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As part of an attempt to precisely clarify the role of social context in early literacy development, this paper presents a working theoretical model for the ways in which one form of close social relationship, friendship, relates to early school-based literacy. The paper defines friendship as a dyadic, mutual relationship. The paper suggests that the emotional climate of trust and mutuality characteristic of friendships supports cognitive conflict and subsequent resolution. These processes, in turn, afford opportunities for children to reflect upon the linguistic and cognitive processes that constitute school-based literacy. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for future research. Contains 63 references. (Author/RS)

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The Role of Close Relationships in Early Literacy Learning: Towards a Working Model

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Winter 1997

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READING RESEARCH REPORT NO. 80
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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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The Role of Close Relationships in Early Literacy Learning: Toward a Working Model

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Abstract. *As part of an attempt to precisely clarify the role of social context in early literacy development, we present a working theoretical model for the ways in which one form of close social relationship, friendship, relates to early school-based literacy. Friendship is defined as a dyadic, mutual relationship. We suggest that the emotional climate of trust and mutuality characteristic of friendships supports cognitive conflict and subsequent resolution. These processes, in turn, afford opportunities for children to reflect upon the linguistic and cognitive processes that constitute school-based literacy. Implications for future research are suggested.*

Researchers are currently concerned with the social context in which children's school-based literacy, as well as more general cognitive processing, develops. Frequently, Vygotskian (1978) or Piagetian (Perret-Clermont & Brossard, 1985; Piaget, 1983) theory is invoked to explain the ways in which supplementary (e.g., adult-child) or complementary (e.g., peer) relations facilitate cognitive processes. In both Piagetian and Vygotskian cases, the theories propose that cognitive development is the result of co-construction of knowledge between participants. To our knowledge, most studies do not explicate the specific dimensions of these social configurations that might afford literacy learning. Here we explore the importance of two specific aspects of the peer social contexts: contacts with diverse social actors and close relationships. We suggest that one type of close relationship between peers, friendship, may be an especially important social configuration in early school-based literacy learning.

Early literacy is a particularly interesting construct in which to study the role of social interaction in cognitive processes. Specifically, social interaction processes influence self-regulating, or "meta," processes, such as planning, monitoring, and checking outcomes in problem-solving situations (Hartup, 1985; Perret-Clermont & Brossard, 1985). These meta psychological processes can play an important role in children's school-based literacy learning. Further, performance on the sorts of tasks typically used in school-based literacy events support the use of the "meta" processes associated with peer interaction. Performance on open-ended tasks, such as

those frequently found in North American school literacy learning events (e.g., story writing and story telling, pretend play, and general talk about books), seems most susceptible to the forms of talk that spur cognitive change (e.g., disagreements/agreements [Kruger, Yebra, & Willis, 1995] and talk about language and cognitive processes).

We center our model on Piaget's equilibration theory where cognitive growth is stimulated by the conceptual conflict and resolution inherent in much peer interaction. We explore the ways in which two sorts of peer contexts, diverse and close relationships, stimulate cognitive and linguistic processes constitutive of early school-based literacy. We first define what we mean by early literacy. Next, we explore the role of diverse social contacts in the cognitive and linguistic decentering that is important for school literacy. Then, we argue that it is the close relationships within these diverse social networks that might be particularly important for literacy development. We suggest that the emotional tenor of friendship affords conceptual conflict and resolution; these processes are typically accompanied by talk about corresponding emotional states (e.g., That makes me *sad*). When friends talk about such emotional states they "cool" (Bruner, 1987) the emotions, enabling them to reflect upon the linguistic and cognitive processes important in school-based literacy learning.

The social context for literacy learning is multifaceted and complex, as researchers such as Dyson (1989; 1993), Galda (Galda, Shockley, Pellegrini, & Stahl, 1995), Lensmire (1994), and Baghban (1984; 1989) have shown. One important factor, according to this research, is the influence of peers. Peers, however, is a fairly global construct in much of this research. Here we focus more clearly on two aspects of the peer system: diversity of social contacts and mutual friendships. By discussing only these two dimensions of the peer system, we do not imply that they are the only important aspects of social context. Rather, we seek to precisely elaborate the concept of peers in literacy learning contexts. We also limit our discussion to the sort of literacy that is often taught in North American schools (see Galda et al., 1995; Lensmire, 1994, for two examples). While we recognize there are a variety of literacies, such as literacies for music, map reading, mathematical notation systems, as well as a variety of alphabetic literacies, we are interested in exploring the role of peers in literacy learning in typical North American classrooms. That we present one model, or path, by which children may become literate should not be interpreted as excluding other possible routes to literacy. We, like other developmentalists (Martin & Caro, 1985; Piaget, 1983; Sackett, Sameroff, Cairns, & Suomi, 1981), endorse the notion of equifinality in development, which states that organisms reach developmental hallmarks via a variety of routes. Such flexibility seems necessary if organisms are to develop, and survive, in the varied environments that they inhabit. Thus, our working model is one of many that describes the process of becoming literate in certain types of schools. There are certainly different routes to literacy in the same types of schools and certainly different routes to literacy in different settings. Human beings and

