Narratives of Chinese Children: The Effects of Age and Genre

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ABSTRACT

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Children's ability to narrate real or fictional events is important for communication as well as for academic success and literacy. Children's narratives have thus been studied widely and a developmental path of narrative development has been outlined. There is, however, evidence that development in this area may be influenced by cultural factors as well as by the genre of narrative a child is asked to tell. This study explores narrative development further by examining both personal and fictional narratives by Mandarin-speaking Chinese children aged 5 years (n = 12) and 8 years (n = 12).

The narratives were examined in terms of length, narrative pattern (i.e., the overall structure of the narrative) and narrative elements comprising the pattern, using high point analysis. The findings showed that the stories by 8-year-olds were significantly longer than those by 5-year-olds, as expected. The narrative pattern scores (obtained by assigning a numeric score to each pattern) showed that the classic pattern increased significantly from ages 5 to 8 years, for both narrative genres. The 5-year-olds produced a variety of narrative patterns and more complex patterns in the fictional story than in the personal story. They did not include any *direct quotes* or *reported speech* in their personal narratives, or *appendages* in their fictional narratives. The classic pattern was most common for the 8-year-olds, and they provided more *evaluation* and *resolution* than the 5-year-olds, as well as more *orientation* in both narrative genres. These results are discussed in terms of their implications for education and cross-cultural studies of narrative.

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Children learn how to talk about their experiences and gradually develop the ability to relate past experiences as they talk to their primary caregivers every day during infancy and the preschool years (Berman, 2000). Children may also receive support from teachers in developing oral narrative skills as they recount their past experiences in classroom interactions with teachers and peers (Snow & Dickinson, 1990). It is also common for children to engage with graphic and written narratives in storybooks and other curricular materials (Green, Peterson, & Lewis, 2006; Lai, 2019; McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett, 2008) and these experiences contribute to their narrative abilities.

In addition to being shaped by home and school environments, children's ability to express past experiences depends upon development in various domains. For example, to introduce a narrative of a personal experience in a conversational context, children have to integrate memory, language, and social skills (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). More generally, to tell a story that will be meaningful to listeners, children must represent what happened in the past (to themselves or other characters); give their perspective on events; and communicate the significance of events in the present (Chang, 2004; Schick & Melzi, 2010).

Given the complexity of narration, it is reasonable to expect that children's expressive narrative abilities will develop gradually and be influenced by age. As the following literature review will show, however, children's narratives may be influenced by factors such as the type of narrative (e.g., a personal or fictional story), the input of adults, and sociocultural norms regarding narrative content and style. To fully understand children's narrative development, data is needed from children of various ages and levels of schooling, with diverse sociocultural backgrounds, and for more than one type of narrative. The present study helps fulfill this need by

examining the narrative skills of children living in mainland China: a five-year-old group in preschool and an eight-year-old group attending school. In addition to examining age effects on various features of these children's narratives, the study investigates the effects of narrative genre (personal vs. fictional narrative) and the interactions of genre with age. Descriptive data for Chinese children is also reported and discussed in light of findings in the literature for other groups of children and the rare studies of Chinese children available to date.

The Importance of Children's Narratives

Over the past decades, children's narratives have been of interest to researchers partly because of their significant role in communication. According to Berman (2000), storytelling is an important aspect of *communicative competence*, socialized by caretakers in the early years. Even as young as two years old, children verbally express past experiences with their caregivers (Eisenberg, 1985). Through these early dyadic conversations about personal experience, children acquire important skills such as understanding their own and others' intentions, recalling past events, and understanding and expressing the sequence of events, as well as causal relations between them (Peterson & Jesso, 2008).

In reporting past events, children also learn to communicate about events removed from the 'here and now'. As Schick and Melzi (2010) describe, when talking about the past, narrators must "recreate" (p. 279) the experience for the listener, mainly by using language. Given that past events are (by definition) outside the immediate environment, children must rely on their memories and on words to get their message across. As other researchers explain, telling stories is one way that young children transition from talk about highly contextualized and concrete objects and events to "decontextualized talk" focused on non-present events and more abstract concepts (Hedberg & Westby; as cited in Kao, 2015). Researchers have suggested for some time

that engaging in decontextualized talk can help prepare children for the language demands at school (Snow, 1991). In a recent study, this claim was tested by a team of researchers who examined children's use of decontextualized language early in childhood and their later academic language (i.e., language skills needed at school but not typically used in conversation; Uccelli, Demir- Lira, Rowe, Levine, & Goldin- Meadow, 2018). These authors found that children's use of decontextualized language at age 30 months, including narrative (talk about past or future events), predicted their academic language at the age of twelve years.

In addition to providing opportunities for decontextualized talk and thus contributing to later academic language, narrative production and comprehension (i.e., telling and understanding stories) can benefit children in terms of literacy. Some researchers propose that by telling and listening to stories, children develop not only academic language but also an awareness of the structure of stories that helps with reading similar texts later on (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004). Indeed, Griffin et al. (2004) found a significant positive relationship between storytelling in kindergarten and reading comprehension at age eight. A similar relationship between expressive narrative skills and reading comprehension was found for Mandarin-speaking Chinese children studied longitudinally from ages three years to seven years, and from seven years to ten years (Chang, 2006). These studies suggest that children who are better at narrating have an advantage in reading comprehension compared to their peers with less developed narrative skills. Storytelling skills are also relevant for writing. As McCabe et al. (2008) point out, telling stories is connected to composing stories. Interestingly, evidence of a link between storytelling and writing was found by Griffin et al. (2004) in their study mentioned above. The children's abilities to tell well-structured and elaborated stories in kindergarten predicted their proficiency at writing a story at age eight.

Familial and Cultural Influences on Children's Narratives

Although the present study does not directly examine parental and cultural influences on children's narrative skills, research on these topics is relevant because it helps explain individual and cultural variations in children's narratives that have been reported in the literature.

Schick and Melzi (2010) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on the socialization and scaffolding of children's narrative skills and related the literature to some of Vygotsky's ideas about development. According to Vygotsky's theory (as cited in Schick & Melzi, 2010), adults can provide guidance and feedback to help the child acquire new knowledge and/or accomplish a task. Vygotsky also stressed the importance of providing input to a child that challenges the child and allows them to exceed what they could do alone yet does not go too far beyond the child's developmental level (Kermani & Brenner, 2000). Based on these ideas, the verbal input caregivers and teachers provide will influence children's narrative development.

According to the review by Schick and Melzi (2010) mentioned above, parental styles of eliciting narratives do, in fact, make a difference to children's narratives. For example, Peterson, Jesso, and McCabe (1999) conducted a longitudinal study with 20 mothers and their preschool-age child. They asked mothers in an intervention group to spend time talking with their children, ask open-ended questions (e.g., 'wh' questions), and encourage their children to elaborate. Mothers in a control group were instructed to simply talk with their children as they normally would. The findings showed that children in the intervention group significantly improved their vocabulary, produced longer narratives, and gave more information about where and when the events occurred compared to the control group. Thus, children whose mothers were highly elaborative appeared to be more capable of producing rich narratives than children whose mothers used a less elaborative style. Findings from a study conducted more recently by Reese

and Newcombe (2007) are consistent with the results reported by Peterson et al. Children whose mothers were instructed to use a "high elaborative" style (p. 1161) produced richer narratives compared to children whose mothers used a less elaborative style. Specifically, the children included more descriptions, actions, and *evaluations* of past narrative events in their conversations with their mothers (Reese & Newcombe, 2007)

Schick and Melzi (2010) also reviewed Shirley Brice Heath's classic ethnographic study exploring language socialization across cultures. Heath found that even within the U.S., families varied in terms of how often they shared stories with children, the roles of adults and children in telling stories, and the expectations parents had of children. For example, Heath (1983) reported that the working class White families she studied required their children to stick to the truth when telling personal narratives, while African-American families (also working class) allowed their children to add to their experiences to make their stories entertaining and interesting. Thus, children from different cultural backgrounds may be socialized to tell stories differently.

Melzi (2000) also studied cultural differences in mother-child conversations about past events. She compared 16 Latino mothers and their children to 15 English-speaking European American mothers and their children. The results showed that Latino mothers focused on more the content of narrative, while European mothers focused more on the organization of the narrative. Additionally, Latino mothers used more open-ended questions and encouraged their children to continue talking more than English-speaking mothers did. In comparison, the European American mothers used more close-ended questions to guide their children and ensure their child's narrative was well-structured (Melzi, 2000).

Overall, the studies of parent-child interactions highlight how narratives may vary depending on the input a child receives and on cultural values that influence ideas about what

make a 'good' narrative. This theme is addressed further in the section on Chinese children's narratives below. Heath's study of narrative socialization (1983) also suggested that the narrative styles asked for and promoted in classrooms are different from those used at home for some children, requiring these children to adjust to the culture of the school.

Other research suggests that school exposes children to a wider variety of narratives compared to the narrative forms they might be exposed to at home and gives children chances to interact with a wide variety of people, such as teachers and peers (Dickinson, 2001). These opportunities can positively influence narrative skills. At the same time, teachers, like parents, vary in terms of how they scaffold children's narratives (e.g., Snow & Dickinson, 1990), and this variation can impact children's narrative development.

