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Teacher–Child Conversation in the Preschool Classroom

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This article explores conversations between preschool children and their teachers in the classroom environment. Teachers have an opportunity to engage students in cognitively challenging conversations at critical times during the day: book reading, playtime, and mealtimes. The article provides examples of the types of conversations preschool educators can model and facilitate in order to further develop a child's oral language and subsequent literacy skills during the school day.

KEY WORDS: preschoolers; oral language; conversation.

INTRODUCTION

A typical preschool classroom is a burst of activity and noise. Children can be found painting, playing, drawing, building, reading, eating, and most importantly, conversing. Children converse with other children. Children converse with imaginary characters. Children converse with adults. What is the quality of these conversations? How can these conversations promote oral language development? What is the teacher's role in directing and modeling conversation? Children who experience rich conversations with adults during their preschool years achieve greater academic success in later years (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). This article explores teacher talk in the preschool classroom and questions how teacher talk might contribute to a child's oral language development and subsequent literacy skills. This article also offers specific suggestions for classroom implementation.

HOW DO PRESCHOOL TEACHERS TALK?

Adults play a major role in the oral language acquisition of young children. Children learn how conversations work by observing and interacting with adults, who are accomplished speakers of the language. Through these interactions they learn the social aspects of conversation, such as taking turns and attending to the conversational partner, but they also learn grammar and vocabulary. According to Genishi, "Adults are the main conversationalists, questioners, listeners, responders, and sustainers of language development and growth in the child-care center or classroom" (1988, p. 3). Opportunities abound for early childhood teachers to talk during the course of their instructional day. Teachers talk when greeting students, during circle time, during playtime, during meal and snack times, during center time, and during book reading time.

Much of teacher talk may not, however, engage children in cognitively challenging conversation. Cognitively challenging conversation and the use of a wide vocabulary by teachers have been correlated with children's subsequent language and literacy development (Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Cognitively challenging conversation engages children in conversations that involve explanations, personal narrative, and pretend play where children create and re-create events, analyze experiences, and share opinions and ideas (Smith & Dickinson, 1994). This moves the children's language beyond the literal and the "here and now," and encourages them to talk about past and future events.

Several studies have suggested that cognitively challenging talk is somewhat infrequent in the early childhood setting. Teachers devote considerable time to facilitating children's play, but the conversations are not filled with rich, stimulating content. In some settings, over half of teacher verbalizations center around providing children assistance in obtaining items, managing be-

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havior, supporting children in peer relationships, praising children for appropriate behavior, and providing instructions (Dickinson, DeTemple, Hirschler, & Smith, 1992; Dickinson & Smith, 1991; Kontos, 1999). Children have few opportunities to elaborate on teachers' questions and statements; therefore, they do not share explanations or ideas, which are key elements of cognitively challenging conversation.

Similar patterns have been observed in studies of classroom book reading, although book reading provides an excellent context for cognitively challenging talk. When book reading occurs in preschool classrooms, the majority of teacher talk deals with organization of the reading task, simple feedback, and naming activities (Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, 2002). Teachers tend to act as stage managers by providing direction to students, but do not always get into deeper levels of conversation and abstract thinking that could be experienced by making predictions, discussing vocabulary, analyzing the plot, or delving into character motivations.

A CHALLENGE FOR TEACHERS: CREATING COGNITIVELY CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

The quality and amount of teacher talk seem to be key in properly developing children's oral language skills. When thinking about teacher–child conversations, it is important to keep in mind that these conversations can vary significantly in the level of cognitive complexity. There are four levels of abstract language that can be incorporated into teacher–child conversations (Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamiton, & McGrath, 1997). Level I, matching perception, is the lowest level of complexity; it focuses on the concrete and involves labeling and locating objects or characters. For example, an adult may point to an object and ask, "What is this?" or command a child to "Find the dog in the illustration." Level II, selective analysis/integration of perception, focuses on describing and recalling. Examples of questions and commands at this level include having children fill in the missing words of a sentence, such as "But the caterpillar was ____ ____" or asking, "What ingredients did we use to make our snack this morning?" Level III, reordering or inferring about perception, deals with summarizing, defining, comparing and contrasting, and providing judgments. After a storybook reading, an adult may say, "Max was upset that he was sent to his room. How do you think he felt when he found food waiting for him later? Why did he feel that way?" Level IV, reasoning about perception, involves predictions, problem solving, and concept explanation. For example, "How do you think the mice will attempt to escape from the snake? Do you think it will work? What else can they do?" Another example is "Explain how the machine you built works." Children need success with concrete information such as labeling, describing, and recalling (Levels I and II) before they can be challenged to apply the information and vocabulary to higher level thinking skills such as noting similarities and differences, predicting, and explaining (Levels III and IV). Approximately 70% of the discourse preschool teachers engage in should be targeted to the lower concrete levels—to promote this cognitive foundation—while 30% should involve higher level thinking skills to promote learning (Blank et al., 1978).