their ecological niches are too complex to suggest anything else.

The model presented is a working model. This implies that much more research is needed before the parameters are more exactly specified. As will become evident, very little research has examined the theoretical or empirical implications of close relationships for early literacy. This paper, hopefully, will stimulate research in this area.

School-Based Literacy: A Developmental Definition

We and others (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1993; Olson, 1977; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Schiefflein & Cochran-Smith, 1981) have argued that school-based literacy is a broadly defined and culturally bound event governed by predictable social rules. Some children learn these rules very early, typically at home, while others have a difficult time learning these rules. The culturally bound nature of school-based literacy is partially responsible for this state. Most generally, school literacy involves reading and writing specific forms of texts and talking in certain ways about those texts, most of which have been prescribed by schools. Children are frequently expected to read trade books, often in the narrative genre, write about those stories and other experiences in story-like frames, and talk with the teacher in specific ways about these texts (Galda et al., 1995). These rule-governed interactions around text in school have been labelled "literacy events" (Heath, 1983). A paradigm example of this sort of interaction is the recitation discussion in which teachers ask students known information questions about a text. Thus, students come to recognize the following rules: Questions are posed by teachers about a book; teachers often have a specific answer in mind; children are expected to present answers to these questions in a specific format.

Our developmental orientation in defining literacy involves taking design features of school literacy, or the rules governing interaction around written language, and locating them in the oral language and speech events of children before they enter school. Our selection of design features of school-based literacy events is derived from fields as diverse as sociology (Bernstein, 1972), anthropology (Heath, 1983; Schiefflein & Cochran-Smith, 1981), language and literacy studies, and cognitive developmental psychology (Olson, 1977). Accordingly, we consider "literate talk" or "literate language" to be one developmental precursor to school-based literacy, generally, and reading and writing, specifically. Descriptively, literate language is a situationally sensitive language variant, or register (DeStefano, 1972; Halliday, 1978), which conveys meaning explicitly, with minimal contextual reliance. This register has the following features: Meaning is explicit (e.g., elaborated noun phrases) and lexicalized (e.g., through endophora), and clauses are conjoined with a variety of conjunctions; what Halliday and Hasan (1976) called cohesive text. Additionally, as part of the meaning explication process, literate language involves talk about talk as well as talk about cognitive processes.

We take this talk about cognitive and linguistic processes and states as evidence that

children are reflecting upon these processes and states (Dunn, 1988; Pellegrini, Galda, Shockley, & Stahl, 1995). Children's use of such terms as *think*, *read*, and *say* is indicative of their meta awareness of the processes governing reading and writing. The importance of children's use of the meta terms in traditional school-based reading and writing status is reflected in the robust finding that children's ability to reflect upon the language and mental processes, as evidenced by children's talk about these processes (Adams, 1990; Pellegrini & Galda, 1991; Scarborough, 1995) is predictive of success in school-based reading. Adams's (1990) synthesis of the early literacy literature clearly supports the importance of metalinguistic awareness in early school-based reading.

The importance of these particular aspects of literate language, however, is probably an artifact of the ways in which literacy is typically taught in many North American schools. For example, reading and writing are often taught around a specific literary genre, the narrative (Galda et al., 1993), with reading and writing being taught by composing, reading, and discussing texts and using language to label words, letters, and sounds. Literate language is also observed in classrooms, which makes oral talk between peers and between children and adults a crucial part of literacy teaching (Galda, Shockley, Pellegrini, & Stahl, 1995). In preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade classrooms, teachers encourage children to use literate language as they talk about the books they read and about the texts they write (Galda et al., 1995).