Personal and Fictional Narratives

A good deal of research on children's narratives has focused on fictional narratives (i.e., children tell or retell a story about imaginary events and characters). Although fictional narratives allow researchers to compare the same story as told by different children, personal stories also merit attention. These have been defined as recounts of real-world events experienced by the narrator (McCabe et al., 2008).

Shiro (2003) proposed that children typically talk about their personal experience early in life while starting to tell imaginary stories later in life. However, others have found some variation amongst children. For example, using ethnographic methods and a longitudinal design, L. L. Sperry and Sperry (1996) observed the frequency of talk about personal and fictional events by eight African-American children from ages 2;0 (years; months) to 3;4 and found that these children talked more about fantastic events and with greater narrative complexity than personal past events.

Research on older children shows an opposite pattern. As McCabe and colleagues (2008) point out, personal narratives are told by children more often than fictional narratives in their daily conversations. For instance, in a qualitative study of 10 children ages 3- to 5-years-old, Stone (1992) found that 90% of the stories the children told were either of personal experiences or other peoples' experiences that the child had witnessed; only 10% were fictional accounts of movies or dreams. Ghezzi, Bijou, Umbreit, and Chao (as cited in McCabe et al., 2008) also found that older children (11-year-olds) interacting with other children and adults produced narratives often in conversation, and most (85-100%, depending on the child) were personal stories. Together, these studies show that in most groups of children studied, children usually tell more personal stories than fictional stories while interacting with others. As a result, children may do well at recounting personal experiences, but still have a hard time telling a fictional story (Berman, 2000).

Models Used to Study Children's Narratives

Children's narratives have been considered from many points of view. Some research focuses on the language children use in their narrative (e.g., grammar and vocabulary). Other research, including the present study, focuses on the kinds of information children provide to listeners and how they organize that information. Within this focus, two models have been especially influential: story grammar and high point, the model used in the present study.

According to the story grammar model (Stein & Glenn, 1979), stories typically involve one or more main characters attempting to achieve some goal. The story therefore includes why the characters want to achieve the goal and the actions they take to achieve the goal (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Stein and colleagues claimed that this schema depends on the development of cognitive skills and would thus become more complete over time. They examined this possibility

by studying children at various ages. They found that between the ages of three and five, children often just described the main character's actions but did not order the information in a way that made it easy for the audience to follow. However, by the time children were in kindergarten, they started to be capable of telling a better structured story (Stein & Glenn, 1979). The story grammar model has continued to be used widely to study children's narratives, but the high point model used in the present study provides greater insights into children's perspective on the events they are reporting.

The high point model was initially proposed by Labov (1972) and applied to examine the structure and organization of personal narratives. Labov focused on how narrators organized their narratives to not only recount events but also to convey their personal perspective on the events to their audience. Labov's ideas are consistent with Bruner's notion of the two landscapes of narrative. Bruner (1986) proposed that narrators make sense of experiences by integrating the "landscape of action", where the narrator reports the characters' actions, and the "landscape of consciousness", where the narrator reports how characters think and feel about the events.

Although Labov's investigations were conducted with adults and adolescents, it laid the foundation for later research on children's oral narratives. In a seminal study, Peterson and McCabe (1983) adapted Labov's high point model to capture the elements in children's narratives. They identified the elements used by children from ages four to nine years and explained how children used these elements to produce a complete story. McCabe has continued to study children's narratives using their adapted model (McCabe et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2018).

In more recent work, also drawing on Labov, Lai (2019) defined the narrative elements in children's stories as follows: an *abstract* that expresses the most important parts in the narrative

in a few words; *orientations* that describe characters and set the narrative in space and time; *complicating actions* that refers to events or actions by the characters; *evaluations*, usually placed around the high point, or climax, that tell the audiences what to think about when, where and especially *why* things happen; *resolutions*, events that follow the high point; and an optional *coda* to conclude the narrative. In studying children, these categories have been refined. One modification by Peterson and McCabe (1983) was to combine abstracts and codas into a single category called *appendages*. Zhang et al. (2018) added two more categories when they studied Chinese preschoolers' personal narratives: *direct speech* that refers to direct quotes of speech by characters; and *reported speech* that refers to what characters said, but without quoting. The categories and subcategories used in the present study are provided in Appendix A.

Peterson and McCabe (1983) also identified several structural narrative patterns based on the elements that children included in their stories. One pattern is similar to the typical form of adult narratives found by Labov (1972): the "classic" narrative pattern. Peterson and McCabe (1983) also identified five other patterns. One of these is the *ending-at-high-point* pattern, which consists of a series of *complicating actions* that are temporally organized and contain a high point. However, the *resolution* is absent, and the story does not come to a formal close. In the *chronological* pattern, events are temporally sequenced but lack *evaluation* (i.e., there is no high point). In a *leapfrogging* pattern, the narrative is incomplete and jumps around, lacking any clear temporal organization. Peterson and McCabe (1983) also proposed two additional patterns (*disoriented* and *impoverished*), later collapsed to a *miscellaneous* pattern (McCabe & Rollins, 1994). Additionally, McCabe and Rollins (1994) proposed "one-event" or "two-event" patterns to describe the simplest narratives, such as those observed amongst the youngest children studied by McCabe et al. (2008) and Zhang et al. (2018). These patterns are comprised, as their names

imply, by one or two *complicating actions* and lack other key elements.

Development of Children's Narratives

As previously mentioned, one of the most comprehensive studies of children's personal narratives was conducted by Peterson and McCabe (1983) with 4- to 9-year-old North American children. Considering the children's narratives in terms of the high point model, they found that only the older children (6- to 9-year-olds) were able to consistently produce the *classic* pattern, while younger children (5-year-olds) often ended at the high point or used the *chronological* pattern. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2018) found that 4- to 6-year-old Chinese children used the *chronological* pattern most frequently.

For the *classic* and *end-at-the-high- point* pattern narratives, the presence of *evaluation* indicated that 4- to 9-year-olds conveyed the importance of the narrated events (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Peterson and McCabe (1983) also found that not only the amount, but also the variety of *evaluation* and *orientation* increased with age. The proportion of the story children devoted to *resolution* increased slightly with age, as reflected in the increase in production of the classic narrative pattern. Similarly, Chang (2004) found that Chinese (Mandarin-speaking) children showed growth in the variety of temporal and evaluative devices they produced in their narratives from the ages of three to four years. These data suggest that the elements defined in the high point model are present in children's early narratives and increase as children develop. In a separate study using the same sample of Chinese children, Chang (2003) also found that the information provided by the children was related to mothers' input at a younger age.

According to Hudson and Shapiro (1991) children can tell complex fictional stories by the age of eight. However, as for personal narratives, development is gradual. Ukrainetz et al. (2005) used the high point model to investigate the development of fictional narratives for 293

children, aged from 5- to 12-years-old. They focused on three elements: *appendages* (introducers; abstracts and themes; and codas), *orientations* (names, relations, and personality of characters), and *evaluations* (modifiers, expressions, repetition, internal states, and dialogue). The results indicated that all three elements increased with age.

Mills, Watkins, Washington, Nippold, and Schneider (2013) conducted a similar study with African American children in second to fifth grades but examined both fictional and personal narratives. They found that children included significantly more *appendages* and *evaluation* (but not *orientation*) in fictional narratives than in personal ones. However, Mills et al. (2013) did not find any grade or age effects on these elements for either personal or fictional stories, a result the authors concluded might be due to sample size (*n* ranged from 9-13 per grade). Shiro (2002) also elicited and analyzed both personal and fictional narratives from 113 middle-class Venezuelan children in first grade (mean age 6 years, 10 months) and fourth grade (mean age 10 years, 3 months). The results showed that with age, the children used more *evaluation* in their fictional narratives, but not in their personal ones (Shiro, 2002). Finally, Wang, Evangelou, and Xu (2018) did not examine genre differences but found that Chinese children as young as five- or six-years-old were able to produce evaluative language in their fictional narratives.

To sum up, studies of American children as well as Chinese children show they become more capable of telling well-structured narratives independently over time. When telling personal stories, children not only use more elements, but also use a wider variety of the elements in their narratives. They gradually improve from just listing actions and events to providing a context for the story, giving their own perspectives on the events, and providing *resolutions*. The couple of studies comparing fictional and personal stories suggest that certain

elements, such as *evaluation*, might be present earlier in fictional stories, than personal ones. In the following section, I take a closer look at the narratives of Chinese children.

Narratives of Chinese Children

According to Lai (2019), who studied the personal narratives of 5-year-olds in Taiwan, narratives appear in activities and materials in Chinese schools. She describes story-sharing time and joint storybook reading as popular in preschool. These findings are consistent with educational policies in mainland China. In 2012, the *Chinese Guidelines for Learning and Development of 3-6-Year-Olds* was released by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). The guidelines focus on five domains, including health, language, socialization, science, and art. They aim to help preschool teachers and parents understand developmental milestones in these areas. Within the language domain, they address listening, expression, and emergent literacy, and most relevant to the current study: narrative. The guidelines specify that by the time children turn five, they will relate an experience with events in a clear and logical order. They are also expected to use common adjectives and a varied vocabulary to produce a vivid story. When presented with part of a story and/or pictures, the guidelines also explicitly state that children should be able to guess what will follow in the story, come up with story endings, or create a new story. Finally, the guidelines state that children will voice their opinions about the stories they have heard or been exposed to through picture-books (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012).

