

Moments that reveal the dialogic nature of talk invite learners to negotiate the tension between self and other, at once clarifying one's identity in relationship to others and provoking the recognition of other's perspectives (Black, 2008). Dialogic moments are powerful meaning-making opportunities in the classroom because of the complexity of attending, in the moment, to multiparty, relational uses of language and reasoning. As Wells argues, "At school, the development of children's understanding of their world - of themselves and others as well as of the content of the curriculum - needs to be understood in terms of a co-construction of knowledge through jointly conducted activities that are mediated by artifacts of various kinds, of which dialogue is the most powerful" (2007, p. 245).

Teaching practice centered on dialogic talk (See Howe & Abedin, 2013 for a review) often takes its inspiration from the seminal scholarship of Bakhtin who argued persuasively for the fundamentally dialogic nature of all discourse. Bakhtin points out even at the semantic level of the spoken or written word an animating tension exists such that no word "relates to its object in a singular way." Instead, any utterance is overlain with "qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276).

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue (Holquist, 1981, p. 280).

From this perspective, all discourse is fundamentally dialogic in nature. However, some stylistic forms, like the novel (Bakhtin, 1981), and some participation frameworks, like multiparty discussions

(O'Connor & Michaels, 2007), seem to be better suited to surface and leverage the dialogic quality of discourse, which Wells proposes is more or less present in different kinds of discourse (Wells, 2007).

Often, what gets viewed as monologic is in fact dialogic. Concepts like heteroglossia point out the way that multiple voices, attitudes, and world views can be in dialogue in one text (Bakhtin, 1981). Linguistic resources like using projection to give voice to another person's perspective enable multiple voices to intersect in a single text (Martin & Rose, 2007). In this way, more than one social dialect, set of sociocultural commitments, and authorial voices meet in the telling of any one story. When multiple voices meet, divergent and convergent points of view can be expressed, requiring accommodation and inviting the kind of potential conflict schools often seek to suppress.

1.3 Dialogic Talk in Education

Dialogic talk has been conceptualized in education in different ways. For instance, dialogic talk has been investigated in relationship to productive discussions and accountable classroom talk. Research with teachers led to the elaboration of talk moves as tools that teachers across disciplines use to facilitate discussion and support improved reasoning (Michaels & O'Connor, 2015; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007). Talk tools include inviting students to take time to think, inviting other students to restate a learner's claim or reasoning, and asking questions of students that probe their evidence or reasoning. Talk moves support dialogic talk by putting learners in conversation with other learners and other "knowledgeable, sociocultural voices that are not physically present in the classroom" (van der Veen, Michaels, Dobber, van Kruistum, & van Oers, 2021, p. 82).

Centered on classroom discussions in elementary and secondary classrooms, the viability of dialogic classroom talk of this kind has only recently been more systematically explored in early childhood classrooms. Initial results show an increase in children's participation and improvements

in communicative competence like taking longer turns, using more words, and using more syntactically complex constructions (van der Veen et al., 2021). There is potential value in inviting child-led, dialogic talk in preschool classrooms in order to support language learning.

The roots of dialogic talk as a form of culturally relevant pedagogy lie in research demonstrating the cultural contrast between European American middle class preference for dyadic communication in which one partner at a time speaks and the triadic and multiparty interactions typical of many other cultural communities (Brown, 2011; de León, 2011; Rogoff, 2003; Schieffelin, 1990). Research into triadic and multiparty communication highlights the important learning that occurs as children observe, listen, and keenly attend to mature participation, including as overhearers of talk in which they are not the speaker or direct addressee (de León, 2011; Rogoff, 2003).

Dialogic talk has been explored as a form of culturally relevant pedagogy most notably in Au's work on Kamehameha Early Education Program's approach to reading instruction (KEEP) (Au, 1980). The KEEP approach engaged children aged five through eight in small group reading instruction in which children interwove "text-derived information with personal experience and existing knowledge" as they made connections between the text and their own experience (Au, 1980, p. 94). The more loosely synchronized talk between children and the teacher closely resembled a Hawaiian speech event called talk story in which two or more speakers cooperatively produce a "rambling personal experience narrative mixed with folk materials" (Au, 1980, p. 95), including swapping personal experiences, jokes, and insults. In the dialogic exchanges of the KEEP reading program, different patterns of interaction occurred. For instance, a child may hold the floor while being supported by two or three other children who freely interject. At other times, two children may hold more of a joint turn in which they provide either complementary or contradictory information to one

another. Competition and cooperation, convergence and contrast are all part of what makes dialogic talk an effective support for the development of language and reasoning, because moments of affinity and conflict both bring to awareness the thinking of the self and other.

Interested in the viability of oral storytelling as a form of culturally relevant, dialogic talk, we asked:

What dialogic strategies do children employ during story circles?

How do dialogic strategies support young children's meaning making?

2.1 Theoretical Orientation

This report on dialogic talk in the context of young children's storytelling draws from a larger study of story circles in three lower SES preschool classrooms, shaped by a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach (Flynn, Hoy, Lea, & García, 2021; Flynn, 2021). SFL posits that language is a social semiotic system through which children construe experience in social context (Halliday, 2006). As a meaning-making system, language enables children to simultaneously make three distinct, but interconnected meanings rooted in functional purpose, in SFL referred to as the metafunctions of language: 1) to represent experience, 2) to enact relationships, and 3) to organize discourse into larger meaningful, textual wholes (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Halliday, 2006; Martin & Rose, 2007). Importantly, the three metafunctions are realized simultaneously (Halliday, 2006), interwoven with one another in complex ways (Martin & Rose, 2007).