Early childhood teachers should engage children in various levels of cognitively challenging talk during the day, focusing on a balance between low levels of complexity and higher levels of complexity. It is common to see many conversations in the preschool classroom that focus on lower levels of cognitive complexity. To increase the amount of cognitively complex conversations in which children are engaged regularly, teachers can utilize three key preschool contexts: book reading time, playtime, and meal and/or snack time. The following provides suggestions for each.

Teacher–Child Interaction During Book Reading

Teachers have various methods of presenting books to children. While some take on a dramatic approach using props and varying voices to present a piece of literature, others read the book and ask questions about the illustrations. Discussion and questions occur before, during, and/or after the reading. Other teachers may simply read the words on the pages. Regardless of the approach, teachers should be aware of several concepts that can promote cognitively challenging conversation in their daily book readings. First and foremost, teachers must make time for book reading in their daily schedule. A minimum of 45 minutes (divided into three sessions) of read-aloud time per day is recommended for preschool classrooms (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Children should be divided into groups of 8–10 during book sharing for optimal discussion opportunities. Being exposed to the language and concepts within diverse storybooks is, of itself, a way to provide children with cognitive challenges relating to the four levels of abstract language previously described.

Second, teachers should be aware of the kinds of talk promoted during book reading. Teacher talk during

book reading may be well suited to the development of language skills necessary for children to succeed in school (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Dickinson et al. (2002) suggest that during book reading, teachers should "engage in discussions that link stories to children's experiences, analyze the meanings of words, probe characters' motivations, and examine the reasons why one event followed another" (p. 12). For example, a teacher may comment during book reading, "Peter planted a flower garden in this story. What kinds of flowers did we plant in our flower pots at school?"

Immediate and nonimmediate talk during book reading benefit a child's oral language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Immediate talk focuses on the here and now. Immediate talk is tied to illustrations and involves labeling and defining. "And there are how many monkeys left? Let's count them." Nonimmediate talk uses illustrations as a springboard for discussions of personal experiences, making predictions, or drawing inferences. "This woman in the illustration is carrying a large bag. What will she put in the bag?" More complex, elaborate language characteristic of nonimmediate talk is found when teachers read, reread, and discuss books during book reading.

Third, oral language skills can be fostered during book reading by incorporating dialogic reading. The goal of dialogic reading is to involve children as active participants in book reading interactions (Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001). The adult's role is to help the child become the storyteller by prompting the child to talk about the book, evaluating the child's response, expanding the response by rephrasing and adding information, and then repeating the sequence to check for understanding (Richgels, 2001). To fulfill this role, adults can provide plenty of who, what, when, where, and why questions in their conversations. Through this dialogic reading approach, children combine language use and comprehension, necessary literacy skills.

Teacher–Child Interaction During Playtime

Playtime is another part of the preschool day when teachers verbally interact with children. Children typically are in smaller groups or centers during playtime. Young children are more interactive in small rather than large group settings (McCabe et al., 1996). Teachers tend to act as magnets to preschool children. Children enjoy sharing their building creations, artistic creations, and pretend play conversations accompanying each event; therefore, the adult's primary role is to be available to children during playtime. It is important for the adult to be stationary during playtime: teachers are two to three times more likely to engage in cognitively challenging conversation with children when they are stationed in one location rather than circulating around the classroom during playtime (Dickinson, 1994). Interacting with children during playtime provides teachers the opportunity to model language use, initiate conversation, and facilitate pretend talk.

