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ABSTRACT

This paper explores children's contributions to the functioning of kindergarten classrooms, arguing that the child's perspective on educational experiences is a valuable source for understanding that experience. Although children are seldom consulted about their experiences, they can provide information about the congruence between the teacher's plan and children's experience and about how they adapt to their environment. The script model is presented as one way of tapping children's perspectives. Next, research is presented on children in child care, kindergarten, and other group settings. Findings demonstrate consistency between children's interviews on group experiences and analysis of the interviews using the script model. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the presented research as well as implications for future research. (DST)

Children's Views of Kindergarten

by

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Introduction

One or two at a time, children enter a kindergarten classroom. They take off their coats, greet their teachers, then look around to see if their special friends are in the room yet. They lounge on large floor pillows, sharing with friends the small toys tucked into pockets. They look at books. The teacher calls them to a rug for circle-time and they snap to attention with excitement. It's time to update the calender, show-and-tell, and hear about the day's activities. There are questions about what to do, reminders about classroom rules, and a brief discussion on the week's unit topic. The children are dismissed to their assignments and play. A typical day has begun in kindergarten.

This example of a preschool program in the morning illustrates how simple events can be seen to flow from one to another. Casual morning greetings fill the time until the group convenes at circle-time. Calendar leads to show-and-tell, and then to assignment of tasks. The teacher has made her plans and organized her schedule so that every event will contribute in some way to the child's total day and development. A story will lead to art activities and free play. Then there will be a time for outdoor play. All of these events reflect the teacher's planning about what children need to be provided in an educational program (Read & Patterson, 1980).

The children also make their contribution to the flow of events during a typical day. They know where to put their coats and where to go at circle time. They know that they must hear and see some directions before they

can deal with assigned tasks. Clean-up comes before the group's next meeting time. By lining up to wash hands when the snack cart arrives, the children are helping the daily schedule fall into place. They are contributing to the group's progress from one event to the next. Little contributions such as these help groups of children get through the entire kindergarten or child care day.

In this chapter, we will explore this contribution of children to the functioning of classrooms. We will look at research on how children come to organize their daily lives in settings such as schools and child care. Children, even very young children, develop an understanding of the events that give structure to their lives. That understanding becomes more elaborated as the child matures. There is some evidence that this understanding is used by children to guide their behavior. This will be presented as an important way of understanding children in group care.

I will begin by arguing that the child's perspective on educational experience is valuable as a source of understanding of that experience. Children, as the focus of our educational programs, are seldom consulted with regard to what they experience. Information they provide can help us assess the congruence between what we plan and what they experience. It can also give us insight into how they are adapting to their environment. The Script Model (Abelson, 1981; Shank & Abelson, 1977; Nelson, 1978; Nelson & Gruendel, 1981) is presented as one way of tapping children's perspectives. Next, research will be presented on children in child care, kindergarten, and other group settings. Findings will be presented that demonstrate great consistency when children are interviewed about group experiences and the interviews are analyzed using the script model. Children have a growing and significant understanding of the sequence and

location of events in their classrooms. That understanding helps direct their expectations and performance. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn, based on the presented research.

The Value of the Child's Point of View of Experience

Recently, there has been a recognition of the fact that educational and developmental research may not represent the meanings of the subjects we study in the contexts we study them. The child's knowledge and understanding of phenomena are not really considered as we attempt to describe those phenomena. Mischler (1979) argues that research tends to strip contexts of the meanings children might give them. The child's point of view is ignored. Cole, Hood and McDermott (1978) go so far as to argue that "real life" contexts should be the subject matter of research, that daily experience is a cognitive task to be understood through research. How children think about and in their daily environments is important information for researchers who want to understand mental development. What children know about their experience can be seen as an index of the meaning that experience has for them; it can provide us with their understanding of the programs and experience we intend for them to have.