The metafunctions of language are realized through discourse systems like the system of ideation used to represent experience, the system of negotiation through which people enact exchanges, and the system of appraisal used to express attitudes (Martin & Rose, 2007). Though there are other discourse systems, ideation, negotiation, and appraisal made up the focus of this study.

Children use the system of ideation to interpretively construct, or construe, experience. The sequence of activities that unfold in talk as well as the people, places, and associated qualities and circumstances represent the goings on of children's experience (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2007). Experiential meanings are construed through doing, sensing, saying, being, having, and existing processes, realized in grammar through verbal groups. Associated participant roles like actor, senser, or sayer are typically realized through nominal groups and modifiers like adjectives. Adverbs and prepositional phrases represent the circumstances in which experience occurs like the time, place, or manner (Christie & Derewianka, 2008).

Children use the systems of appraisal and negotiation to enact relationships and make interpersonal meanings with language. The system of negotiation is concerned with the moves speakers make when interacting with one another like giving or requesting information through speech functions. Statements, questions, offers, and commands position children in relationship to one another, inviting a response (Martin & Rose, 2007). The speaker assumes a speech role with their interacting move while positioning others into related, predictable speech roles (Eggins & Slade, 1997). In response to an initiating move, children can comply with and acknowledge an offer or demand; or, they can resist the way that they are positioned in the exchange making a challenging move. The system of negotiation illuminates the way that power is negotiated through talk, showing both who assumes and is accorded the right to speak within a social context and simultaneously how relationships of solidarity and difference are negotiated by interactants.

Interpersonal meanings that enact relationships also unfold through the system of appraisal. Through appraisal, children express attitudes in talk. Appraisal includes expressions of appreciation like a speaker's reaction to and evaluation of reality, expressions of affect like when a speaker

expresses their feelings, expressions of judgement about social value, and amplification like when a speaker minimizes or magnifies the intensity of experience (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Grammatically, children express attitudes through evaluative resources of language including repetition, expressive phonology, imperatives, adverbial expressions of certainty or doubt, and affect expressions like love, hate, excitement, dread to name a few (Labov, 1972; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2007). Children can amplify their attitudes using graduation to turn up the power of an evaluation using intensifiers like 'very,' or 'really,' or comparators like 'more than,' 'better,' or 'too much' (Martin & Rose, 2007).

3.1 Methods

3.2 Context

The current study of story circles took place in three classrooms in an urban preschool setting in the U.S. serving a racially, ethnically, and linguistically mixed group of young children that included several refugee and recent immigrant families. Each of the classrooms served roughly 15 children. Children and teachers in the classroom participated in story circles which met once a week from October to May of 2016-2017.

3.3 Participants

A total of 44 children participated in the story circle activity over the course of the school year with seven of those children either leaving the classroom during the course of the school year or entering the classroom later in the year, leading to only partial participation. The 37 ongoing storytellers were divided into six groups, two groups per classroom. In a typical story circle, four to six children participated as absences in the classroom were somewhat common over the course of the school year.

Just over half of the children who participated were male (52%). The children averaged four years and five months of age in the fall ($SD=5.90$ months) and ranged in age from three years and three months to five years and two months. The children in these racially and ethnically diverse classrooms reflected a number of parent-reported ethnic backgrounds: 32% European American, 25% mixed in terms of racial or ethnic heritage, 20% Arabic, 16% Latinx, 7% African American.

The study was approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB). Both parental consent and child assent processes were used during the study. All reported names in the study are pseudonyms selected to reflect participating children's ethnic background.

3.4 Data Collection

The storytelling interactions reported in this study were collected in the course of children's weekly story circles. The research team audio recorded and transcribed all story circles with transcription double checked by a second member of the research team to ensure accuracy. The rhythm and intonation of children's speech was taken into account during transcription of children's stories, though a detailed analysis of prosody was not undertaken due to the difficulty of carrying out such a sensitive analysis with audio collected during the course of a typical preschool classroom day. Children in this sample told stories in short clausal bursts with language unfolding through phrasal parts, often reflecting pauses to think as children spontaneously construed experience. We used a period to signal when children had a pronounced break, more than the taking a breath often signaled through a comma. We used a period, question mark, or exclamation point when children fulfilled the speech functions of statement, question, or command, using clausal structure and intonation as a guide even if the clausal burst did not correspond to a grammatically complete sentence. Quotation marks signal a shift in voice common when speakers report others' speech.

Members of the research team visited each classroom two days a week for the duration of the school year, serving as participant observers. Researchers divided their time between observations of children's play and fulfilling the role of helpful adults in the classroom, assisting children in transitioning from activity to activity, listening to children's unfolding play, and documenting through observational notes and photographs the ongoing happenings of classroom life. On most occasions, more than one researcher was present in the classroom. Each week, the research team met to discuss observations and emerging understandings of the children's stories, art, and play. Tentative ongoing theories and questions about the nature of children's storytelling, individually and as a group, were posed and documented throughout the data collection process through research team discussion and observational notes. In this way, the analytic process occurred concurrently with data collection.

3.5 Data Analysis

We analyzed the children's storytelling interactions by identifying children's utterances that occurred during the telling of stories. The research team engaged in an emergent coding process categorizing the way children realized dialogue through language according to functional purpose and the associated discourse systems.