To sum up our conceptualization of school-based literacy, young children's use of literate language reliably predicts their performance on traditional measures of reading and writing (Dickinson & Moreton, 1991; Pellegrini & Galda, 1991). This finding is probably due to the fact that this register shares design features with language used in school-based literacy events. In light of this orientation in many schools, it should hardly be surprising that children who can talk about language also learn to read and write quite easily (Adams, 1990). Simply put: The design features of literate language match the design features of the ways in which literacy is typically taught in schools; thus, the probable reason for the predictive importance of the form of language.

The Peer Context: Diverse and Close Relationships

Talk, of course, needs an audience, and in many classrooms peers make up that audience. Here we describe two dimensions of the peer system that support children's use of literate language. We discuss diverse peer contacts first, noting that not all peers are equally supportive of literate language. We then suggest that children's friendships may be one social configuration that is especially supportive of literate language.

Diverse Contacts

A number of researchers, such as the British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1960) and Piagetian-oriented researchers (Pellegrini et al., 1995) have examined relations between the variety of children's social contacts, or social networks, and learning literate language.

Theoretically, variety of interlocutors may be important because when children communicate with different people, ambiguity often arises. In order to communicate meaning unambiguously, speakers must consider, or accommodate, others' points of view (Bernstein, 1960; Pellegrini et al., 1995). A basic premise of this orientation, following equilibration theory, is that interacting with a variety of peers facilitates conceptual conflict, resolution, and growth. Conceptual conflict, which is the product of being confronted with ambiguous social meaning, leads to social and cognitive decentering, or the ability to see and talk about events from different perspectives. Literate language, especially that dimension that involves meta talk, is an indicator of decentering. When children interact with peers, compared to adults, they are more willing to disagree (Piaget, 1962). Thus, variety of peer interlocutors should facilitate literate language.

An example of this sort of talk between kindergartners is helpful to illustrate our point. Take two children (Anna and Jessica) playing with a doctor kit and dolls:

A: It's (the doll's) sick.
J: *It's* sick?
A: Yeah. The doll. It's sick. Look. I think she's sick 'cause she's got a tempy.
J: Yeah, so she needs a shot.
A: No! She hates them!
J: Then don't tell her! Say: Close her eyes and it'll only hurt a minute. Then it'll be better.
A: Yeah. OK. OK, honey, Mommy wants you to close your eyes. Don't be scared. You'll feel better.

This example includes instances of verbal explication (e.g., *It's* being defined as *the doll*), and conceptual conflict (e.g., disagreeing on the need for a shot), and resolution (e.g., you're right). Also note that such conflict-resolution cycles involve children accommodating others' perspectives. In the process of resolving the conflict children typically employ rather sophisticated reasoning, as evidenced by adversative (*but*) and temporal (*then*) conjunctions. Further, children talk about talk (*say* and *tell*) and mental states (*thinks*, *wants*).

That diverse social experiences relate to cognitive decentering is supported in the experimental work with children's role playing: Taking a variety of different roles facilitates children's social-cognitive decentering (Burns & Brainerd, 1979; Christie & Johnsen, 1983; Piaget, 1962; Rosen, 1974). The naturalistic literature in children's play also supports the claim that taking a variety of roles facilitates children taking differentiated perspectives and the use of literate language (Pellegrini et al., 1995).

Not all peers, however, are equally supportive of the conceptual conflict and resolution cycles that support literate language. Close peer relationships, or reciprocal friendships, may provide a particularly supportive venue for using literate language.

Close Relationships

Interactions vary between peers in different relationships (Hinde, 1978), where relationships are defined as dyads whose specific histories of interactions influence their present and future interactions. Here we concentrate on

a discussion of a specific close peer relationship—reciprocal friendship. While other close relationships between children, such as sibling relationships, may be important for social understanding (Dunn, 1988) and literacy learning (Baghban, 1984), we consider friendship because it is an important part of children's social lives at school (see Dyson, 1989, 1993; Lensmire, 1994, for discussions of the peer world in schools).

Our presentation of the role of peers, friendships, and literacy, however, differs from many discussions of peer influences on literacy learning. In much of this literature the nature of the peer relationship is not considered explicitly: A peer is a peer. Where differences are considered, they relate to differences in expertise; for example, conservers interact with nonconservers (Murray, 1972). Even when the term friendship is used (Dyson, 1989, 1993; Lensmire, 1994), it is used globally with friendship not explicated. In most cases, peers and friends are not differentiated theoretically. In some places it is used synonymously with peers who share classroom space. The unstated assumption here is that when children interact with each other or occupy the same space, they are friends.