Congruence Between Adult Plan and Experienced Program

Most of our textbooks for early education and child care assume that teacher-caregiver planning relates directly to the program as experienced by children (e.g., Leeper, Dales, Skipper & Witherspoon, 1974; Lundsteen & Tarrow, 1981; Read & Patterson, 1980; Robison, 1983). This seems to assume that our intentions for children translate directly into practice. We ay be assuming that our plans are clear and well presented, when, in fact, children are experiencing something totally different. King's (1979) finding

that children considered many activities to be work in the kindergarten, when the teacher saw them as play, is a case at point.

How can we get closer to an understanding of planned and experienced events? Mischler (1979) claims that most research on classrooms gives us data that is stripped from its context. Children's behavior is usually abstracted from the daily activity that is the substance of classroom experience for the children. He states that "human action can be understood only within its own context of socially grounded rules for defining, categorizing, and interpreting the meaning of our conduct." (p. 8) One route for getting to this meaning is conducting sociolinguistic analyses related to the classroom context. In other words, we need to find out how children use language to describe the classroom context. They can, theoretically, directly provide information on the meanings they are experiencing in their daily environment.

Adaption to the Classroom

While Mischler argues for the need to discover participants' meaning in classroom research, Mehan (1979) makes specific recommendations about how to bring researchers' and research participants' perspectives into congruence. From this point of view, like Mischler's, quantification schemes miss much that goes on the classroom, including what children contribute to the classroom. The meaning of activities for the actors is lost. Field studies attempt to include more meaning, but they also tend to be anecdotal, so that the meanings of classroom activity for all concerned is not known. Also, the anecdotal quality of field studies tends to obscure criteria for including or excluding data. What is needed, then, is a way of assessing the classroom meanings of all participants who share classroom experiences. The assessment must allow them to express their own descriptions. The descriptions must all be categorized and dealt with by means of the same criteria.

With regard to classroom activity, Mehan (1979) found evidence and concluded that the meaning of competent classroom membership included awareness of tacit rules (because rules and procedures are not always given or presented clearly), using rule-guided behavior during interactions (especi- ally communicating, but also possibly with regard to the child's general adaptation to classroom activities), and dealing with ambiguous instructions (such as knowing when "you" is one person or all in the group). For a classroom to function, competent children should know, in some sense, (1) what is expected to hap- pen without being told, (2) how those activities are implemented, and (3) they should be able to create a structure of the situation even when instruction is not clear. By finding out how children understand and describe class- room activities, we should gain insight into their contribution to com- petent classroom membership.

Assessing the Child's Description of Experience: A Script Model

One way of investigating a participant's perspective of experience is by analyzing scripts of the events they have experienced, using the model of event knowledge presented by Shank and Abelson (1977; Abelson, 1981). Knowledge of routine experiences presumably is organized into temporal-spatial representations. Nelson and her colleagues have investigated the development of event knowledge by questioning children about their experiences eating lunch (Nelson, 1978; Nelson & Gruendel, 1979, 1981), attending a party (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981), attending half-day kindergarten (Fivush, 1984), and participating in common and special activities at camp (Hudson & Nelson, 1982). Knowledge of events comes to guide behavior, by providing information on what typically is associated with experiences. Event knowledge also shapes expectations, by virtue of

the fact that structural (temporal-spatial) relationships imply the presence of elements in any given experience. For example, on the second day of kindergarten children already expect a sequence of acts such as "coming in," play, group meeting, class work, lunch, and "going home" (Fivush, 1984). Additional acts were added to this structure by the second week of school, at which point the script for kindergarten stabilized to a large extent. This script formed the children's expectations for the school day and directed their behavior accordingly.

Two elements are characteristic of script formation. First, there must be a statement about acts, which are memories for events as experienced. For example, a group of children questioned about lunch at school responded with statements about cleaning up for lunch, setting the table, serving food, eating food, and cleaning up (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981). These acts comprise the event of school lunch. Earlier research has found consistent statements of acts for children as young as three (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981) who have had as little of one day's previous experience with an event (Hudson & Nelson, 1982).