The guidelines seem broadly consistent with expectations of children in North American contexts. Yet, cultural differences have been found in the content of children's narratives. Relevant to the present study, a study by Wang and Leichtman (2000) has shown that Chinese children's narratives are somewhat different from those told by children from other sociocultural

groups in terms of themes. Wang and Leichtman (2000) compared the narratives of 26 Chinese (Mandarin-speaking) and 24 American six-year-olds. The results showed that the Chinese children emphasized *social harmony*, *attention to others*, and *moral correctness* in their stories. In comparison, the American children's narratives were more descriptive and evaluative, and mentioned more about the self than those of Chinese children. There are also cultural differences in the length and structure of children's narratives. For instance, Minami and McCabe (1991) examined personal narratives of 17 Japanese children aged five to nine. The results showed that Japanese children's narratives were short and simple when compared with American children. Some Japanese children only told personal stories with an orientation-action-resolution pattern. Thus, compared with American children, children from East Asian backgrounds (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) tell shorter personal stories (Minami & McCabe, 1991; Wang & Leichtman, 2000).

A possible explanation could be that talk about personal experiences is less encouraged in East Asian cultures than American culture. Mullen and Yi (1995) examined differences between Korean and American mothers in their conversations about past events with their children. The results showed that American mothers talked more often about past events and referred more to the thoughts and feelings of their children than Korean mothers. Korean mothers talked more about the child's behaviours and responsibilities towards others. Similarly, Wang, Leichtman, and Davies (2000) compared Chinese and American mother-child conversations and found cultural differences in their content and style. They found that Chinese mothers were less elaborative than American mothers and often asked and repeated factual questions. Chinese mothers also focused more on morality and their child's conduct when talking with their children, consistent with Mullen and Yi's (1995) findings with Korean mothers. As a result, Chinese children did not elaborate as much as American children when talking about past experiences.

Wang et al. (2000) concluded that Americans see personal stories as a way of expressing opinions and individuality while Chinese see them as a means of transmitting values and standards for appropriate behavior. This explanation could also apply to the findings of Mullen and Yi (1995) for Korean mothers.

Elicitation of Children's Narratives

As many of the studies above demonstrate, children's narratives can be collected as they spontaneously talk about the past. Another way of collecting children's stories involves intentionally eliciting stories, for example by using the *conversational map* procedure first developed by Peterson and McCabe (1983). In this procedure, the experimenter provides the children with a verbal prompt by telling a personal experience, such as going to the doctor. The child is then asked a question, such as "Did something like that ever happen to you?" If a child answers no, a different verbal prompt is used. If the child answers yes, the child is encouraged to elaborate the personal experience (e.g., "Tell me more about what happened that day."). When the child stops talking, the experimenter uses sub-prompts to support the narrative while not affecting the content, including prompts such as "And?", "Uhhuh?" "Anything else?" and "Tell me more" (Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

To elicit fictional narratives from children, many researchers have used visual support (e.g., picture books or cards) to collect fictional narratives from children. However, Spinillo (as cited in Spinillo & Pinto, 1994) found that when Brazilian children (four- to eight-years-old) told stories without pictures, they related better narratives than they did with pictures. Without pictures, children paid greater attention to the story and communicated content mainly through words. These findings were consistent with a later study by Spinillo and Pinto (1994) with English and Italian children, leading the authors to suggest that stories elicited with pictures may

conceal children's actual storytelling capabilities. Spinillo claimed that when a non-linguistic cue, such as a picture, is not available, the child pays more attention to telling the story.

Wang and Leichtman (2000) found an interesting method to address the concern raised by Spinillo and Pinto. In order to compare Chinese and American children's narratives, they created 11 story beginnings referring to different topics such as peer conflict, competition, cooperation, family party, being praised by a teacher, and so on. Each of these story beginnings was illustrated with colorful, cartoon-like pictures by a children's artist. The child was presented with the picture for about 20 seconds, with the interviewer narrating the standard story beginning and pointing to the characters in the picture (Wang & Leichtman, 2000). Based on Spinillo and colleagues' research, the interviewer then took away the picture and asked the child to "Tell me what happens next." Wang and Leichtman (2000) examined several components of the stories the children generated including *narrative concreteness* (i.e., reference to background information, time, and location). The latter category is similar to *orientation* in the high point model. The results indicated that Chinese children's stories included more references to time than American children's stories, but there were no significant differences between Chinese and American children for background information and location.

The Present Study

The current study is designed to (a) explore the effects of age (i.e., 5-year-olds and 8-year-olds) on Chinese children's narratives; (b) examine the differences between the children's personal and fictional narratives; and (c) describe the qualities of Chinese children's personal and fictional stories in comparison to qualities reported in the literature for Western children and when possible, to Chinese or East Asian children.

Children's narrative ability was assessed on two tasks: personal and fictional storytelling.

I expected the older children to tell longer stories with better narrative structure than younger children for both personal and fictional stories. I also expected there to be some differences between the personal and fictional narratives. Based on the literature, two relationships might be found between children's personal narratives and fictional stories. On the one hand, fictional narratives might be more complex than personal narratives because the child is less limited in terms of the content than when reporting real events. Also, some research indicates that in East Asian families, talk about personal experiences might not be encouraged (Minami & McCabe, 1991; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Wang & Leichtman, 2000). This could result in children telling shorter, less elaborate personal narratives and more elaborate fictional stories. Furthermore, the difference between 5- and 8-year-olds might be greater for the fictional narrative because the older children would have had greater exposure to reading and writing fiction at school and may thus be more familiar and comfortable with producing the genre than the younger children.

On the other hand, personal narratives might be more complex than fictional ones because the child might have reported them before, giving them practice with sequencing the events. This would allow the child to pay more attention to other aspects of the organization of the personal narrative. Also, as Stone (1992) demonstrated, children tend to tell more personal narratives than fictional ones in natural interactions. Based on this set of findings, one might expect the 5- and 8-year-olds in the present study to tell longer and 'better' narratives (i.e., 'classic' narratives with a high point, *evaluation*, and *resolution*) when narrating personal events. The present study explores these two possibilities.

Method

Study Design

The study used a cross-sectional design to compare 5- and 8-year-old Chinese children on

the length and complexity of their personal and fictional stories (dependent variables). The between group variable was age group and the within group variable was story genre. As described further in the method, the sample, totaling 24 children, included 12 children at each age, with an equal number of boys and girls at each age.

Participants

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Concordia University. The English version of the consent form was approved at the University and then was translated to Chinese by me, reviewed by a thesis committee member (a bilingual Chinese and English reader) for clarity and accuracy of translation, and revised by me based on that feedback (see Appendix B). After translation was complete, the consent forms were given to school principals and classroom teachers (see below for setting details) to distribute to parents when they came to school to pick up their children. Parents were asked to complete the consent at home and return it to the school the next day. Children were also asked for their assent to participate (see Appendix C).

Recruitment took place in Mile, a city in the province of Yunnan in mainland China. All the 5-year-olds were recruited from the same local preschool, and all the 8-year-olds were recruited from the same elementary school. Both schools are public and public schools in Mile are locally considered to be of high quality and have a good reputation. Most children who graduate from the preschool enter the elementary school where the data for 8-year-olds were collected. The language spoken at both schools is Mandarin, but within the community, both 'standard' Mandarin and the local Mile dialect are spoken widely.

For the 24 children participating in the current study, parents provided written consent for their child's participation. The 24 children included 12 five-year-olds (6 boys and 6 girls) and 12

eight-year-olds (6 boys and 6 girls). The average age of the children by age group follows: 5-year-olds $M = 64.17$ months ($SD = 3.24$); 8-year-olds $M = 101.25$ months ($SD = 4.96$).

In order to ensure that the two age groups were similar in terms of parent education, parents were asked to complete a short questionnaire regarding the number of years of education they had completed (see Appendix D). The educational levels reported by parents are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Parental Educational Level by Age Group

			Years of Education	
	Age	N	Mean	SD
Mother	5 y.o.	12	14.00	1.809
	8 y.o.	12	12.83	4.130
Father	5 y.o.	12	14.08	2.021
	8 y.o.	12	13.08	3.450

An independent *t*-test was used to compare each of the parents' education levels for the two age groups. This showed that the differences were not significant: mother's education $t(22) = 0.896$, $p = .380$; father's education $t(22) = 0.866$, $p = .396$.

Procedures

I first spent two days observing in the classroom and getting familiar with the children before beginning to collect my data. When the children started to talk to me spontaneously and seemed comfortable with me, data collection began in the school library (5-year-olds) or in a meeting room (8-year-olds). Each child was assessed individually. At the beginning of each session, I chatted with the child for a few minutes to help the child feel comfortable and to obtain her or his assent to participate in the activities. If the child agreed (and all of the children did), I

continued by eliciting two narratives: one personal and one fictional. The stories were elicited in counterbalanced order and audio recorded. To increase the chances that each child had something she or he really wanted to talk about, I was prepared with three prompts for the personal story and three for the fictional story, as described next.