We open coded one story circle group's interactions, settling on more established labels for each type of dialogic strategy as open-coding proceeded. Ultimately, we applied a total of 12 open codes to the data. Through a second level of coding, dialogic strategies were refined and collapsed. For instance, we collapsed the move types - bid for turn, bid for another child's turn, bid to be included in a story, bid for another child to be included in a story, and bid to end a story and have a turn - into a single interactional type - bid for participation based on frequency and shared functional

purpose of the moves. See Table 1. for description and exemplars of dialogic strategies reflecting the discourse systems of ideation, negotiation, and appraisal.

Table 1. *Dialogic Strategies, Description, and Examples*

Discourse System	Dialogic Strategy	Description	Exemplar
Ideation	Including a Child in a Story	Child or teacher named as participant in the story	Once upon a time. I played <i>with Amelia</i> . When. In the. In the snow. And we went sledding. . . .
	Excluding a Child in a Story	Child named as explicitly not included in the events of a story	I said all my thing. On paper. Saying June 11th. And I write it in Spanish. Teachers at my birthday. Teacher Sofia. And Teacher Madison. And Teacher Loretta. And he. <i>And not Emelina</i> . Makes you go crazy with my dollies. . . .
Negotiation	Suggesting a Story Element	Interjection that nominated story elements	Jael: And then fishies came. And just ate. Caleb: <i>Say there was an exploding barrel.</i>
	Bid for Participation	Utterance seeking inclusion in a story, another child's inclusion in the story, a story turn, or another child's turn to tell a story; attempt to end long stories to secure a turn	Damon: And come Miguel and he had no. Miguel: <i>Alex</i> Damon: No pants. And come Alex and he had no. . . .
	Questioning	Statement of question about story elements	Hakeem: <i>The little arm? How could an arm eat a mouse?</i> Abia: It s just a story.

Appraisal	Evaluative Comment	Interjection that expressed disbelief, surprise, shock, or other evaluative response to story; comments expressing interpersonal connection to story elements	<i>A head of a meatball! I would love to eat that. I like it.</i>
	Repeating for Emphasis	Repetition of story element	Noah: And one was a Jael head. One was a goat head. And one was a cat head. Jael: <i>Cat head.</i> Meow.

4.1 Findings

Through their story circle interactions, the children enacted relationships by ideationally populating their stories with child participants drawn from the story circle, negotiating speech roles and rights, and expressing attitudes. While doing so, the children developed a shared experiential world as they constructed larger textual wholes through their individual stories and their stories' contribution to the larger dialogic fabric co-constructed by each story circle group.

The children employed a range of dialogic strategies during the telling of stories in the story circle (See Table 2). The most prevalent strategy involved drawing on the ideational system of language by naming children and teachers in the classroom as characters in the story (61%) in ways that included a child in the action (60%) or, in a smaller number of cases, explicitly excluded a child from unfolding action in the story (1%). Children used the system of negotiation 20% of the time to both determine speech rights as well as desired ideational focus of the stories. Through the system of appraisal, the children expressed attitudes emphasizing ideational meanings through repetition and

evaluating the goings on of stories through attitudinal comments of disbelief, shock, and approval (19%).

Table 2. *Frequency of Dialogic Strategies in the Story Circle*

Discourse System	Dialogic Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Ideation	Including a Child in a Story	857	60%
	Excluding a Child in a Story	15	1%
Negotiation	Suggesting a Story Element	79	5%
	Bid for Participation	140	10%
	Questioning	87	5%
Appraisal	Evaluative Comment	249	17%
	Repeating	26	2%
	Total	1453	100%

Variation existed amongst participants with boys in the sample engaging in a more interactive, dialogic storytelling and story listening style. Boys accounted for 66% of the dialogic strategies. Girls contributed 29% of the strategies. The identity of 5% of interactive commenters remained undetermined. In story circles, girls overwhelmingly interacted with others by including other children as participants in their stories using the ideational system of language to enact relationships; inclusion made up 78% of girls' dialogic strategies. All the other interactional strategies were used sparingly by girls.

In contrast, boys signaled active listening and co-constructed stories with one another, not just making up the majority of dialogic strategies, but using a more diverse range of strategies as well. Over half (56%) of boys dialogic strategies involved casting a classmate as a story participant. Boys more actively used the system of negotiation to determine speech rights and ideational focus stories.

They suggested a story element 6%, made a bid for participation 11%, questioned the storyteller 7% of the time. The boys used evaluative comments to interject during the telling of a story actively expressing attitudes about the ongoing ideas expressed in the circle (18%).

Next, we present representative exemplars of the way that children used the system of ideation, negotiation, and appraisal to enact dialogue in the story circle, highlighting how children included other children in stories, made bids for participation, suggested story elements, and interjected with evaluative comments.

4.2 Enacting Dialogue through the System of Ideation

Children used the system of ideation to realize dialogue in the story circles by selecting children as story protagonists and demonstrating awareness of and sensitivity to children's favored ideational foci. The most prevalent dialogic strategy used by the children in this sample of storytellers consisted of including classroom children, especially those in the story circle, in one's story. In the context of the classroom, young children of varied backgrounds, abilities, and experiences formed affinities. Telling stories populated with story circle mates made these connections concrete as children used their stories to enact relationships with one another, their teachers, and important family and friends. The majority of stories that included classroom children and teachers involved the children who were actively present in the story circle group in which the story was told and involved imagined or wished for adventures rather than delineating experiences that had actually occurred.

