

# Storytelling skills support early literacy for African American children

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According to FPG researcher Nicole Gardner-Neblett, better understanding the relationships between early narrative skills and literacy will inform strategies to improve reading skills of all children. Credit: FPG Photo Archives.

Early narrative skills are tied to kindergarten literacy among young African American children, according to new research from the Frank

Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG). The study is the first to demonstrate the connection between African American preschoolers' storytelling abilities and the development of their early reading skills.

"Previous research found an association between oral narratives and literacy at later stages of development," said FPG researcher Nicole Gardner-Neblett, who led the study. "But our findings suggest how important storytelling is for African American children at the earliest stages."

Gardner-Neblett explained that oral narrative skills emerge as early as age 2 and continue to develop as children engage in interactions with parents and others, who provide guidance and feedback. Although experts have suggested the importance of oral language skills on literacy during the preschool years, much of the research until now has focused on associations between early language and later reading outcomes in elementary school, leaving many unanswered questions.

Gardner-Neblett and Iheoma Iruka, director of research and evaluation at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, looked at these unsolved early developmental questions by focusing on preschoolers' skills with oral narratives and on the same children's emergent literacy at kindergarten. Their study's sample included 6,150 students nationwide.

The researchers found that oral narratives of children from low-income families generally received lower scores than other children's oral narratives. Similarly, children from low-income families did not score as well as their peers on reading achievement.

"This may reflect socioeconomic disparities evidenced in other studies," Gardner-Neblett explained.

Somewhat surprisingly, she said, the study did not find a link between

oral narrative skills and emergent literacy for the overall sample. However, when Gardner-Neblett and Iruka broke down the findings demographically, one group was different.

"We found that preschool oral narrative skills were a significant predictor of emergent literacy for poor and non-poor African American kindergartners," Gardner-Neblett said. "But only for the African American children."

"Oral story telling has been an important part of the histories of many peoples—and an especially rich aspect of the black culture across the African diaspora," said Iruka, whose own life included preschool care in Nigeria between trans-Atlantic moves.

According to Gardner-Neblett, previous research suggests that African American children are skilled in telling complex narratives of many different types, which may provide clues to the new study's findings.

"Having a repertoire of different styles suggests that African American children are flexible in their narratives, varying the narratives according to context," she said. "This flexibility may benefit African American children as they transition from using oral language to the decoding and comprehension of written text."

She added that preschool oral narrative skills may be as important to children of other ethnicities, too.

"Something different is going on for African American children before they receive any formal instruction in kindergarten," said Gardner-Neblett. "But for other groups, the association between narrative and literacy may be as crucial—but not evident until later stages of development, as other studies have shown."

Gardner-Neblett and Iruka said the new findings suggest the importance of recognizing and capitalizing on storytelling skills to help young African American children with their early reading development.

"Building on children's oral narrative skills is a strategy for schools looking to connect with children," said Iruka. "Especially as schools support children of color who come from a culture that has cherished these skills."

Gardner-Neblett added there still was much to learn about early literacy, and she called for more research. "Better understanding the relationships between early narrative skills and [literacy](#) will help inform strategies to improve reading skills among all [children](#)," she said.

**More information:** Abstract and link to full article:  
[fpg.unc.edu/resources/oral-nar ... aceethnicity-and-ses](https://fpg.unc.edu/resources/oral-nar...aceethnicity-and-ses)

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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