The conversational map procedure developed by Peterson and McCabe (1983) and since used by others, was used in the current study to elicit personal narratives from children. In this procedure, I provided a verbal prompt, by narrating a personal experience such as falling down or receiving a gift. Then the child was asked, "Did something like that happen to you before?" If the child replied no, a different verbal prompt was used. I provided a maximum of three prompts on different topics, as shown in Appendix E. If the child replied yes, then she or he was encouraged to tell more about the experience (e.g., "Can you tell me about it?"). When the child stopped talking, I encouraged elaboration by using additional prompts that were designed to encourage talk but not direct what the child should say, such as "And?" "Anything else?" and "Tell me more."

The elicitation strategy for the fictional narrative was inspired by Wang and Leichtman's (2000) study. I created three story beginnings (see Appendix F) and asked the children to finish the story by asking "Can you tell me more of this story?" or "Can you tell me what happened next?" If a prompt failed, a new story beginning was provided, up to a maximum of three story-beginnings. When the child stopped talking, I encouraged her or him to continue by using the same neutral prompts described for the personal narrative.

Transcription and Translation

After collecting data from the participants, I transcribed the data in Chinese, recording all of the child's words, including false starts and reformulations (but these were excluded in clause

and Chinese character counts). The stories were divided into clausal units. Independent clauses were each coded, and dependent clauses were coded when they added new information. The coding was based on the Chinese transcription, but the stories were translated from Chinese to English for the sake of English-speaking readers. The translations were reviewed for clarity by the research supervisor during the review of coding (see next section).

Coding and Scoring

The narratives were first scored from the transcriptions for the number of clauses and the number of Chinese characters (ideographs). These general measures give a sense of the length of the narratives told by the children.

The personal and fictional narratives children produced were then coded according to the high point models for narrative elements and patterns. The narrative elements were examined using the seven categories proposed by Peterson and McCabe (1987) and Zhang et al. (2018): (1) *appendages*, (2) *orientation*, (3) *complicating actions*, (4) *evaluation*, (5) *resolution*, (6) *direct quote*, and (7) *reported speech*. I completed all the coding, and then reviewed the coding with my research supervisor and made changes when necessary. This coding was also used to determine the narrative pattern in the next step.

I categorized the narrative patterns using categories adapted from McCabe et al. (2008, p. 198), and also assigned each pattern a score from 1 to 7 points, as shown below:

One-event pattern (1 point): The discourse contains only one past event (most definitions of narrative require at least two events).

Two-event pattern (2 points): The narrative evaluates two past events, but there is no buildup to a high point.

Miscellaneous pattern (3 points): The narrative contains more than two past events but

without a logical or causal relation to these events in real world.

Leap-frogging pattern (4 points): The narrative jumps from one event to another, leaves out major events, and confuses the logical sequence of those events.

Chronological narrative (5 points): The narrative contains a chronological sequence of events but without evaluations around the high point.

Ending-at-the-high-point pattern (6 points): The narrative tells the listener about who, what, when, and where the events occurred, builds actions up to a high point with evaluations, and then ends without a resolution for the conflict in the high point.

Classic pattern (7 points): The narrative provides orientation information, builds up to a high point, tells the listener how the narrator felt about the events, and then ends with a resolution.

In order to identify the narrative pattern, I used the following steps, adapted from a flow chart by McCabe and Rollins (1994, p. 49):

1. "Are there two past events?" If No, it is a one-event pattern. If Yes, continue (this decision applied to all steps).

2. "Are there more than two past events?" If No, it is a two-event pattern.

3. "Is there a logical or casual relation to these events in real world?" If No, it is a miscellaneous pattern.

4. "Does the narrator's order of the events reflect the order in which the events must have logically occurred?" If No, it is a leap-frogging pattern.

5. "Is there a high point surrounded by evaluations?" If No, it is a chronological pattern.

6. "It there a resolution (events which occur after the high point and close the narrative)?" If No, it is an end-at-the-high-point pattern. If yes, it is a classic pattern.

Results

Length

Descriptive statistics of length - the number of clauses, and number of Chinese characters (ideographs) - are displayed in Table 2 for the two age groups. Table 2 shows that the number of clauses and number of characters (ideographs) increased with age in both genres (i.e., personal and fictional).

Table 2

Number of Clauses and Characters (Ideographs), by Age Group

	Age Group	Mean	SD
Number of Clauses Personal	5 y.o.	3.00	1.56
	8 y.o.	11.58	7.00
Number of Clauses Fictional	5 y.o.	4.50	2.84
	8 y.o.	13.50	8.23
Number of Characters Personal	5 y.o.	32.58	26.62
	8 y.o.	167.50	92.73
Number of Characters Fictional	5 y.o.	53.92	43.11
	8 y.o.	223.17	155.15

Note: y.o. = years old

Two separate repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. The number of clauses developed significantly from age 5 to age 8: $F(1, 22) = 19.75$, $p < .001$, as did the number of characters: $F(1, 22) = 21.93$, $p < .001$. However, there was no effect of genre for either variable: $F(1, 22) = 2.09$, $p = .162$ for clauses, and $F = 3.58$, $p = .072$ for characters. There was no significant interaction of age and genre.

Narrative Patterns

Distribution of patterns. The distribution of the narrative patterns by age group and genre is presented in Table 3. Chi square analysis of the proportions (i.e., the percentages of children producing each pattern) was not conducted because one of the assumptions of the test

was not met (two of the cells had an expected count of 4, below the required minimum count of 5). However, the descriptive statistics show a clear difference in the proportions of children producing each pattern.

Table 3

Number and Percentage of Children Producing Each Narrative Pattern by Age and Genre

	Personal				Fictional			
	5 y.o.		8 y.o.		5 y.o.		8 y.o.	
Pattern	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
One-event	3	25.0	0	0	1	8.3	0	0
Two-event	2	16.7	1	8.3	1	8.3	0	0
Miscellaneous	2	16.7	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chronological	3	25.0	2	16.7	6	50.0	1	8.3
End-at-High-Point	1	8.3	2	16.7	3	25.0	3	25.0
Classic	1	8.3	7	58.3	1	8.3	8	66.7

For the personal narratives, many 5-year-olds told stories corresponding to the two least complex patterns: one-event and two-event (41.7% of the narratives fell into these two categories), and half produced chronological stories. Only 8.3% of the younger children produced the classic pattern in the fictional and personal stories. In contrast, 66.7% of the older children produced the classic pattern for the fictional story, and 58.3% for the personal story. Children in both age groups did not produce any leap-frogging narratives in either genre.

The following examples (translated from the Chinese) from 5-year-olds in the present study shows the one-event and two-event patterns in personal stories.

One-Event Pattern (Participant 04, 5-year-old boy)
My sister gave me Astro Boy as a gift.

Two-Event Pattern (Participant 02, 5-year-old girl)

I fell down.
And then, my mom took me home.

As noted earlier, these are the simplest patterns in the high-point model, consisting of only *complicating actions*. In contrast, the following narrative (translated version) provides some *orientation* information (the character's name and "grandma's house") followed by *complicating actions* mixed with *direct quotes* by characters. The order of the events reflects the order in which the events must have logically happened. However, the story does not seem to have a clear high point and the *direct quotes* do not seem to function as *evaluation*.

> *Chronological Pattern* (Participant 06, 5-year-old girl)
> Xiaohong went to grandma's house.
> Xiaohong said, "Grandma, I miss my mom, can you let me go back home?"
> Grandma said, "Okay."
> Then grandma dropped her off at her house.
> Xiaohong said again, "Mom, is it evening?"
> Mom said, "Yes, it is."
> Then Xiaohong said, "I'll brush my teeth, wash my face and go to bed soon."

The next examples (translated versions) from the present study shows the classic pattern in the fictional narrative. The first narrative by a 5-year-old followed the prompt in Appendix F, where a teacher has praised a child for a drawing. The narrative focuses on an earlier incidence of the teacher's criticism ("in preschool") of a different drawing, which the child dwells upon using evaluative devices (modifiers and causal explanations). The *direct quotes* also seem to serve an evaluative function. Finally, the narrative ends with a *resolution* of the character drawing a simpler but still "pretty" picture.

> *Classic Pattern* (Participant 01, 5-year-old girl)
> Then it seemed that she drew the wrong picture, and the teacher criticized her.
> But suddenly she tried again, and it seemed to be beautiful again.
> The teacher praised her after she gave the picture to the teacher.
> It's just that what she drew in preschool was a little too complicated.

The teacher said, "Can you draw something simple? Don't draw something too difficult."

She also drew a library.

The teacher said, "How can you only draw a house with nothing in it?"

She said, "I can't draw inside."

Because it was too small, she couldn't put her hand in.

She wanted to draw something simple, because the library was too difficult to draw.

She just drew something she could draw, and it looked pretty.

The next example also follows a classic pattern. However, in this story, the child

incorporates multiple episodes, including realistic events (mowing grass and receiving candy

from his grandmother) and fantastic ones (a finding a golden egg and a hen with magical rings).

Classic Pattern (Participant 05, 8-year-old boy)

One day, grandma went out to play, grandpa was at home.

Grandpa said to Xiaoming, "Go get the push mower to clean up the meadow in front of the house."

Xiao Ming went to the meadow with the push mower, pushing everywhere.

Finally, he pushed out a small hole in the grass by accident.

(He) found a little hamster inside.

The little hamster was not happy, so he said to Xiaoming, "Brother, brother, can you let me go?

Xiaoming said, "No, my grandpa asked me to push the grass, so that I found this small hole."

"I want to take you back home to play, is it okay?" (said Xiaoming)

Little hamster said, "No, no, brother Xiaoming, please let me go."