As the year progressed, the children delved into well worn ideas, continuing and building on favorite stories of classmates. When children populated their stories with classmates, they frequently told stories that reflected an understanding of the included child's own favorite ongoing ideas, demonstrating the kind of recognition of self and other brought to awareness by dialogic talk. The

ideational content of the story served a dialogic, relationship-building function by centering and continuing particular ideas. Taking up and continuing ideas was common in this sample of children and another group of storytellers who continued ideas - participants, processes, and circumstances - like threads from story to story (Flynn, 2018b; 2021). For example, Emma told a story with Alex as the main participant. Alex initiated the group's interest in the mythical Dinosaurland, a presumably fictional land that became the setting for the children's imagined adventures like riding on a dinosaur's back. A repeated convention emerged from this group's shared storytelling of naming classmates and teachers' body parts as dinner items for dinosaurs ("Dinner at Dinosaurland" interactions are reported elsewhere Hoy, Lea, & Flynn, 2021).

In this story, Emma began by drawing on her group's established story convention of introducing children in the story circle group and naming their body parts as food for a dinosaur by saying, "Here comes [child name]" Instead of continuing with the convention by naming a body part to be devoured, Emma shifted the ideational focus to Alex, the original author of the convention, as a participant embarking on an adventure involving dinosaurs and friends (bold signal members of the story circle included as participants in the story)

Once upon a time I was. Here comes. Here comes. Here comes. Um. Here comes. **Dasha** with no ears. Here comes. Uh. What s that that happed? Here comes **Alex**. And he has. A dinosaur friend and he. And he went to the dinosaur museum. And I saw a friend. And. And I say, "Yay yay yay." And. And I went with that friend. That was a little boy that was a baby boy. And. And he was still a kid. But he could not talk. But this time. But. But then we went to dinosaur then he could still say dinosaurs. And **Alex** was there too.

Ideationally, Emma began the story, establishing Alex as a central participant in the action while drawing on several ideational threads maintained in the story circle group like a dinosaur friend as a

participant of interest and a dinosaur museum as an important circumstance of location: “Here comes Alex. And he has. A dinosaur friend and he. And he went to the dinosaur museum.”

And he saw dinosaurs. And he saw more dinosaurs. And he saw more dinosaurs. And **Alex** saw more dinosaurs. And saw more dinosaurs. And **Alex** saw more. That place is so huge. He just wanted to go over and over and over again. And wanted to see it. And then we went to dinosaur park where there was still more dinosaurs. And more and more and more and more for him. He was like, I just want to go and see the. Just want to go and see more dinosaurs and. I was like that too. And I just wanted to see the pterodactyl.

Ideationally, Emma construed Alex as a senser of dinosaurs on a large scale, using evaluative resources to amplify the quantity of dinosaurs that are seen. For instance, she repeated a clause to reinforce how many dinosaurs were seen saying, “And Alex saw more dinosaurs. And saw more dinosaurs. And Alex saw more.” Language like “more dinosaurs,” “so huge,” and “still more,” combined with the repetition of clauses invite the listener to imagine the presence of dinosaurs on a large scale, which is a more particular meaning than simply introducing the presence of dinosaurs. In moments like this, children’s desire to build connections with other storytellers, invited and reinforced using language in ways that were specific, descriptive, and evaluative - more advanced uses of language for young children (Nicolopoulou, Ilgaz, & Shiro, 2021). Emma cast Alex’s experience as an internal experience of desire, using a sensing process and resources like graduation to amplify the experience: “He just *wanted to go* over and over and over again. And *wanted to see* it.”

And. And then. And then **Dasha**. And then **Damon** came and he was like, “What **Alex?**” And. Then I. Then **Alex** said “I just saw a lot of dinosaurs.” And **Damon** was like, “Wow, dinosaurs? I want to go see them too.” And **Alex** showed him around just like I did. To him. And he saw more dinosaurs. Yes. More dinosaurs. And he saw more dinosaurs. He saw more dinosaurs.

Emma introduced other children present in the circle as participants in the story as Dasha and Damon enter the scene. In a moment of heteroglossia, Emma construed Alex and Damon as sayers

rather than actors as other voices populate the story. Emma had Damon give voice to a reinforcement of her appraisal of seeing so many dinosaurs when he said, “Wow, dinosaurs?” In moments like this multiple attitudes dialogue in a single story, in this case cohesively. The concept of heteroglossia points out the ongoing tension in language between pulls toward order, unity and disorder and difference. Emma’s is a story of social cohesion with voices aligned emphasizing a sense of togetherness. Ideationally, Damon echoed Alex’s internal process of a desire to see dinosaurs when he said, “I *want to go see* them too.”

He didn t know there was a secret entry where there was real dinosaurs. And then we went to Dinosaurland. And then there was actually real dinosaurs there. And then no one even noticed. That there was. Hundred and hundred and hundreds. Of them. For **Alex**. And **Alex** had more and more and more and more. More and more and more and more and more dinosaurs friends. And he was like. And then. And then we went to dinosaur park again. And then. Then. Then. And then **Alex** like saw. What? There was a secret pathway. And then we went to the secret pathway and then. It led to where the real dinosaurs are. Led to the. And then we went through another secret pathway.

In the story of dinosaur friends, Emma added new ideational dimensions like a “secret entry,” “secret pathway,” and “real dinosaurs.” She drew on shared ideational threads from the group, having the children go to Dinosaurland, one of Alex’s story inventions. Emma used evaluative resources of language to highlight the remarkableness of all the children saw at Dinosaurland by commenting, “there was *actually* real dinosaurs there.”