The second element of script formation is the language form used to state acts. Scripts are expressed with either "we" or "you" (in the sense of "one") combined with the timeless present tense (e.g., We go outside to play. You go to sleep at nap time.). This form suggests the regular, on-going nature of the acts presented in the script.

The script model allows children to provide their own perspectives on classroom experience. The events they select should inform us of at least some of their views of the meaning of that experience. The way they

present that information suggests a rule-like orderliness and reflects their sense of adaptation to the classroom's procedures.

Research on Children's Descriptions of School and Child Care

Descriptions of Events Within School and Camp

Much of the research on children's scriptal description of school and child care has been done by Nelson and her colleagues (Nelson, 1978; Nelson & Gruendel, 1981). Some of the earliest work done in this area focused on lunch in child care, when children as young as age 3 were asked "What happens when you have lunch at the day-care center?" (Nelson, 1978; Nelson & Gruendel, 1981). Even these 3-year-olds provided a consistent set of acts for the lunch event, including play, teacher calls, going inside, washing hands, getting food, taking food to table, eating, throwing away plates, and taking a nap. The acts comprise the whole event of lunch and are related to one another hierarchically; the acts flow from one to the next because of either temporal or enabling linkages. Even the youngest 3-year-olds made use of the general pronoun "you" or "we" in their descriptions, and not "I," indicating the general, non-personal encoding of the acts. They also used tenseless verbs (e.g., You eat.), indicating the on-going expected nature of the acts.

Interestingly, young 3-year-olds who were new to the program recounted fewer acts than same-age peers who had been in the program longer. Both groups of children gave a larger number of acts some months later, indicating that both age of child and amount of experience in the program contribute to script formation.

Very young children know what usually happens during events within the child care day, such as mealtime. They know consistent acts of the event, and they know the order in which those acts occur. They are consistent in their expression of those acts. Further research compared children's knowledge of general events (what always happens) with specific events (what happened yesterday). Hudson and Nelson (1982) interviewed preschool and school-age children at a camp, again asking questions about events at camp such as meals and snack. They found that general events were remembered and described in more datail (i.e., with a greater number of acts) than were specific events. The acts and the way they were expressed were similar to those presented by Nelson (1978), as reported above. Pronouns and verbs were used as the script model posits.

Young 3-year-olds provided good accounts of general events, as did older children in the study. All children had more difficulty with specific events; they could not remember as much about what they did yesterday. They tended to use general script acts to fill in gaps in their specific event accounts. They also tended to slip into script language (e.g., We get our food. You line up.), even when describing a specific event when one would expect to find the use of "I" and past tense verbs.

What we find, then, is evidence that children can reliably describe events within the child care or camp day. They provide component acts appropriately. They express proper temporal relationships. As children grow older and gain more experience with the event, they include more component acts in their description. The language used to describe events indicates that children understand events as general, on-going sequences of acts that apply to everyone in the context. They also appear to have a

better understanding and memory for the general structure of their daily experiences than they have for specific events that they have experienced.

Description of Kindergarten Events

The research presented above looked at events within the child care or camp day. Fivush (1984) went beyond this by looking at the kindergarten day itself as the event to be experienced and described. She elicited descriptions from classrooms of kindergarteners, then went on to correlate those descriptions with rankings of each child's performance and adaption to the class, as well as knowledge of the rules.

A standard sequence of acts appeared to comprise their kidnergarten experience. Children reported coming to school, putting things away, doing an art project, playing in minigym, returning to class, playing, bell ringing, cleaning up, meeting, work groups, playing, meeting, having snack, minigym, handwriting lesson, eating lunch, playing, resting, meeting, playing outside, and going home. Their descriptions reflected the actual temporal order of the school day, as well as the planned acts themselves. Interviews conducted on the second day of school provided a general description of daily events. Subsequent interviews (weeks later) elaborated on the daily experience, adding acts but not changing the general temporal sequence. Meeting time, work time, play, snack, and lunch were consistently referred to, across interviews.