Xiaoming relented and put the hamster back.

(New Episode)

After a while, grandpa's big rooster laid an egg.

Xiaoming found it was a golden egg and opened the egg to have a look.

Wow, there was a big hen in it.

The big hen had four rings on her neck.

Xiaoming took back the four rings, gave them to his four brothers.

When the first brother wore it, he became very learned.

When the second brother wore it, he became very clever.

When the third brother wore it, he grew up to be an athlete.

When the fourth brother wore it, he became an inventor, inventing medicine that could cure any disease.

(New Episode)

Finally, grandma came back, she brought a bag of candy to Xiaoming, and said, "Were you obedient in grandpa's home today?"

Xiaoming said, "(I was) very obedient."

Grandma handed the candy to Xiaoming, said, "You feel free to eat it."

Examples of narratives following the other patterns are provided in Appendix G, with narrative codes.

Comparisons of mean scores. Each of the narrative patterns just described was also assigned a score for the sake of comparing the two age groups (see Method). A score of 1 was associated with the least complex pattern (one-event) and a score of 7 was associated with the most complex pattern (classic), The mean scores for narrative pattern are presented in Table 4 by age group and genre.

Table 4

Narrative Pattern Scores by Age and Genre

	Age Group	Mean	SD
Personal	5 y.o.	3.42	2.11
	8 y.o.	6.08	1.51
	Total	4.75	2.25
Fictional	5 y.o.	4.83	1.70
	8 y.o.	6.58	0.67
	Total	5.71	1.55

ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of age and genre on the narrative pattern scores. I used the repeated measure command in SPSS which allows one to examine both between group variables (age, in this study) and within group variables (genre, in this study) as well as their interaction. The ANOVA showed a significant effect of age on the narrative pattern scores, where the older children had higher scores: $F(1, 22) = 18.81, p < .001$. It also showed an

effect of genre: $F (1, 22) = 5.78$, $p = .025$, where scores on the fictional stories were higher than in the personal stories. This was true for each age group; there was not a significant interaction between age and genre: $F (1, 22) = 1.322$, $p = .263$. In summary, age and genre each had an effect on the children's narrative pattern scores, but the effect of genre did not depend on age.

Pattern by narrative prompt. As mentioned before, three prompts (i.e., falling down, receiving a gift, and spilling something) were provided to elicit children's personal narratives and three story-beginnings (i.e., fighting, being praised, visiting grandparents' house) were used to elicit fictional stories. Table 5 shows the mean scores of each prompt by age group and genre.

Table 5

Narrative Pattern Scores by Prompt

	Personal			Fictional	
	5 y.o.	8 y.o.		5 y.o.	8 y.o.
Falling Down	2.8	6.2	Fighting	3.5	6.2
Receiving Gift	4.0	4.7	Being Praised	6.3	7.0
Spilling	3.6	7.0	Visiting Grandparents	5.0	6.7

ANOVA showed that the narrative pattern scores were not significantly different by prompt for either age group. Notably, however, none of the 8-year-olds who chose to respond to the Receiving Gift prompt produced any *resolution* in their stories, while other children at this age told classically patterned stories in response to both Falling Down and Spilling prompts.

Narrative Elements

To examine the narrative elements used by the Chinese children, the proportions of each element (i.e., *appendages*, *complicating action*, *direct quote*, *evaluation*, *orientation*, *reported speech*, and *resolution*) for each age group (i.e., 5- and 8-year-olds) was calculated. The following sections will compare the proportion of each element by age group, within each genre.

Personal narrative. The proportion of narrative elements for the personal stories are shown in Figure 1. As the Figure shows, the majority of elements used by the 5-year-olds were *complicating actions* and *appendages* (42.25% and 29.56% respectively), and none of the 5-year-olds used any *direct quotes* or *reported speech* in their personal narratives. As for the 8-year-olds, the majority of elements were *complicating action* and *orientation* (35.36% and 24.71% respectively). The proportion of *direct quote* and *reported speech* increased from 0 to 9.14% and from 0 to 2.42% respectively from age 5 to age 8.
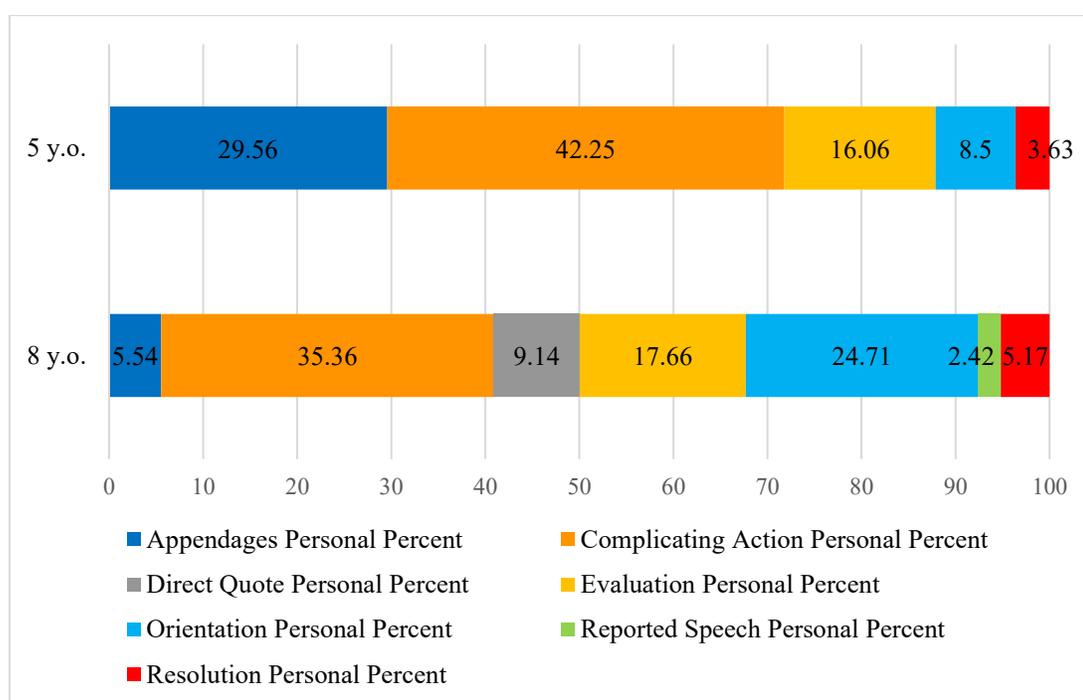
Figure 1. Mean percent of narrative elements by age for personal narratives.

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare the mean percent of each element by age group with a Bonferonni correction for multiple comparisons ($p = .05/7$ comparisons $= .007$). All tests were nonsignificant using this strict criterion. However, the results for *direct quotes* and *orientation* came nearest to significance ($p = .036$ and $p = .01$ respectively). Although Figure 1 suggested an important decrease in *appendages* from ages 5 to 8 years, there

were few instances of this category in either age group and the result did not reach significance.

To follow up, the raw scores for *evaluation* (the sum of all *evaluation* subcategories per child) and *resolution* (which had no subcategories) were also compared by age. These two categories were chosen because the high point of a narrative is surrounded by evaluative information and *resolution* is the key element to determine whether a narrative is a classic pattern. These tests were significant: *evaluation* $F(1, 22) = 9.04$, $p = .006$ and *resolution* $F(1, 22) = 6.40$, $p = .019$.

All five types of *orientation* and eleven types of *evaluation* shown in Appendix A were used by children in the current study. Separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted to investigate if the 5- and 8-year-olds differed in the number of types of *orientation* and *evaluation*. The results showed that older children produced significantly more types of *orientation* and *evaluation* in their personal narratives than younger children. Moreover, ANOVA showed significant age differences in two types of *orientation*: location, $F(1, 22) = 10.48$, $p = .004$ and relations (as defined in Appendix A, relations are words that define characters' roles), $F(1, 22) = 20.48$, $p < .001$. As for *evaluation*, significant age differences were also found for one type: modifiers (i.e., adjectives and adverbs), $F(1, 22) = 7.44$, $p = .012$.

Fictional narrative. The proportion of narrative elements for the fictional stories are shown in Figure 2. As the Figure shows, for both age groups, the majority of elements used by the children was *complicating action* (41.49% and 32.33% respectively), and none of the 5-year-olds used any *appendages* in their fictional narratives. As for the 8-year-olds, the proportion of *appendages* increased from 0 to 1.29% from age 5 to age 8.

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare the mean percent of each element by age group with a Bonferonni correction for multiple comparisons (p = .05/7

comparisons = .007). All tests were nonsignificant. As I did for the personal narratives, I compared the raw scores for *evaluation* and *resolution* for the fictional narratives. These tests were again significant: *evaluation* F (1, 22) = 6.24, *p* = .020 and *resolution* F (1, 22) = 8.19, *p* = .009.