That led to cheetahs. That. That were my favorite. And I. And. And. And my cheetah friends were. Cheetah girl and cheetah boy. They were there trying to fight the bad guys to save their cheetah friends. And then. And here comed. Every single person and **Mariana**. And I wanted to see all the dinosaurs. So we went there and went there and went there and went there. Every single time. Until. All of the friends loveded at the dinosaurs. Even **Alex**. And he wanted to go over and over again. So yeah. He askeded his mom again and again and again and again. To go again. And then he had so much fun he just wanted to. Go over and go over and go over day and night. He loved the dinosaurs. And he gaved all of them a kiss. (Laughs.)”

As the story drew to a conclusion, Emma included the other two children present in the story circle, Mariana and, indirectly, Diego. Diego told stories in the circle in which he starred in adventures as cheetah boy. Emma's inclusion of the cheetahs acknowledged this important alter ego in a moment that demonstrates how ideational resources like populating stories with story circle mates and their favorite characters realized dialogue between stories told in the circle. Emma again echoed the conventional refrain used in the dinosaur dinner stories told by members of the story circle group when she said, "And here comed. Every single person and Mariana." The oft repeated phrase was used at the beginning of the story when Emma said, "Here comes Alex." Including the group's convention to begin and end the story interjected the voices of her story circle mates into the story in another heteroglossic moment, situating the story in conversation with the other children's ongoing storytelling while creating a dialogue of voices within the story.

In a story about dinosaur friends, that included children from the story circle group, drew on shared ideas about the participants, places, and processes that are important, and heteroglossically included multiple voices, ideational resources of language enabled dialogic storytelling; and in doing so, helped children establish and maintain relational affinity. Emma emphasized the point and concluded the story with the declaration, "All of the friends loveded at the dinosaurs. Even Alex He loved the dinosaurs. And he gaved all of them a kiss. (Laughs.)" The story ended with the journey of friendship and dinosaurs climatically concluding with a kiss - a complete story that amplified important shared experiential meanings while building relationships of friendship and love. Emma's story illustrates the primary dialogic strategy used by girls in the sample as ideational populating reinforced relationships of affinity.

Children's use of ideation to realize dialogue could also be more combative and "tactical" (Goodwin, 1990) as the children used the story circle participation framework as a way not just to establish affinity, but to manage daily classroom disputes, and take up conflict, itself, as an animating idea. One group, in particular, featured a small group of boys who maintained and managed ongoing camaraderie and competition in the story circle and in the context of their classroom play. In one such instance, Noah assumed the role of a dragon, a frequent character in this group of storytellers that dated back to their first stories in the circle. Just as the children in the previous vignette maintained a conventional way of starting stories and introducing participants by saying, "Here comes [child's name] . . .," this group of storytellers often drew on a repeated convention for introducing participants stemming back to their first story circle. In that first circle, Jael said, "I am a goat who runs around town . . ." to start his story, a repeated way of beginning that he continued over the course of the school year. In the very next story, Noah began, "I am a dragon. Who blows fire. . . ." Many months later, Noah drew on this established group convention to begin his story in another instance of drawing on ideational resources to enact a dialogic exchange. He said:

Noah: I m a. I m a dragon who. Who kills people. And I eat people a lot. And I eat **Jael**. Goat and zebra.

Caleb: Me too.

Noah: And they all die.

Caleb: Me too!

Noah: And then I eat. Everyone in the city. And then. They re all dead. And then the. And then I get my dragon friends. And they come with me. And they say. "We got a new world to ourselves." That s. That s. And then. Then. And then indominus came and it killed us. And we. That s the end.

Caleb: I m a dragon and (inaudible) did not kill us. Cuz we set fire on his eyeball. And you went dead. And a zombie. I. I ate the zombie s. Neck. And. And I ate. **Jael** s brain.

And I ate **Noah** s brain. And **Lynn** s brain and everybody s brain. And I want to get the lunch. And my friends comed and set fire. Oh. Everywhere. And ate the people. And killed the people. The end.

The dialogic quality of Noah's story is realized through the echoing of the group's often used convention for beginning a story. Populating the story with his story circle mate Jael and two of Jael's most common sidekick characters - goat and zebra - put the story in conversation with Jael's ongoing ideational story world. A heteroglossic text, Noah takes up multiple voices in the text, his own as well as his dragon friends who proclaim "a new world." While Emma's story of dinosaur friends was a story of social cohesion, Noah's more centrally revealed the forces of disarray and difference. Caleb chimed in in a bid for inclusion, negotiating a place in the unfolding action as an equally ferocious destroyer. As was frequently the case amongst this trio of boy storytellers, Noah, himself, died when an indominus rex, a cross between a tyrannosaurus rex and velociraptor included in the film Jurassic World, killed him and his dinosaur companions.

Caleb's story immediately followed with an orientation that readied the listeners for the experiential context and simultaneously served as a retort to Noah's story: "I m a dragon and (inaudible) did not kill us." Caleb relayed how he ate the brain of each of the children present in the story circle - Jael, Noah, and Lynn. This type of co-constructed, tactical back and forth in which a repeating cast of favorite formidable characters like dragons, dinosaurs, and zombies lay waste to the world, revealing "a new world to ourselves," constituted the ongoing, interactive, dialogic exchange of this group of boys. The world that they storied together centered competition, destruction, and fearsomeness, but it was also about friendship. Noah and his "dragon friends," Caleb and his "friends," and Jael's weekly story sidekicks of eagle, goat, and zebra, all navigate this dangerous world together.