Pretend talk is prevalent during playtime activities and can be defined as talk that occurs during the development and enactment of fantasy-play episodes (Smith & Dickinson, 1994). Pretend talk can be predictive of strong language and literacy development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). Teachers can model and contribute to pretend play by providing props that can encourage conversation. In a kitchen play area, for example, teachers can provide illustrated restaurant menus, a telephone, paper, and pencil to encourage conversation that may occur in a restaurant. During playtime, the adult can pretend to be the customer and discuss menu items. For example, the adult may say, "I would like to order an ice cream sundae. What ice cream flavors and toppings may I choose?" Teachers can also support students by narrating and describing play, asking projective and open-ended questions that elaborate on the play theme, and introducing knowledge about the world into children's pretend events (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). For example, as part of a farm theme, teachers can narrate and describe a farmer's tasks while children play with farm props. Children can respond to cognitively challenging questions such as "Why does the farmer need to gather the eggs?" and "What might he or she do with the eggs?" Picking up cues from the children, the teacher can then introduce information to extend their farm-related vocabulary. Part of the playtime discussion may relate to the literature used in the classroom as part of the theme. For example, a teacher may comment, "Oh, I see a caterpillar. What did we learn will happen to this caterpillar in the book we read this morning?" To do this effectively, preschool teachers must be actively involved with the children during playtime each day, eliciting talk from the children.

Teacher–Child Interaction During Mealtimes or Snack Times

A third important time of day for developing oral language skills is during mealtimes and/or snack times. Mealtime might be overlooked as a powerful context for cognitively challenging conversation. As in playtime, having a stationary adult during mealtimes is an impor-

Table I. Examples of Teacher Discourse to Facilitate Conversation

Abstraction Level	Description	Book Reading	Playtime	Meal/Snack Time
Level I	label locate	Do you see the bear? It is in the cave.	Where did you put the ballerina tutu?	What kind of fruit did you bring today? It is called a plum.
Level II	describe recall complete sentences	But the caterpillar was ________ ________________________.	Describe how you built this tower.	What ingredients did we use to make our snack this morning?
Level III	summarize define compare/contrast provide judgments	Max was upset that he was sent to his room. How do you think he felt when he found food waiting for him? Why?	A scale helps us weigh objects. What can we weigh using this scale?	Some fruits can be used in different ways. How can we use apples? (eat raw, make pie, applesauce, juice)
Level IV	predict problem solve explain	How do you think the mice will escape from the snake?	Will and Sam both want to ride the scooter. How can they solve the problem so that they both are treated fairly?	Raisins are dried grapes. What must happen to grapes in order to turn them into raisins? (explain if necessary)

Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997

tant element in teacher–child conversations. Children spend more time talking during mealtimes when an adult is seated at their table, compared to students who have no adult present; therefore, a family-style mealtime setting with a 1:5 adult–child ratio is recommended (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Vocabulary enhancement, narrative talk, and links to literature represent typical patterns of language use during mealtimes.

Vocabulary can be enhanced when the preschool teacher uses rare vocabulary words and develops linguistic concepts (e.g., associations between word categories). For example, a teacher may remark that milk is a dairy product, in which dairy is a rare word. Through explaining and questioning, this conversation can extend to a conversation about where dairy products originate, examples of other dairy products, the process by which milk is transformed to cheese, and how milk helps a person's body. Narrative talk can be encouraged when teachers ask children to share such personal experiences such as "What did you do last night?" or "How did you get to New York? What types of transportation, or vehicles, did you use?" Teachers can also make reference to literature activities in the classroom to practice vocabulary, such as "What did you like about the story we read this morning? What would you do if you found a dinosaur in a cave?" When facilitating mealtime conversation, it is also important for teachers to allow children to control some of the conversational topics (Dickinson, 1994). As children introduce topics, teachers can contribute to the conversation by interjecting vocabulary, restating, and extending conversation. Mealtime also provides an excellent opportunity for children to engage in conversation with one another, further developing their expressive language skills. Table I provides additional illustrations of teacher discourse that can be used to facilitate conversation during the preschool day.

CONCLUSION

As preschool teachers assess their current conversational interactions with children and make plans to include quality conversations throughout the school day, they must keep in mind the magnitude of the importance of conversation to children and their subsequent literacy skills. Classroom environment is less predictive of later language and literacy than the nature of the teacher–child relationship and the kinds of conversations found in the classroom (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). To converse effectively, teachers need to make themselves available to children and consciously plan for such interactions in the daily schedule. Since the most fruitful times of day to promote oral language skills seem to be book reading, playtime, and mealtimes, it might be best to start with one of those times. For example, a teacher could tape-record interactions during book reading, analyze the kinds of talk used, and then think about how the language interaction could be improved to include meaningful context. The meaningful oral language skills relevant to literacy include the development of narrative ability, use of pretend talk, and vocabulary use (Dickinson, McCabe, & Sprague, 2003). An old proverb says, "living is what we do while waiting for something to happen." In a like manner, research suggests that the conversational encounters between teachers and students are planned educational events and are key to student

acquisition of oral language skills. Future research should address the outcomes of using these conversations intentionally to enhance student literacy skills.

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