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ABSTRACT

Observational records presented in this report demonstrate the powerful influence that adults have on the developing literacy of young children. The report reveals the role that language plays in contextually providing adults' expectations for the extent of children's participation in written language events. Observations of 4-year-old fraternal twin sisters interacting in literacy events with their mother and father revealed that the oral language of both parents functioned for similar purposes, suggesting that both parents held similar expectations for each child's written language effort. These observations were consistent with previous findings. While possibly similar for each individual child, parents' expectations differed from child to child. Thus, parents focused on meaning in interactions with one of the twins, and on letter formation and placement with the other. It was seen as important that both girls responded as expected. It is concluded that oral language transactions between adults and children during written language activities have tremendous impact on the way children learn to make meaning through writing. It is important that parents and teachers recognize the influences their teaching language has on children's early writing efforts. (RH)

THE LANGUAGE OF PARENTS: INFLUENCING INDICATORS OF EXPECTATIONS FOR CHILDREN'S LITERACY

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Connie: Read it!

Father: I can read this. It says, "Connie."

Connie: Not all of it.

Father: You help me, ok? I can read this. That says, "Connie." I know her. What's this say?

Connie: "House. I love house."

Father: You love your house?

Connie: Somebody else loves the house.

Father: Oh, somebody else loves the house.

Teale (1982) discussed literacy events in light of two factors which seem to play a vital role in a child's learning to read and write: the child's active participation in the event and the speech which surrounds the activity. He explained that "reading and writing for the young child are in their very beginning stages conducted interpsychologically, i.e., in the interaction between the literate person(s) and the preschooler, and speech is what enables literacy to be conducted interpsychologically" (p. 562). Thus, it was the interaction between Connie and her father that allowed the child to participate actively in the written language event which introduces this discussion.

Hoffman's continuing research into the nature of parent-child interactions which surround literacy events indicates that oral language characteristics hold clues to both parental expectations of children and the children's response to these expectations. She stated (1983, p. 3) that "the content of the language (what was said), the context of the language situation (when it was said), and the tone of the language exchange (how it was said) appeared related to the

quality of the language transactions and the meaning exchange between parent and child as well as to the success of the teaching and learning process."

Using Halliday's (1975) concept of register to describe the language variance within the context of situation in which written language takes place during mother-child transactions, Hoffman and McCully (1984, p. 44) reported that language variances were apparent within the same parent-child dyad, "depending upon the role relationships established because of adult expectations for what the child did or did not know." For example, when the activity in which the mother and child were involved moved from drawing to writing, the parent's oral language evidenced skill-directed expectations. The written messages of the child indicated a negative influence of that shift in intended and/or perceived functions of parent's language. Each of the children's writings evidenced more attention to "mechanics" and conventional orthography and less attention to content and personalized meaning.

Because of research demonstrating differences in parent gender as a factor in various parent-child task interactions (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Fash & Madison, 1982; Lamb, 1977; Soar, Huitt, & Soar, 1980); Searcy (1984) raised a question as to whether the language of fathers and mothers differed as they participated in specific literacy events with their prekindergarten children. His initial findings indicated that, although there were differences in parent-child interactions between families, parents in the same family tended to interact in similar ways with their children during writing activities. Within the same family, the oral language of the mother and the father functioned for similar purposes and suggested similar expectations for the same child's written language effort. Fathers and mothers of the same child demonstrated similar expectations for their child's written efforts; their teaching language supported those expectations.

Examples from a Case in Point

Connie and Kristy, four-year old fraternal twins, were videotaped at different times with each of their parents during a planned drawing and writing activity. The initiating and responding language of the parents clearly showed to what extent they expected each daughter capable of taking control of her own activity. Let's consider the father's role, first.

When the activity began, the father encouraged both girls to talk about what they might draw. Connie drew independently and talked with her father about topics unrelated to her writing: for example, "(Are) we going to play baseball tonight?" Only after she had finished her writing did she direct attention to her drawing and written message by asking the parent to read her writing. His response was to look for meaning in the message, as illustrated in the opening dialogue of this article.

On the other had, Kristy was questioned about each part of her drawing and carefully directed and cued by her father's language as she wrote. The following dialogue between Kristy and her father demonstrates his expectations for her and her efforts.

Father: Let me show you one thing, ok? Do this for me?

Kristy: Uh-huh (yes)

Father: You got a real good K, don't you? Let's write your name. Let me write it and then you write it. You got a real good K, ok? It rhymes. And an R and an I and we got S. You don't need that bottom tail. And a T and a Y.

Kristy: Dad, try to make it. I don't know how to.

Father: Sure you do. You grab the pen. You write it right below it. Is that the way we did it? One more time. That one's pretty close.

Through the verbal transactions of father and child, definite expectations were conveyed by the parent and carried out by each of the young writers. Kristy depended on her father's model of writing and relied on his assistance in writing conventional letters. Connie, on the other had, wrote independently and created a message with personally intended meaning.

Now, let's look at the language of the mother and her daughters during a similarly planned literacy event. Although more directive of both girls, the mother also differentiated her expectations for Connie and Kristy through language, beginning with the drawing activity.

Without any suggestions from her mother, Connie decided to draw a house and drew until the picture was completed. Kristy, on the other hand, was told by her mother what to draw and how to draw it, with an emphasis on "correctness":

Mother: Well, draw one straight line for me. There you go--oop--there you go. No, go straight across over here. That's good. Now go down to my finger. That's good. That's it. Then down. No, no. Right here. Finish the door, sweetheart. There you go. Ok, now draw a window. And draw another window. Ok, now you know what? Now draw a path all the way down to here. That's good. That's a good path. There you go. Swingset. What's that?