In other cases, friendship and popularity are conflated (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). We define friendship as a reciprocal, dyadic relationship operationalized by reciprocal peer nominations of friendship (Hartup, 1996). Popularity is a unilateral measure of acceptance by numerous peers. A popular child is liked by more children than he/she is disliked; a rejected child is disliked more than he/she is liked. Children can be popular yet have no reciprocal friends and be rejected with friends (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Thus, the two constructs should be kept separate in that they are conceptually and empirically separate.

Discussion of friendship in relation to other peers and to popularity help us to clearly articulate the aspects of the peer context that are theoretically important. This level of clarity is needed in future research certainly. Friends, according to our definition, are pairs of children who *reciprocally* nominate each other as friends, not simply children who are in the same classroom or interact together during a lesson. Reciprocity is of crucial theoretical importance in our definition of friendships because of the mutual trust inherent in a relationship where children *each* consider the other as a friend. Unilateral friendships, or definitions of friendships where one child nominates another as a friend but the other does not reciprocate, should not be characterized by the same levels of trust. Trust, and the corresponding synchronous interaction patterns, should differentiate this relationship from other, nonfriend, peer relationships. When peers trust each other, as friends do, they are more willing to disagree with each other and, in turn, to accommodate that discrepant information (Hartup, 1996). An example of this sort of disagreement and compromise was presented above in the dialogue between Anna and Jessica. It is the trust that operates in reciprocal friendships that is crucial if children are to disagree with each other and then compromise.

Conceptual conflict and compromise are emotionally charged events for young children (Dunn, 1988). These events are often characterized by children verbally encoding accompa-

nying emotional states with terms such as *happy*, *sad*, *disappointed*, and *angry* (Dunn, 1998). Encoding emotional states in language has the effect of cooling the emotions to a level where children can then reflect upon them (Dunn, 1988; Bruner, 1987). That is, by verbally encoding the emotions that accompany conceptual conflict and resolution, children make them emotionally less charged and can thereby step back from the interaction and reflect. This reflective process is crucial for children's reflection upon language and thought processes.

The empirical record supports these claims to the extent that interactions between friends, compared to acquaintances, tend to have more conflicts and resolutions, yet they are also more cooperative and sustained (Hartup, 1996), as well as contain more meta comments (Jones & Pellegrini, 1996). In a study of first-grade children's computer-assisted writing, Jones and Pellegrini (1996) found that friends, compared to nonfriends, not only used more meta terms but they also wrote more sophisticated narratives. Similarly, with a group of older primary school children, Daiute and colleagues (Daiute, Hartup, Shool, & Zajac, 1993) found that the oral language accompanying narrative writing and the written narratives themselves were more advanced in friendship than in acquaintanceship (dyads). Most interesting from our point of view was that Daiute and colleagues found that these forms of literate language co-occurred with markers of trust and emotion. The importance of peer trust in literacy learning is also reinforced by Lensmire's (1994) observations in his third-grade classroom writing lessons. Thus, friendship and the emotional support it affords seems crucial to the development of one form of early school-based literacy.

Implications

An important and initial research implication involves the definition of friendship. Given the centrality of reciprocity in our model, research should examine the role of unilateral and reciprocal friends. Our model predicts that reciprocal, compared to unilateral, friendships should evidence more trust and mutuality and, consequently, more conceptual conflict/resolution and literate language.

A second extension of this model would be to examine close relationships between children and teachers. By way of guidance, we consider children's attachment relationships with their primary caregivers, usually mothers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wells, 1978). Interactions around storybooks between children and mothers in one form of close relationship, a secure attachment relationship, are coordinated and synchronized; these interactions, in turn, relate to emergent literacy (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988; 1995). Secure attachment relationships (see Ainsworth et al., 1978 for an extended discussion of attachment classifications) occur when children use adults as secure bases from which to explore and interact with their environments. The trust manifested in securely attached relationships allows children to take risks and explore their worlds. Thus, in secure relationships, mothers ask children demanding questions about the book being read. Children and mothers both feel confident in each other during such difficult and possibly

stressful incidents (Bus & vanIJzendoorn, 1995).