As for the subtypes of *orientation* and evaluation, results showed that, similar to the personal narratives, 8-year-olds significantly produced more types of *orientation* and *evaluation* in their fictional stories. Moreover, significant age differences were found in one type of *orientation*: name of character, F (1, 22) = 9.14, *p* = .006. Within the *evaluation* category, significant age differences were found in one type: modifiers, F (1, 22) = 6.33, p = .020, a result also found for the personal narratives.
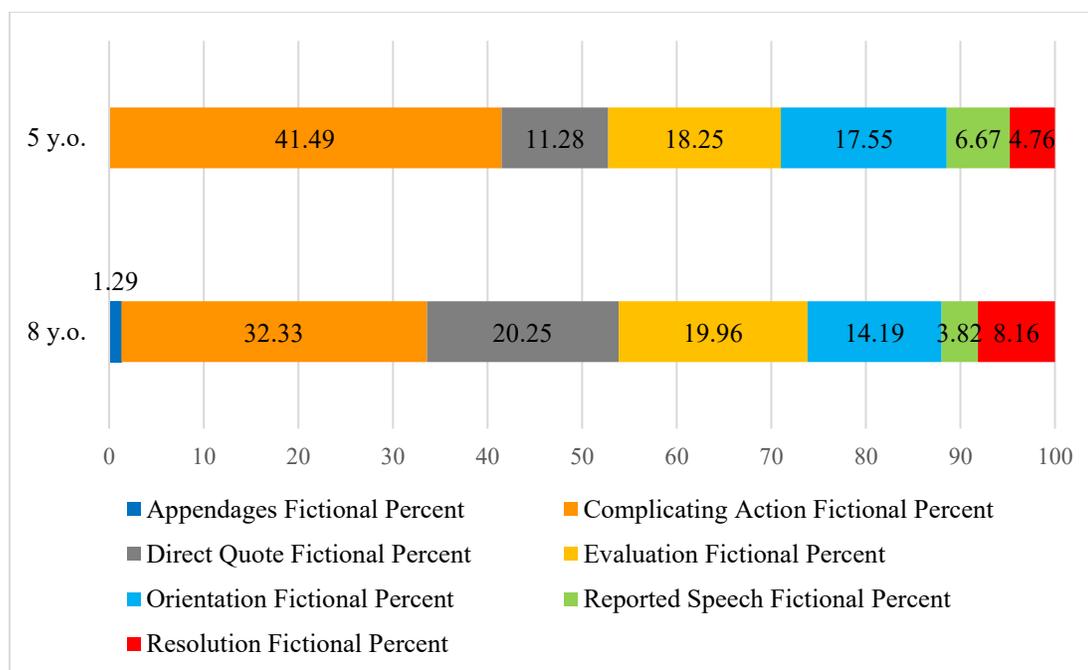
Figure 2. Mean percent of narrative elements by age for fictional narratives.

Discussion

This study aimed to determine whether the length, patterns (i.e., structure), and elements

of Chinese children's narratives improved with age and differed across the genres of personal and fictional narratives. Some research has been conducted on the development of personal narratives of English-speaking children (e.g., Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Mills et al., 2013), but there is little research on Chinese children and the existing research has not addressed the skills of children beyond the age of six years nor the narrative patterns in fictional stories. Yet, we might expect important changes in the early years of elementary school or differences across these genres. The current study fills in the gap by providing data from both personal and fictional narratives for 5- and 8-year-olds living in mainland China. As elaborated in the following sections, children's narratives improved with age in terms of length and pattern for both genres, but on average, the fictional stories were more complex than the personal ones. Analysis of the narrative elements further showed that 8-year-olds included all seven narrative elements with a wider variety than 5-year-olds in both genres of narratives as elaborated below.

Age Effect on Chinese Children's Narratives

I expected the 8-year-old children to tell longer stories featuring a more complex narrative structure. The number of clauses and number of characters (ideographs) of the 8-year-olds were significantly higher than those of 5-year-olds, across genres (i.e., personal and fictional). Similarly, Zhang et al. (2018) also found age differences for length in the personal narratives of Chinese preschoolers aged 3 to 6 years.

Regarding the narrative patterns, the findings showed a clear age difference in the proportions of children producing each pattern. The 5-year-olds told mostly one-event, two-event, and chronological stories. A recent study (Lai, 2019) comparing 26 Mandarin-speaking 5-year-olds to an equal number of "aboriginal" 5-year-olds in China, provides a point of comparison. In that study, the children mostly told leapfrogging personal narratives (i.e., the

narrative jumps from one event to another without a logical sequence), a pattern that was not observed in the current study. Moreover, only two of the 5-year-olds I studied produced the classic pattern: one child on the personal genre (8.3%) and one on the fictional (8.3%). While Zhang et al. (2018) found that use of the classic pattern increased significantly from age 3 to age 6 in Chinese children's personal narratives, 5-year-olds produced a similar proportion of the classic pattern (10%) as in the current study.

In contrast with the younger children, two-thirds of the older children in the current study produced the classic pattern for the fictional story, and over half (58.3%) produced this pattern for the personal stories. These findings are consistent with results reported by Peterson and McCabe (1983) for English-speaking children's personal narratives at the age of eight, where 62% of children in their study produced the classic pattern. The narrative patterns were also assigned a score to compare the means by age group. As expected, a significant effect of age was found for both personal and fictional narratives: 8-year-old children had higher pattern scores than those of the 5-year-olds, indicating that they told more complex stories.

For narrative elements, both 5- and 8-year-olds produced many *complicating actions* in their narratives across both genres. This result is not surprising given that actions are essential to a story. Children in both age groups produced low proportions of *appendage* and *resolution*. That is, these children devoted little of their stories to openings or summaries or to *resolutions*. It makes sense that these would occur with low proportions since each could be successfully expressed with as little as a single clause. The findings were consistent with Lai (2019), who reported medians of *appendage* and *resolution* of zero at age 5, and with Peterson and McCabe's (1983) data which showed low mean proportions for these categories at ages 5 and 8 years. However, 8-year-olds recounted many more events and even told stories with multiple episodes.

They also included all seven narrative elements across both genres of narratives. Furthermore, although the age differences of the mean percent of each element were not significant, the raw scores were significantly different for *resolution* and also for evaluation, consistent with age differences reported by Ukrainetz et al. (2005) for fictional stories. In comparison, five-year-olds produced fewer of these elements and did not use any *direct quotes* or *reported speech* in their personal narratives, or *appendages* in their fictional narratives.

The narrative elements of *orientation* and *evaluation* were further analyzed by subtypes. The results showed that 8-year-olds used significantly more types of each of these elements than 5-year-olds, in both personal and fictional narratives. This result was consistent with Peterson and McCabe (1983), who also found that the variety of *orientation* and *evaluation* in personal narratives increased from age 4 to 9 years amongst American children. Chang (2004) also showed that Chinese children produced a wider variety of temporal and evaluative devices in their personal narratives at an even younger age: from 3- to 4-years-old.

Thus, Chinese children in this study appear to resemble other groups of children in terms of narrative growth and their ability to not only report but also to evaluate events, an important development as evaluation gives the story greater meaning. At the same time, the children showed some differences across genres that might be explained by cultural differences, as discussed next.

Genre Effect on Chinese Children's Narratives

Regarding the personal and fictional narratives, I explored two possible relationships. One was that Chinese children in my study would tell longer and 'better' fictional narratives because children are less limited to the content of fictional stories and because in East Asian cultures, talk about personal experiences is not encouraged (Minami & McCabe, 1991; Wang &

Leichtman, 2000). The other possibility was that children would tell longer and more complex personal narratives than fictional narratives because children might tell personal narratives more frequently than fictional narratives in their daily lives, as Stone (1992) found.

The results indicated that the number of clauses and number of characters (ideographs) did not differ significantly by genre; children produced narratives of roughly equal length for both the fictional and personal stories. While the percentage of children producing each narrative pattern was also similar in both genres, the narrative pattern scores on the fictional stories were, on average, significantly higher than on the personal stories. This was true for both age groups. This result is contrary to some of the speculation in the literature, but in agreement with L. L. Sperry and Sperry (1996), who found that 2- to 3-year-old African-American children told more complex fictional stories than personal past events. While I expected that the age difference would be greater in the fictional context due to the older children's potentially greater exposure to fiction in the classroom, there was no significant interaction between age and genre.

One possible explanation for the findings could be that when telling a fictional story, the children of both ages felt freer to elaborate and less limited by the content than when reporting events which had actually happened to them. A second explanation could be related to the prompts. When providing prompts for the personal narrative, I told the children things that had happened to me in the past, following the conversational map procedure used in past research. Namely, I narrated a short personal story, and the children might have been affected by my examples and thus told a shorter and simpler personal narrative than they were capable of telling.

Cultural differences could be another possible explanation for why fictional narrative scores were higher than for personal narratives. Based on my own experiences, children might be more exposed to fictional narratives in the classroom. A teacher interviewed in Zhang et al.

(2018) noted that Chinese teachers like to read illustrated story books with children, and these could serve as a model for children's stories even if teachers do not necessarily elicit children's contributions during reading.

Zhang et al. (2018) has also suggested a reason for the lower scores for the personal narratives found in the present study: the style of Chinese parenting. Yue, Freedman, and Parker (1997) suggested that Chinese mothers played the role of a teacher while interacting with their children and wanted to impart to their children the knowledge and skills she or he needed in the future. There was little talk of emotions in mother-child interactions, and perhaps Chinese mothers paid little attention to personal storytelling. Wang et al. (2000) also stated that Chinese mothers focused more on morality and their child's conduct when talking about shared memories with their children, which was consistent with Mullen and Yi's (1995) findings with Korean mothers. This could reduce children's elaboration, in particular their references to their own feelings and thoughts. Based on my own experience, Chinese parents rarely talk with their children about their personal experiences, feelings, and emotions. This may explain why Chinese children tend to just list past personal experiences, at least in talking with adults. Minami and McCabe (1991) also found that Japanese children told short and simple personal narratives. Interestingly, however, in a unique study where Wang et al. (2018) compared Chinese children's narratives by audience, they found that Chinese children were affected by their audience and used more evaluations in their narratives when talking to peers than when talking to adults.