The language used by kindergarteners to describe their experiences was like that found in other script research. Acts were described in the general timeless tense, usually with "you" or "we" used as pronouns.

Correlations of children's narrative descriptions with other measures did not reveal much. There was a significant relationship between their

narratives and their awareness of certain rules, but there was no demonstrated relationship betwen narratives and performance or adaptation to the classroom. Since teacher ratings formed the core of these latter measures, it is perhaps understandable that no results emerged.

The Fivush study demonstrated that an event, such as kindergarten, is seen by children as an experience with common acts that procede in a common temporal order. The expectations of the daily event are clear, although it is not clear how those expectations relate to children's performance. Children do, however, have a general script of the kindergarten day. They know the acts they experience. The question then becomes, how do those acts compare with the teacher's plans for the kindergarten day? Do children describe school as teachers do? If so, how do children see the relationship between what they are expected to do and what they actually do in school? Interviews and anecdotal accounts provided by kindergarten children provide some insights into these questions. The anec otal accounts provide a special view on the relationship of children's thinking about school and their views of how (or whether) they fit in with what is expected.

The current study was designed to elicit knowledge of kindergarten by means of narrative description of constituent kindergarten acts. It provides further evidence documenting how children see the organization of their daily experience, as compared to what is planned for them. It also allows some conjecture about how children adapt to their school experience, physically (through actions) and psychologically.

Subjects. Subjects were 82 children, aged 5 and 6, representing a variety of ethnicities. Forty-three were female and 39 were male. All were

English speaking, non-handicapped children in four public school kindergarten clasrooms. At the time of the study, the children had been attending their classes for four or five months. Program activities, as described by the teachers, included sitting on the rug for roll call, daily directions for activities ("work" or "jobs"), center time (for "work" or "jobs"), play (also during center time), clean up, outside play, return inside, story, lunch, nap, music or gym (on alternate days), return to classroom, afternoon center time, and dismissal. The daily schedule was remarkably similar in the four classsrooms, even though they were in two different schools. The teachers did make use of district-wide curricula, which were presented during the rug time in the morning and elaborated on during center time. These curriculum activities formed the "jobs" or "work" that children did during center time each day.

Procedure. Each child was interviewed by the author, who was familiar to the children, in a room adjacent to each classroom. Interviews were tape recorded. They were guided by two sets of directions. The first direction elicited a spontaneous narrative (i.e., What happens when you go to school? When you get to school in the morning, what's the first thing that happens?) The following directives probed for information about specific events, as suggested by teachers' description of daily events (e.g., What happens when you go to gym? Do you remember the book that Mrs. X read during story time yesterday?) The second group of directives was continued until each child's responses were exhausted. From recordings, each child's event protocol was broken down into its component acts. An act was defined as a single action or activity that can occur (e.g., We hear

a story. And then you have lunch.). A sample of a spontaneously recalled arrative is presented in Figure 1, with its constituent acts marked.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Responses to directives about specific acts were scored if the child provided any relevant information about the event (e.g., story time, lunch). If a child spontaneously elaborated on any of the events that were to be probed, such as, music or story time, then probes were not made. In a few instances, children spontaneously provided information about events that were not expected (e.g., washing hands), so that there were more responses given by children than expected. Sample responses regarding specific acts also appear in Figure 1. Two graduate students independently coded 25% of the protocols, achieving an interrater reliability of 84%. One of the students coded all of the remaining protocols.

Findings. Every child spontaneously provided some knowledge about acts in Kindergarten. The percentage of children who reported acts are presented in Table 1. Infrequent acts (e. g. We wash our hands.

Insert Table 1 about here

We line up.) are not included here. There is a fairly common structure to daily activities, including roll call, center time, play, clean up, go outside, return, story time, lunch, nap, music, gym, and go home, which corresponds with the teachers' account of events.