While teachers often seek to minimize and resolve conflict in the classroom, this group of storytellers centered and held conflict - its causes, consequences, and potentials - as a central experiential meaning that they explored together throughout the year. Research has documented a tendency for boys' stories to center conflict or competition between individuals or teams (Flynn, 2019; Nicolopoulou, Cates, de Sá, & Ilgaz, 2014), which can still serve vital functions for boys to express vulnerability, strength, and meaningful relationships to others (Flynn, 2019). Far from generating strife in the classroom, this group of children's stories functioned as an important outlet for frustrations that occurred in the friendships while engaging the children in a kind of world making that was continued through the children's daily play and in direct dialogue with cultural resources that they valued like video games, movies, and television shows.

4.3 Enacting Dialogue through the System of Negotiation

Children frequently voiced the desire to be included and to have a turn, negotiating speech rights, roles, and ideational representation as story participants. Given the centrality of populating stories with story circle mates as the primary dialogic strategy used by girls, being a named participant in story events was particularly important for girls in the study. Although notably, girls accounted for all but one of the fifteen instances of active exclusion, and in other instances, like the one reported below, girls sometimes omitted others, showing how girls could use inclusion, exclusion, or omission as a strategy to enact relationships of affinity and difference. For instance, Abia told a story in which different children in the class were turned into favorite classroom animals while Mía, another child in the story circle nominated herself for inclusion:

Abia: And then. **Lucía** turn into a giraffe. Then. **Marta** turned to a. A horse.

Mía: **Mía**.

Abia: And then **Amirah** turned to a. A wolf.

Mía: You mean **Mía**.

Abia: And then. . . .

Mía made her bid for inclusion immediately after her twin sister Marta was named as a participant. The two twins sought to do everything together in the classroom, likely prompting the more reserved Mía to name herself as the next participant. Mía initiated the negotiation with an interrupting demand to be named an ideational participant in the story. Abia responded by naming another classmate as a participant, resisting Mía's demand. Mía countered with an interrupting statement of correction, "You *mean* Mía." Abia continued the story, challenging Mía's demand to be an experiential participant in the story, while asserting her right as storyteller to hold the floor. In serial stories like Abia's in which children were named in a variation on a repeated theme, like in the dinner at Dinosaurland stories, children frequently clamored to be included, demonstrating the power of children's ideational populating as a dialogic strategy, one worth negotiating over.

The children in this sample also used the system of negotiation to enact relationships by inviting and suggesting story ideas as the children co-constructed stories together. In one group, Yusuf engaged Antonio, in helping to tell his story. Yusuf had been telling a long story detailing a Spider Man adventure when he said:

Yusuf: There. Um. Oh. OK. So when the bad guys could be driving on the car. My webs are still lifting up the car. And I used my super speed. To. To put on ice cream van. Where the bad guy was driving. And I put on so it could smash like doom. And I got. That when I smooshed it down. It bent. And um. And then um what happens after that? When I. When I lift up the big rock. And I put on the bad guy where s he s driving an ice cream van, and and I smoosh it. What happened when I did it? Can you help **Antonio**? What happened?

Antonio: You crashed it like this. You crashed it.

In this instance, the storyteller initiated the negotiation with a question functionally demanding information from Antonio. Antonio complied, responding by giving a story idea. Yusuf continued with the next story event, then paused which invited a multiparty exchange as the teacher used a question to demand clarifying information.

Yusuf: And then when I smooshed it. Then the bad guy died. Because.

Teacher Hannah: Something happened to the bad guy?

Yusuf: He. We. Give him lava. That s inside the potion. When you put the bad guy in. He explosion far far away until he s dead. Right? And **Antonio**, what happens next after that when the lava?

Antonio: And then he died. Then. Crash.

Yusuf: And he get in the volcano and just died. Well the bad guy s name is Joker.

Antonio: The Joker.

Yusuf: Right?

Yusuf continued to engage Antonio in the storytelling exchange. He sought affirmation of the manner of the bad guy's death: "He explosion far far away until he s dead. *Right?*" Then, used a question to functionally demand the next story event. Antonio responded with a statement ratifying the death. Later, Antonio interjected a corrective repetition of Joker s name as "The Joker." Yusuf acknowledged Antonio's statement with another affirmation-seeking, "Right?" Questions like this were a regular feature of Yusuf's storytelling style as he routinely invited agreement from the story circle members, in a similar fashion to documented culturally-specific storytelling styles that seek shared understanding with listeners through statements like "you know" (Minami, 2002). Such strategies are thought to strengthen a sense of togetherness by suggesting shared experience or

understanding. Prompted by his teacher and Antonio's suggested story element, Yusuf continued the exchange, bringing the story to a conclusion.

Teacher Hannah: Think of a way to finish your story.

Antonio: Fire hot lava.

Yusuf: Then when he been. When he. And come, um, **Antonio** what happened next after that?

Antonio: How about he lost him like this? (Acts out a careening motion, bumping the child next to him.)

Teacher Hannah: Oh be careful that could hurt my friend.

Yusuf: So when he tried to reach his friend. He s not a superhero but. When I saw the cool robot that s in my team. His. His arm could stretch really long. And when it stretches long. It really so stretches super long to the bad guy. And it grabs it. And it put it back in the volcano where it can never get us."

In this instance, Yusuf told a story about playing with Antonio in school as they pretended to be a good guy and bad guy with the good guy being part of a team of superhero friends. The shared play served as inspiration for the story which also drew on the boys' shared interest in a ranging cast of popular culture figures like Spider Man, The Joker, and others. The story offered an opportunity for Yusuf to continue and work through the ideas that the two boys embodied in play, representing the action in language. During the story circle, Antonio physically acted out the story elements that he suggested, using gesture to simulate the crash and the bad guy being lost, at one time bumping into the child next to him.