Although sociocultural values and norms may play a role in shaping Chinese children's narratives, it is important to note the variations observed in children's personal stories even within Chinese populations. For instance, in the current study, the 5-year-olds told mostly one-event, two-event, and chronological stories. In comparison, 5-year-olds in Lai's (2019) study

mostly told leapfrogging (i.e., the narrative jumps from one event to another without a logical sequence) personal narratives, a pattern that was not observed in the current study. Finally, most 5-year-olds in Zhang et al. (2018) told chronological personal stories, showing a higher level of performance overall. Thus, even within the same culture, there might be other variables affecting children's narratives. One possible factor is parental education. For example, most mothers in Zhang el al.'s (2018) study had graduated from university (typically requiring 16 years of education in China) while in my study, mothers had comparatively less education: 14 years for 5-year-olds, and nearly 13 years for 8-year-olds. In contrast, Lai (2019) described the families she studied as "low socioeconomic statuses" (p. 4), which could involve a lower level of maternal education in that sample.

Regarding the effects of genre on narrative elements, Mills et al. (2013) found that African American pupils, in grades 2 to 5, produced *appendages* (e.g., introducers) more frequently in fictional narratives than in personal narratives. However, the current study found the opposite trend: the proportion of *appendages* was lower in fictional stories than in personal narratives for both age groups. One possible reason could be that the prompts for the fictional stories provided some *appendage* information and the children could continue the story without repeating the information in their own stories.

Mills et al. (2013) also found that African American schoolers produced more *evaluations* (e.g., internal state) in fictional narratives than in personal narratives. This result was consistent with Shiro (2003), in which Venezuelan children, grades 1 to 4 evaluated more in a fictional story than in a personal narrative. In the current study, children at both ages similarly produced slightly more *evaluations* in their fictional stories than in their personal stories. Additionally, in the fictional context, children used more *direct quotes*, some of which could

have an evaluative function (Ukrainetz et al., 2005).

Prompt Effect on Chinese Children's Narratives

Multiple prompts were used in this study in order to ensure that the participating children could find something they were interested in talking about and to make the two tasks (personal and fictional storytelling) as parallel as possible. In each of the tasks, if one prompt failed, a new prompt was provided to encourage the children to talk. The different prompts did not appear to affect children's performances on either task; their narrative pattern score did not differ by prompt for either age group. This positive finding suggests that in future research, varied prompts can be used to elicit stories from children without affecting their performance. With diverse prompts, children can choose the prompt they prefer and will be motivated to tell stories.

However, there were some subtle differences in the prompts that should be considered in the future. Specifically, with the Receiving Gift prompt, the 8-year-olds did not produce any *resolution* in their stories, while they did in response to the Falling Down and Spilling Something prompts. When children talked about the gift(s) they had received, they tended to end the narrative with either *evaluation* (stressing their pleasure in receiving or playing with a gift) or *orientation* (describing the gift) which seemed to me, as a listener, like a natural way to end a story about a gift. This observation also provides insight into how topics can influence narrative patterns; the classic pattern is not required for a story to be well-structured and meaningful.

Educational Implications

As described in the literature review, the *Chinese Guidelines for Learning and Development of 3-6-Year-Olds* was released in 2012 to guide parents and teachers. The guidelines highlighted the importance of children's narrative competencies. The children in this study appear to meet the basic competencies outlined in the guidelines: relating events in a

logical order and being able to complete or tell a story independently. This is an encouraging finding. However, the study also showed some gaps in children's narratives, such as lower narrative pattern scores in personal stories. These findings might inspire Chinese parents and schoolteachers to spend more time listening to children recounting personal past experiences and encourage them to elaborate by expressing their feelings and thoughts about the experiences.

Curenton (2006) also proposed that parents and teachers could encourage children to tell stories with them; listen closely to children's stories during story time as well as during non-instructed activities, such as mealtime and free play; pay attention to the narrative elements used in those stories; and ask open-ended questions to help children understand stories and become more familiar with different narrative types and practices. School teachers could also create more story-related activities and model classically patterned stories to students. In this way, children may become capable of producing richer narratives by themselves as time passes. At the same time, it is important to consider the possibility that there are cultural differences in the importance placed on personal narratives and the criteria for a 'good' story.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the findings in this study. First, all 5-year-olds in the current study were recruited from the same preschool and all 8-year-olds were recruited from the same elementary school in Mile, Yunnan Province. Thus, the results of this study do not apply to all Chinese children.

Second, the sample size of this study was relatively small for quantitative analysis. A larger sample size might have strengthened the results. Third, the narrative elements can be further analyzed, particularly in terms of the subcategories within the *appendages*, *evaluations*, and *orientation*. Ukrainetz et al. (2005) included dialogue as a category in *evaluation*. However,

I separated dialogue and coded it independently from *evaluation* as *direct quote* or *reported speech* (Zhang et al., 2018). This was because the *dialogue* seemed to have multiple functions and was not always evaluative. A closer look at the *dialogue* is needed to clarify its function.

Children's perception of the situation in the present study could also have affected their performance on the storytelling tasks. In the current study, when I assessed children, I asked them to accompany me to a room outside their classroom to ensure a quiet environment. This may have led children to perceive the tasks as a formal test and this could have heightened their anxiety and in turn, led to lower performance and an underestimate of their narrative ability. According to Hudson and Shapiro (1991), the purpose of a narrative will affect both its content and organization. A narrative might be different if a child were to tell it in a more natural context, such as a conversation, rather than when asked, "Can you tell me what happened one time when you fell down?" by an unfamiliar experimenter.

In terms of other future directions, gender could be an interesting variable to consider. Although Zhang et al. (2018) found no gender differences either in narrative patterns or narrative elements, Wang et al. (2018) found significant differences between the use of evaluative language by boys and girls and the current data set could be analyzed with regard to gender as well. Finally, while this study may give other researchers confidence that the high-point analysis can be usefully applied to narratives in diverse cultures, it would be interesting to share the findings with Chinese educators and to obtain their opinions about what makes a good story and on the narratives told in the current study.

Moreover, the effect of audience could also be an interesting variable for future research. Little research had examined children's abilities as they share narratives with their peers, although peer interaction is important and necessary in children's daily life (Wang et al., 2018).

In fact, in Wang's study (2018), Chinese children used more macrostructure narrative elements (i.e., introduction, theme, relation and coda) in their stories with same-age peers than they did with their teacher. A possible explanation for this finding could be that when children talk to their peers, peers listen actively, demanding orientation information and providing information spontaneously that the child can use to tell a complete story; thus, sharing stories with peers may help children to develop their narrative skills (Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2004).

Conclusion

This study examined Chinese children's narrative development by comparing 5-year-olds to 8-year-olds; explored the differences between these children's personal and fictional narratives; and described their personal and fictional stories in comparison to qualities reported in the literature for North American children and when possible, to Chinese or East Asian children. The study showed that the patterns and elements of Chinese children's narratives improved significantly with age. The classic pattern (and the presence of *resolution*, a key element in the pattern) was unusual at age 5 consistent with data for Chinese children reported by Zhang et al. (2018). At age 8, the classic pattern was nearly as frequent as in the narratives of English-speaking American children and the most common, suggesting that age 5 to 8 years is an important developmental period for storytelling for Chinese children. This study also provided a novel comparison of children's personal and fictional narratives, and revealed more sophisticated patterns in the fictional genre, for both the younger and older children. The study suggests areas where Chinese parents and teachers can scaffold children's narrative ability, in particular by providing opportunities for children to elaborate on their personal experiences.

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Appendix A

Narrative Elements in the High Point Model

Note: Definitions adapted from Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Ukrainetz et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2018. All examples were taken from the current dataset.

Appendages

- Introducer: Openings that indicate the beginning of the narrative (e.g., *One day*, *once*, *one time*, *that day*).

- Abstracts: Summaries of the narrative that occur at the beginning, e.g., *My mom's friends like to give me a lot of gifts*.

- Codas: Endings of the narrative (e.g., *The end*).

Orientation: Statements that provide the setting or context of a narrative, including:

- Names of characters

- Relations: Words that define a character in relation to others or to occupations (*mother*, *grandfather*, *teacher*, *athlete)*.

- Time: specific times, excluding *every time*, *later*, *then*, and *when I ...*

- Location

- Environment: Descriptions of objects or settings, e.g., *It's as big as a barbie-sized house*.

Complicating Actions: Specific events which occur before the narrative's evaluative high point.

Resolutions: Events following the high point.

Evaluation: Statements or words that reflect the narrators' perspectives on the events and make the story increasingly vivid, including:

- Modifiers: Adjectives and adverbs (i.e., words indicating perspective on events or characters such as *really, beautiful, complicated*). Following Ukrainetz et al. (2005), I excluded common modifiers such as *some*, *little*, *big*, *good*, *bad*.