Conclusions

Congruence Between Adult and Child Views

Findings from this study present a fairly consistent picture of kindergarten in these settings, including a consistent common core of activities described by both child and adults. Classroom activities (i.e., sit on rug, center time), play, and meals, story, and nap emerge early on as important acts from the child's point of view. The regular appearance of acts in both the spontaneous scripts and in probed responses suggest a common child care event structure for all children, comprised of acts such as doing jobs, story, lunch, nap, music, gym, and going home.

These findings are consistent with the teachers' descriptions of the child care day, which they described in a similar way. They described the day in terms of a sequence of event slots that begin with "rug time" and progress through "going home." There was a good deal of congruence between adult and child views.

The teachers also expressed a good deal about play, both in and out of the classroom. Children see play as a large part of their chld care experience (Garza, Briley & Reifel, 1985: Reifel, Briley & Garza, in press). The similarity between adults and children in kindergarten on this aspect of the program is not as strong; play was seen as central to child care, both indoors and out, while it is not as pronounced in kindergarten. It is not yet clear, however, whether the adults and children are in agreement about what play is at school or in child care. (Garza, Briley & Reifel, 1985; Reifel, Briley & Garza, in press).

It appears that children's descriptions of their programs are recognizable to us as similar to the outline of a daily plan that teachers might provide. Children and adults may well organize their thinking of

classroom experience in similar ways. There is still much to be learned about both groups' thinking about their daily experiences, where that thinking comes together, how well that thinking reflects the views of other parties' experiences, and the impact of that thinking on experience. This becomes especially critical in light of what we know about children's formation of scripts for school events. It appears that children may act based on their scripts, or cognitive expectations, about real world events like school (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981).

Description of Experience as a Clue to Adaptation

While the link between the child's understanding of classroom experience and successful performance in the classroom has not yet been made (Fivush, 1984), it does seem clear that children are aware of and can described those events and the organization of the day that are necessary for competent performance in the classroom. Even children as young as 3 years know some expected events, and as they grow older they demonstrate the expected sequence and progression of their daily experiences. These are tacit rules (Mehan, 1979) for performing in child care. Every child is expected to go from one event to the next. And many children anticipate these events, which helps the progress of daily activities flow.

An example of a child's description of kindergarten experience from this study illustrates how a child uses a script of the school day as a planning tool that guides expectations and behavior. When asked "What happens when you go to school?" the child began with the standard narrative: look at a book, lesson time, jobs/center activities, clean-up, group time, outdoor play, lunch, and nap. These events occur daily. Then the child said, "Then we go to music. That's today, anyway. Other days we go to gym or the library." The child's expectation for the day was set, five hours prior to the event that would be in store for him in the afternoon. This form of anticipation must play some role in helping the child adapt in school. This is consistent with

Nelson and Gruendel's (1981) idea that the child's cognitive context is based on experience with events and not on any abstract set of school rules or expectations.

Alternatively, and possibly more worrisome, are the cases of a few children who reported standard descriptions of the school day, one of whom went on to say, "That's what we are supposed to do, but I don't." Teachers confirmed this child's admission of the difference between what he did and what was expected. By age six, he (and several other children in the study) knew the school day as planned and experienced by most of the class. Those children were also aware (and could state) that they did not "fit;" they were operating psychologically on some different premise than the others in the group. They had the scripts that everyone else did, but they had not psychologically adapted to school events in the same ways as their classmates had. Some other script (a "contrary" script, perhaps) was motivating them, or at least sensitizing them to an awareness of their differences with what was expected. Whether these differences prove to be maladaptive is not known. It is interesting that children themselves are attuned by age six to the gap between what everyone does and what they themselves do.