Antonio's story suggestions both affirmed Yusuf's recollection and introduce new elements. For instance, Antonio echoed that the bad guy died, he recasted Yusuf's idea about the car being "smooshed" as a crash which he physically embodied with crashing hands, he embellished Yusuf's lava into "fire hot lava," and he physically demonstrated how an escape might be made. Such an

engaged, physical back and forth in which boys used the story circle as a way to continue and connect ideas from play, popular culture, and their ongoing storytelling was typical of storytelling for boys in the sample who made up 72 of the 79 instances of suggesting a story element.

4.4 Enacting Dialogue through the System of Appraisal

The children in this sample used the system of appraisal to express attitudes about the ideational content of one another's stories, not just negotiating what was authored and by whom, but co-constructing the stories by providing the interpersonal import of unfolding experience. Often, attitudinal comments served the co-constructive function of amplifying events and signaling the usuality of events both important evaluative functions regarded as necessary for mature storytelling (Bruner, 1990), but practiced less often by young children. In this respect, the children's evaluative comments helped children to tell more complete stories.

As noted earlier, boys interjected frequently. In a representative example, Aaden, told a story about a fast train. Aaden often engaged in solitary play, deliberately building elaborate train tracks in the block area. On this occasion, he told a story that began about trains and elicited evaluative interjections from two of his story circle mates:

Aaden: I was in a train. And it goes super fast.

Damon: What? That s unreal.

Aaden: That s. And after that. I went back home. I, I was sleeping. I saw the monsters and they eat me.

Alex: Oh no!

Damon: No way!

(Long pause.)

Researcher: All done?

Aaden: Then my. Then my mom called the police. Then they cut the monster!

[Another story was told in the circle.]

Damon: Uh. I. I was riding on my airplane. I was going super real fast. And then, I went back home. And I was sleeping. And a big monster ate me. And then my mom called the police. And then they cutted in half. Like a carrot.

In this interaction, Alex and Damon signaled their engagement with Aaden's story, providing the kind of interpersonal reactions typical of story evaluation as mature stories are often thought to consist of both an account of what happened and an interpersonal, evaluative take on events (Bruner, 1990). Interjections like, "that's unreal," and "no way," provide the evaluative appraisal of events that Aaden more sparingly provided by characterizing the train as "super fast" and exclaiming the concluding event when the monster was cut.

The dialogic quality of the storytelling exchange is evident as Damon's orientation to his own story directly responded to Aaden's story in a similar fashion to Caleb's retorting orientation in the story of murderous dragons, only in this instance, another story was told in between the two. Aaden's train may go "super fast," but Damon goes "super real fast" in his airplane. Damon drew on several ideational threads from Aaden's story. When children continued ideational threads from story to story, they did not simply repeat another child's story. Instead, the children varied, continued, and built on ideas. In this instance, Damon embellished Aaden's idea about cutting the monster, adding that the monster was "cutted in half. Like a carrot."

The children in the sample also used evaluative interjections as a way to signal their relationship to the experiential reality of a story as a more indirect way to judge or express the value of ideas taken up in stories. For instance, Noah told a story about a visit to the desert and the animals

he saw there, offering another storytelling turn that elaborated the story circle group's ideational preoccupation with fearsome creatures both real and imagined:

Noah: When I was in the desert I saw a big lizard. And it was very fat. And shoots. Blood out of its eye. And. And I also saw a cobra. In Navajo. And it was big. And I even saw a desert tyrannosaurus. And a desert raptors. And also. I also saw a desert. Tarantula. And a. And a scorpion. And a. And a shade lizard. And I even saw a desert T rex! It was chasing me around the whole world!

Caleb: Well I played a gun game that s. T rexes.

Teacher Madison: Is that it Noah?

Caleb: And my daddy let me play it.

Noah: Um. And I even saw a desert chameleons. And I even saw a desert hippo.

Caleb: Ew. I hate those things. I m serious! I hate those things.

Noah: And. I saw a desert crocodile. And a desert komodo dragon.

Caleb: I hate those things again.

Jael: A komodo dragon? I heard about one.

Noah: And. And I also saw a desert indominus. And a desert spinosaurus. And a desert. And a desert raptor. And a desert (inaudible). And a desert. Velociraptor. And a desert. And a desert. Mosasaur. That was in a big pool.

Here, we see both Caleb and Jael make an interjecting comment relating ideas in the story to their own experience. In both instances, the children inserted themselves into the story as a way to express attitudes about what is relayed, in Caleb's case, he qualified the significance of Noah seeing a desert T rex by comparing it with his own experience: "*Well* I played a gun game that's. T rexes." Jael expressed a more ambivalent attitude, using a sensing process to signal awareness of the experiential content: "A komodo dragon? I *heard* about one." Caleb more directly appraised named participants in Noah's story, expressing his personal evaluation of a desert hippos through the evaluative comment:

"Ew. I hate those things. I m serious! I hate those things." As was typical for disapproving comments in the story circle groups, the comment was directed at an idea included in a story, in this case, desert hippos and desert komodo dragons, rather than about the story itself. Caleb may hate komodo dragons, but he does not dislike Noah's desert adventure. In fact, as Caleb noted, he has relevant experiences with a dinosaur game. The end result is a short story told in dialogic exchange that drew on and advanced important continuing ideas shared by the group while cataloguing with remarkable accuracy different animals found in a desert habitat.