Kristy: Swingset.

Mother: Well, is that a swing or a teeter-totter?

Kristy: I'll make a teeter-totter.

Drawing changed to writing as the girls wrote their names on their pictures. Once again, the mother took control of Kristy's work, directing her writing and rejecting Kristy's interpretations of her message:

Kristy: That says, "turtle."

Mother: No, that says, "Kristy."

Kristy: But, but--

Mother: Doesn't that say, "Kristy"?

Kristy: Well, I write another one.

Mother: You did? Where?

Kristy: Make a K.

Mother: Make a t. What are you writing? Kristy? Good S! Good S. Oh, good job. That's it. Not very many squiggles.

Kristy: That's my name.

Mother: Ok, what's this letter?

Kristy: That's a R. That's a R.

Mother: Then, what's that letter? I~ that a bung-up?

Kristy: Yes.

Mother: Just scratch it out.

Kristy: No, but this says, this says, "Just lines." This says, "Just lines."

Mother: That's just lines? Well, honey, if you put lines in the middle of the word, it doesn't make sense. You can't have lines in your name. See?

Kristy: But that says lines right here.

Mother: Ok, why don't you put that up above your name, not in your name. See, that doesn't say your name now.

When the mother finally turned her attention to Connie, she asked Connie about meaning, encouraged her writing, and supported what she had done. The following conversation between Connie and her mother contrasts with that between Kristy and her mother.

Mother: Oh, nice letter. Now what's that say?

Connie: I don't know. (reads) "C-O-N-N-I-E, Connie. P-B-B-P-B-K"

Mother: Good job.

Connie: K--That's a mess-up.

Mother: No it's not. That looks like Y. Are you starting up here? Oh, I see. Ok.

Connie: "O-O-C-O-N-N-O-I-O-N."

Mother: That's good. Now, what's that say? Are you writing a letter to Pam?

Connie: This is a--I didn't like the mixed up so I made a line and this is all pictures and this is all pictures and then I maked the letters up here.

Mother: Well, that is a nice job.

Discussion

The father and mother in this family clearly used oral language to demonstrate their expectations for their daughters during these activities. Furthermore, it was evident that within the language transactions both parents sent different messages of expectations for each daughter. The similarity in their expectations was striking!

Both parents revealed that they expected Connie to draw and write without adult assistance. The focus of their interactions with this daughter was on her creation of meaning. Connie responded with appropriate behaviors. She drew and wrote independently, assigned personal meaning to her products which were accepted by the parents for the meaning intent rather than the conventionality of the form.

For Kristy, the language of both parents carried different expectations from those they held for Connie. The focus was on the surface characteristics of both Kristy's drawing and writing. Through their language, her parents suggested she needed to "master" the mechanical aspects of writing--conventional letter formation and placement--before she could attend to meaning. And, Kristy, too, responded with expected behavior. She relied on the written language models of her parents, responding with "I can't write it" when encouraged by her father to write on her own. Near the end of one writing

event, when her father asked Kristy what she had written, she said, "It doesn't read! It doesn't read! It doesn't read!"

Teale's (1982) suggestion that the oral language which surrounds a literacy event is the vital element that makes literacy "take" was evidenced clearly in these writing episodes. The language functions of these two parents demonstrated that how parents use language affects what aspects of literacy are interpreted by the child as important and therefore "take." It was apparent that the language of teaching was either an enabling or a limiting factor for each child's active involvement with constructing personal meaning through written language.

Implications for Teachers

Perhaps there is a message here for parents and teachers. Connie's and Kristy's parents demonstrate the powerful influence that adults have on the developing literacy in young children. More specifically, they demonstrate the role that language serves in providing the adult's expectations for the extent of the child's participation in written language events.

How can oral language be used positively to encourage children's active participation with writing? Let's look for an answer through Connie's experience. Both of Connie's parents focused on meaning when interacting with her about her writing. They allowed her to discuss her message in terms of what it meant to her, and responded in supportive and interested way. They expected her to write.

Connie's parents also used language to indicate an acceptance of how Connie had written. Rather than emphasizing the conventional aspects of writing as they did with Kristy, they simply accepted Connie's efforts. This lack of

insistance that letters be written "correctly" allowed Connie to take risks with her writing and to explore ways to make meaning through written language. This self-testing of hypotheses, according to Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), is essential for children to discover on their own as they learn about written language.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the language transactions described above and one which demonstrates the positive expectations for Connie was the silence of the parents during her writing. They allowed her to write independently. She was able to make her own decisions about what she wrote, how she wrote, and where on the page she wrote. This is a uniquely powerful way to tell a young writer, "I expect you can do that."

The oral language transactions between adults and children during written language activities have tremendous impact on the way children learn to make meaning through writing. It is the belief of these authors that this impact stems from the adults' expectations--expectations which serve to limit or promote children's active participation with written language--and which are revealed through their oral language.

This suggests that parents and teachers must recognize the influences their "teaching language" has on children's early writing efforts. We must all remember to send oral messages that say, "What you have to write is important! And how you write your message is just fine!" When children hear anticipated success for them in our language cues, they dare to try out their own developing rule system for writing. And they become writers--naturally!

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