From the standard theory of scripts, the language used in the child's description of classroom events does reflect adaption to the class. They make use of linguistic indicators such as the timeless verb (e.g., We get on the rug.) and the general "you" (e.g., You go to centers.) (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981). They spontaneously represent knowledge about prototypical experience as a set of temporally related acts (e.g., After we play, we clean up.). These signs reflect a view of the child's participation in and contribution to membership in the classroom. The child is part of the activity, like everyone else in the class is. Being a part of the class must be

seen as a necessary component of adaptation. These children provided many linguistic indicators suggesting that they are adapting.

The content of children's scripts of kindergarten and the forms of language used to express that content both suggest something about the child's socialization and adaptation in the early childhood classroom. More must be done to evaluate the significance of those experiences for the child's development and view of the world.

Child's Understanding of Kindergarten as an Alternative Perspective

Kindergarten is an experience for young children that can be partially understood in terms of their understanding of daily activities. Earlier efforts attempted to document that experience in terms of outcome measures or observed process measures and have not considered the child's knowledge of the school day as a pertinent source of information. At least by age 5, children can provide fairly reliable knowledge of what transpires in a school program. It is worth considering whether the child's representation of daily experience could serve as an indicator of the effectiveness (i.e., organization, orderliness, consistency) of the program, since they can contribute a valid perspective on their experience in the program.

It is also important to remember that play emerges early in all children's accounts of their progress, indicating the importance of play in the child's daily experience. (Garza, Briley & Reifel, 1985; Reifel, Briley & Garza, in press) More research must be done to document the variety of creative activities that constitute what children view as play. Play, both indoors and outdoors, is a salient event (or set of activities) that has a central place for children in child care programs.

Clearly, interviews about clasroom experiences can provide us with some insights into the structure of classroom activity and the expectations that develop within the class. This is perhaps one of the contexts that Mischler (1979) wrote about, a context within which meaning is formed. There are also other classroom meanings that are not dealt with in these

interviews: What does it mean to have a friend at school? What does it mean to learn something new? What does it mean to fall off the swing? What does it mean when someone cries? The analysis of scripts provides one framework for capturing regularity and order. There are also incidental meanings that occur within routine. We should consider methods for incorporating some of this ideosyncratic meaning into our models of classroom experience.

Future Research

Some reference has been made in sections above to what we might consider as next steps in research. We can learn a great deal as we interview and interpret children's views of what goes on in classrooms. One current project involves the cross-cultural comparison of kindergarteners' scripts of daily experiences. Children from Israel, Germany, and the U.S. will contribute to our understanding of the kindergarten program: expected events, rules, procedures, the nature of work and play. A cross-cultural perspective might reveal differences in socialization patterns and expectations about performance. The implicit rules of the classrooms could also be markedly different.

It is also of interest to wonder about how the curriculum, or content of daily lessons, plays a role in the child's formation of scripts. Children appear to be aware of general acts in their child care and school days. At the same time, we plan many unique activities in our curricula, activities that we assume contribute to the child's store of school knowledge. Do specific activities play a role in young children's school experience? The current evidence of children's lack of memory for specific acts (i.e., what they did yesterday) seems to have many implications for what we plan and teach in our classrooms.

Figure 1: A 6-year-old boy's description of the kindergarten day.

E: What happens when you go to school?

S: Well, we sit down on the rug and look at books.

And the Mrs. tells us about dinosaurs* and stuff like that,

and then she talks about what's in the centers.

Then Ms. B. or Ms. S's class we go to the library.

Then we come back.

And we go outside,

And then we play.

And then we come back in,

and have a story, maybe.

Then we go to lunch.

Then come back and have rest-time.

And after rest-time, hmm, I forgot what we do. Oh, yah . . .

And then we go to music class or gym. (Today we go to gym.)

And then we come back from gym,

And we go home.

*Dinosaurs had been the previous week's unit topic.

Table 1

Percentage of children Who Reported Specific Acts

Sit on rug	31
Roll call	21
Teacher tells about work/jobs	27
Center time	58
Work/jobs	39
Play	26
Clean up	37
Story	23
Go outside	19
Lunch	61
Go to classroom	30
Nap	55
Music	35
Gym	35
Go home	38

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