The children also used evaluative interjections to positively appraise ideas in a story, or the story, itself. Though clearly approving comments were more rare in this sample, many of the interjections that served an evaluative function, signaling disbelief or excitement were likely intended in positive ways. For instance, during one of the dinner at Dinosaurland stories, Damon interjected, "Son of a meatball!" shortly after a child's head was described as a meatball for a dinosaur. In moments like this, children were clearly engaged with and reacting to other children's stories in ways that encouraged the storyteller.

Other evaluative comments more directly stated approval for a child's story. For instance, Abia told a story about a mermaid that drew praise from another child in the circle.

Abia: Once upon a time, had a mermaid. Who was in a pond. Well then all the water was dried. Then the the. Mermaid couldn t even decide what her can do. Her can t swim, agreed. Then her has a pony. Magic pony. Then her can fly and undo magic. Then a little girl, got it. And then. Was a nice pony. So it rescued. Putted water in the pond. The end.

Researcher: Good story. You ready?

Hakeem: Yeah. Once upon a time. When I was three. . .

Cooper: I love that story of mermaids.

In this instance, Cooper made a direct statement of appreciation for a story, itself. Though boys, at times, engaged in the tactical use of evaluative interjections, they also made up the majority of clearly positive appraisals as well as a part of a more dialogic storytelling and story listening style through which they signaled listening, engagement, and evaluative appraisal. Just as with the systems of ideation and negotiation, the system of appraisal was used to enact relationships of affinity and difference in the story circle as children told dialogic stories using a range of linguistic strategies.

5.1 Discussion

Like all discourse, young children's oral stories in a small group storytelling activity are fundamentally dialogic. Similar to multiparty discussions, story circles act as a participation framework that more readily surfaces and supports a dialogic exchange in which children interact with children as co-constructing meaning-makers, rather than having more dyadic, teacher-centered talk. Heteroglossic moments show how multiple voices, attitudes, and world views dialogue in one story, revealing the ever present tension between order, social cohesion and disorder, divergence. Ideational populating and the continuation of ideational threads reveal how the experiential content of children's stories create a dialogue within and across texts. Dialogic strategies like negotiating participation, negotiating story ideas, and appraising the unfolding action through interpersonal responses enables children to co-construct individual stories as well as a larger group storied world.

In this sample of children, boys in particular, enacted a more pronounced dialogic storytelling style, using dialogic strategies more frequently and employing a wider range of strategies. However, girls ideationally populated their stories with other children, construing experience as a relational world made up of story circle mates and shared participants, places, and processes that the children navigated together.

For children in the sample, ideational populating of their stories with one another and with ongoing ideational threads helped the children co-create, in dialogic exchange, an experiential world. Children drew on the resources of language to negotiate their place in that world, and to make appraisals of an emerging shared reality storied individually, but collectively held by the story circle group. Ultimately, storytelling enabled children to maintain a dialogue of ideas, enacting relationships of affinity and difference, as they situated themselves and one another in relationship to the ongoing dialogue.

The children's dialogic strategies supported a number of recognized meaning-making ends that are important goals for learning in early childhood. Signaling listening, attention, and engagement fulfills important language and literacy goals in the early years. Relational affinity affirming like Emma's story of Alex and Dinosaurland motivated more specific, explicit, and evaluative uses of language, advanced uses of language for young children (Nicolopoulou, Ilgaz, & Shiro, 2021). Evaluative appraisals that unfolded through interjections co-constructed stories that more fully meet mature expectations for storytelling as tellings that construe both what happened and an interpersonal take on events (Bruner, 1990).

As Indominus Rex stalks through the children's imagined adventures, the complex, storied history of the Indominus reverberates through the meaning-making of Noel and Caleb as they alternately are devoured or defeat a creature that blends real and fictive reptiles. World building like the ongoing friends and combatants of Noel, Jael, and Caleb's story circle allowed children to sustain and explore an animating idea like the nature of conflict, while drawing on diverse cultural resources like books, movies, video games - the knowledgeable, sociocultural voices that are not physically present in the classroom" (van der Veen et al., 2021, p. 82), but make up an important part of any

dialogic exchange. When coupled with personal experience and ongoing preoccupations of play, the children's stories evidence a kind of complex connection making not unlike what Bakhtin imagined when writing about the novel as a particularly dialogic form.

6.1 Implications

Children's engagement in story circles shows what creating spaces in early childhood classrooms for child-led, dialogic talk makes possible. The very moments that can feel like interruptions to adults who engage children in and often enforce monologic talk and dyadic exchanges in the classroom, serve as instrumental forms of meaning-making, especially for boys who were more likely to engage in a co-constructed, collaborative storytelling style. Gendered differences in interactional styles have been documented elsewhere (Goodman, 1990; Nicolopoulo, Cates, de Sá, & Ilgaz, 2014; Souto-Manning, Dernikos, & Yu, 2016). Though this is only one sample, it adds to established findings on differences in interactional style with consequence for language and literacy learning opportunities for young children, especially boys. Overall, it is important to recognize the viability of more loosely held, child-to-child talk in the classroom as a conduit to creating motivating, collaborative spaces. Such spaces support children to build their meaning-making capacities by exchanging, building on, and co-constructing a world of ideas in ways that resonate with culturally-shaped interactional styles maintained in home and community life.

The children's stories and the ongoing story circle activity, itself, navigate the tension between unity, order, social cohesion and the disordering tendencies of living, heteroglossic dialogue. Children are not just called upon to make meaning, but to negotiate, accommodate, and contest co-constructed meanings through the resources of language - complex semiotic activity, the kind of

worthy classroom performance that offers an antidote to limited classroom talk in early childhood classrooms.

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