- Idiom: e.g., *she saw it in the eyes, being anxious in the mind* (*kan4zai4yan3li3, ji2zai4xin1li3*).

- Repetition: e.g., *And then we <u>ran, and ran</u> and we sprinted*.

- Exaggeration: e.g., *I fell a hundred times*.

- Internal states: Words expressing thoughts (e.g., *knew*, *thought*), emotions, (e.g., *happy*, *angry*), and states expressing emotions or physical states (e.g., *cried*)

- Results of high point: e.g., *My brother's clothes were all wet, so my mom had to wash them again.*

- Gratuitous: e.g., *Then I ran <u>very</u> fast.*

- Casual explanation: e.g., *Because shark was the king of the ocean, they all wanted shark toys.*

- Negative: Explicit negative or conditional/future negative, e.g., *In the future, I will not talk with my brother while drinking juice.*

- Hypothesis: e.g., *And together, she could play with them happily.*

- Tangential: e.g., *This morning, I woke up feeling hot all over (seems like Mom washed clothes at night).*

Direct Quote: Clauses that are directly quoted by characters involved

Reported Speech: Clauses that include indirect speech of characters involved

Appendix B

English Parent Consent Form

Study Title: Narratives of Chinese Children: The Effects of Genre and Age

Researcher: Lin Zhang

Contact Information: lin.zhang@mail.concordia.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Diane Pesco

Contact Information: diane.pesco@concordia.ca; phone 514-848-2424 extension 7338

Source of funding for the study: N/A

         You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A.   PURPOSE

         The purpose of the research is to understand the qualities of stories told by Chinese children at different ages and to determine whether the type of story (personal or fictional) has an effect on their stories.

B.   PROCEDURES

         If your child participates, he or she will be asked to narrate two stories (one personal and one fictional) with me. To encourage your child to talk, I will tell something that happened to me and I will also provide some story beginnings.

         Participating in this study will take a total of 30 minutes. I will audio record the stories, so that I can examine them more closely later.

C.   RISKS AND BENEFITS

Participating in this study has no known risks for your child. Your child may enjoy telling stories with me and might be inspired to continue telling stories to you or their teacher. This practice could help improve their storytelling skills.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will keep any information about your child or you confidential. We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research (me, and my supervisor). We will only use the information for the purposes described in this form.

The information gathered will be coded. This means that your child's name will not appear on any documents except this consent form. I will keep a list that links your child's name to a code. The list will be stored in a digital file protected by a password. All other files, such as audio-recordings and transcripts of your child's stories, will also be kept in password-protected digital files.

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you or your child in the published results, as we will not use your names or any other identifying information.

We will keep the information for five years after the end of the study on my supervisor's office computer. After that, all the files will be deleted securely.

F.   CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you agree that your child participates but later change your mind, you can ask that the information that your child provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you do not want us to use the information, you must tell the researcher before August 1, 2019.

There are no negative consequences for not participating or asking us not to use your information later.

Your child will receive a pencil case as a gift for participating in this study.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

CHILD'S NAME (please print)   _____

PARENT'S NAME (please print)   _____

PARENT SIGNATURE   _____

DATE   _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact me. My contact information is on page 1. You may also contact my faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Chinese Parent Consent Form

研究题目：浅谈中国儿童的叙事:故事类型与年龄的影响

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研究经费来源：无

现诚挚邀请您参与上述研究。此表单提供了参与方式的信息。请仔细阅读后再决定是否参加。如果您有什么不明白的地方，或者您想了解更多的信息，请询问研究人员。

一． 目的

本研究的目的是了解不同年龄阶段的中国儿童所讲故事的特质，并探讨故事类型(个人或虚构)是否对他们的故事有影响。

二． 步骤

如果您的孩子选择参与，他或她将被要求跟我一起讲述两个故事(一个是个人的，一个是虚构的)。为了鼓励您的孩子跟我交谈，我将讲述一些发生在我身上的事情，并提供一些故事的开头。

参与本次研究总共需要30分钟。我将把这些故事录音，以便以后更仔细地研究。

三． 风险和收益

参与本项研究对您的孩子没有已知的风险。您的孩子可能喜欢和我一起讲故事，并可能会受到启发，并在将来继续跟您或他们的老师讲故事。这种练习可以帮助他们提高讲故事的技巧。

四． 保密性

我们将为您的孩子或您的任何信息保密。除了直接参与研究的人员(我和我的导师)外，我们不允许任何人访问这些信息。我们只会将资料用于本表格所述的用途。

收集到的信息将被编码。这意味着您孩子的名字将不会出现在任何文件，除了这份同意书。我将保留一个列表，将您孩子的名字与代码链接起来。该列表将存储在由密码保护的电子文档中。所有其他文件，如您孩子故事的录音和抄本，也将保存在密码保护的电子文档中。

我们打算发表这项研究的结果。然而，由于我们不会使用您或您孩子的姓名或任何其他身份信息，因此无法在公布的结果中识别您或您的孩子。

我们将在我导师的办公室电脑学习结束后保存这些信息五年。之后，所有文件将被安全地删除。

五． 参与条件

参与这项研究是完全自愿的。如果您同意您的孩子参加，但之后您改变主意，您可以要求不使用您孩子提供的信息，您的选择将得到尊重。如果您决定不让我们使用您的信息，您必须在2019年8月1日前告知研究人员。

不参与、中途停止或要求我们不要使用您的信息不会产生负面后果。

作为参与这项研究的奖励，您的孩子将获得一个文具盒。

六． 参与者的宣言

我已经阅读并理解了这份表格。我有机会提问，任何问题都得到了回答。本人同意在上述条件下参与本研究。

孩子姓名（请打印） ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

家长姓名（请打印） ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

签名 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

日期 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

如果您对这项研究的科学或学术方面有任何疑问，请联系我。我的联系方式在第一页。您也可以联系我的导师。

如果您对本次研究中的伦理问题有疑问，请联系康考迪亚大学研究伦理部经理，电话: +1 514.848.2424 ex. 7481或oor.ethics@concordia.ca

Appendix C

Script for Assent from Child

Today, I would like to tell you some stories and you will also have a chance to share your own stories with me. Some of the stories will be about real events and people, and some will be made-up stories. I will be recording your voice. Would you like to do this activity with me?

Appendix D

Parent Education Questionnaire

	Level of education completed	Mother	Father
1	Elementary		
2	Middle School		
3	High School or equivalent		
4	Community College/vocational school		
5	4-year College/University Degree		
6	Professional Degree/Graduate School		

Appendix E

Prompts for Personal Narratives

Once I went to a park with my friend Tingting. I ran so fast that I fell down and hurt my knee. Did something like that ever happen to you?

Last week when I came home from Canada, I received a gift - a Hello Kitty doll - from my cousin. Did something like that ever happen to you?

Yesterday I spilled a glass of milk while I was eating dinner. The milk went all over the floor. Did something like that ever happen to you?

Appendix F

Prompts for Fictional Narrative

(modified from Wang & Leichtman, 2000)

One day, at school, two kids were fighting over a toy. They didn't want to share the toy with each other. Tell me what might have happened next.

One day, in art class, the teacher praised a child's painting, and said "It is the best in the class." Tell me what happened next.

Xiaohong's Mom and Dad went on a trip. They sent Xiaohong to her Grandma's house and said good-bye to her (NB: a boy's name will be used for the protagonist for boy participants). Tell me what happened next.

Appendix G

Examples of Children's Narratives

Miscellaneous Pattern (Participant 04, 5-year-old girl)

Clause	Narrative Code	Count
I have spilled rice.	Appendage (Abstract)	1
And (I) broke the bowl.	Complicating action	1
And (I) broke the cup.	Complicating action	1

End-at-High-Point Pattern (Participant 01, 5-year-old boy)

Clause	Narrative Code	Count
Later, the teacher came to divide their toy in half, each one took a half.	Orientation (Relation)	1
	Complicating action	2
They wanted to play with the toy again, but they didn't grab.	Evaluation (Internal State)	1
	Evaluation (Negative)	1
They stole others' toy.	Complicating action	1
When they stole it back, someone found them.	Complicating action	1
They went to tell the teacher.	Complicating action	1
The teacher took them to stand.	Complicating action	1
(The teacher) asked them to tell their mom, "Why are you told to stand?"	Orientation (Relation)	1
	Direct quote	1
He stood and cried.	Evaluation (Internal state)	1

End-at-High-Point Pattern (Participant 05, 8-year-old girl)

Clause	Narrative Code	Count
A kid grabbed the toy and said to another kid, "I got it first, you can't rob with me."	Complicating action	1
	Direct quote	1
Another kid also said, "I got it first, you can't rob me, either"	Direct quote	1
Then the two kids began to fight.	Complicating action	1

Clause	Narrative Code	Count
The teacher came over and asked them what they were fighting for.	Complicating action	1
	Orientation (Relation)	1
	Reported speech	1
Then, a kid said, "Obviously I got the toy first, she came to rob me."	Direct quote	1
Another kid said, "She lied, I was the first to get the toy."	Direct quote	1
Then the teacher said, "Exactly who is the first one to get the toy? You can let the other play first."	Direct quote	1
"You compare your ages, the younger one is going to play first."	Direct quote	1
"Then the older one plays after."	Direct quote	1
"You have to learn humility, then you can be friendly to each other"	Direct quote	1