Young children also seem to form attachment-like relationships with their teachers (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). These interactions, too, are typified by mutual trust, respect, and coordination. Children classified as secure in their classrooms are generally socially competent in the classrooms, popular, and engaged in complex peer play (Howes et al., 1994). We do not know, however, about their interactions with teachers during literacy events. Evidence from the mother-child book reading literature provides some guidance as to what we should expect (Bus & vanIJzendoorn, 1995; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990). The atmosphere of trust should encourage teachers to use a variety of demanding but supportive teaching strategies. For example, when teachers are talking to children about books, they may begin by asking cognitively demanding questions (e.g., What do you think will happen next?). Children's responses to these questions should determine teachers' subsequent strategies. If children respond appropriately (e.g., He's gonna make too much spaghetti), teachers should continue with high demand strategies (How's he going to shut it off?). If children respond inappropriately (e.g., I don't know) teachers should lower their demands (e.g., Is he hungry?). Future research should address these issues directly with children and teachers in both secure and insecure relationships.

The role of individual differences in relationships should also be studied in the future. Human beings are individuals who enter into various relationships in different ways. These differences affect the contexts into which they self-select and the ways in which others interact with them. To minimize the role of individual differences in social interaction implies that individuals are rather passive recipients of larger social processes. This, as Tooby and Cosmides (1992) have argued so eloquently, is to reduce children's development and learning to a behaviorist variant of cultural reproduction. Consideration of individual differences makes provisions for individuals' contributions to social interaction. If we consider development to be transactional, rather than unidirectional, we must consider the exchange between individuals and larger social processes. Examinations of the role of individual differences and social relationships are especially important in the field of early literacy because they are noticeably absent from most socially-oriented theories of culture and development and especially absent from discussion of the social context of literacy instruction.

Individual differences are often considered in terms of children's temperament. Temperament is evident very early in children's development, stable across childhood, and has a biological (typically hormonal) expression (Suomi, 1991). Because of these characteristics, temperament is an excellent construct to use to examine the ways in which individuals contribute to socialization (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Here we consider one example, inhibited children (Billman & McDevitt, 1980; Kurdek & Lillie, 1985). These children are "slow to warm up" to different situations. When they do warm-up, however, they are social but less so than their more outgoing counterparts (Kochanska & Radke-Yarrow, 1992). These inhib-

ited children may be those who seek out a few close friends with whom to interact rather than more diverse and less intense relationships. Although their networks may be less diverse, their close friendships may be equally supportive of literacy learning. The important point here is the notion of equifinality (Martin & Caro, 1985), which states that there may be different, but equally effective, routes to developmental outcomes, such as literacy.

At the broader level, cultural variables, such as ethnicity, may influence children's friendship formations in school. Dubois and Hirsch (1990), for example, found that friends were particularly important for African-American boys and girls. They evidenced few of the gender differences observed in their European-American counterparts. Friendships seemed particularly important for African-American males, possibly to buffer their status in school. Future research into the differential role of relationships in school for different cultural groups is important in terms of equity (i.e., some members of these groups fail at rates higher than European-American children). Further, these differences are important to complement our understanding of children, relationships, and school in that most of our knowledge is based on middle-class children (Bronfennbrenner, 1979).

In conclusion, we presented a working model of one aspect of the social context of literacy learning. As noted above, specification of the dimensions of this model should not preclude other aspects of social context being examined. Indeed, a major motivation for our writing this paper was to stimulate discussion of these issues. Currently, there is wide recognition of the importance of social context. The time is right for a more direct and theoretically driven discussion of social context. The present paper is an initial and limited step in this direction.

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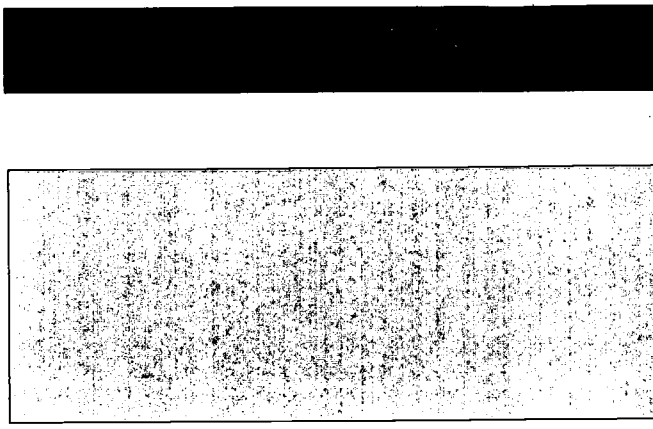

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