

Chapter 04



Why we must improve teacher-child conversations in preschools and the promise of professional development

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Abstract

In this paper, I briefly outline why children's early literacy is important, and report data from a series of my studies conducted since the mid-1980s, focusing on the importance of oral language. First, I briefly describe some specific features of classroom experiences are particularly, then I report data that reveal the need for concentrated efforts to improve the quality of classroom support for language. I conclude on a hopeful note, discussing promising data indicating the effectiveness of a professional development effort that I developed with colleagues at the Education Development Center.

The importance of high-quality preschool experiences

Concern about children's status at school entry comes from data showing group-related disparities throughout the school years. At the time of school entry, children from low-income homes are significantly disadvantaged relative to their more affluent peers in the language and reading-related skills that predict long-term literacy growth (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Tarullo & Zill, 2002; Strickland, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Longitudinal studies of language and literacy development have found that children's status in the early grades is strongly related to the degree of long-term success (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, 2002; Scarborough, 2001; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Further, considerable research has demonstrated that higher-quality programs result in better outcomes for children (e.g., Barnett, 1995, 2001; Campbell & Ramey, 1994, 1995; NICHD, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997).

The home-school study of language and literacy development

The body of evidence pointing to the importance of preschool classrooms has been bolstered by the *Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development*, a longitudinal study that I led with Catherine Snow (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, 2002). We examined, in detail, children's home and classroom language experiences during the preschool years and related them to children's later academic success. This study provides additional evidence of the importance of the preschool years for later literacy development and describes specific kinds of experiences that foster language and early literacy development.

We hypothesized that language skills fall into different clusters (Snow & Dickinson, 1991). One cluster of skills is those employed to carry on informal conversations with friends and relatives. During informal conversations, people typically rely on gestures such as pointing to objects, intonation, and shared knowledge or shared prior experience. We predicted that such uses of language would not be strongly linked to literacy growth. The second cluster of language skills are those that people use when they communicate new information to listeners. At these times, people communicate most effectively when they are explicit, use precise vocabulary, and make few assumptions about shared knowledge. Using explicit extended discourse and strong vocabulary knowledge, we believed, would be key to literacy success in the middle school years.

The long-term importance of early success

During the preschool years, members of our research team visited children in their homes and classrooms, interviewed parents and teachers, and audiotaped conversations. In both homes and classrooms, we audiotaped mealtimes and book reading; in classrooms, teachers and children wore backpacks with tape recorders, allowing us to record conversations during group times and free play. These audiotapes were transcribed and analyzed for evidence of relationships between selected language experiences and assessments of children's language and literacy skills at the end of kindergarten. Our assessment battery included tasks that tapped children's print-related knowledge (e.g., letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, early writing); receptive vocabulary; story understanding; and story production skills (see Dickinson & Tabors, 2001 for details). We continued to assess children's reading and language abilities throughout the elementary grades and into middle school, and found very strong correlations between children's skills in kindergarten and our end-of-seventh-grade assessments. For example, seventh grade reading comprehension was strongly related to kindergarten receptive vocabulary ($r = .71$; $p < .001$). These data underscore the strong continuity between early and later literacy skills and highlight the need to identify experiences in the preschool years that contribute to the acquisition of language and literacy skills.

Preschool experiences that foster language and literacy

Our search for precursors to kindergarten success revealed three beneficial types of experiences in children's homes and classrooms:

- 1) Parents and teachers provided children exposure to *varied vocabulary* during informal conversations such as at mealtimes. In classrooms, children had more opportunities to hear varied vocabulary if they conversed with the teacher, because teacher-child talk was considerably richer than talk among peers. This said, we did find that children may support each other's vocabulary learning, because the variety of vocabulary used by all children in a classroom as they conversed with teachers teacher helped predict the vocabulary growth of the particular children we were studying.
- 2) Children benefited if they participated in conversations that use *extended discourse*. For example, children did better if they had more opportunities to hear and produce explanations and personal narratives, and to engage in more pretending. A prime activity that gives rise to such talk in homes and classrooms is book reading. Mealtime is also a setting where adults and children engage in intellectually valuable extended discourse. Also, in classrooms, free play provided opportunities for teachers to effectively support children's language and for children to engage in dramatic play.
- 3) A third important factor in homes and classrooms were *supportive environments* that provided *cognitive and linguistic stimulation*. In the home, the most important contributor to language and literacy development was frequent book reading. In classrooms, support for writing and a curriculum that changed and had a focus on introducing new information were beneficial.

Thus, we found that both homes and classrooms contribute to children's early language and literacy development and that strong classrooms can go far toward providing experiences that are needed to ensure that children enter school with critical language and literacy skills (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001).

The quality of support in classrooms for language and literacy

Realizing the importance of classrooms for young children's early language and literacy development, we have examined many preschool classrooms for the quality of support for language and literacy using different kinds of tools to describe classrooms.

Broad features of classroom quality

Using the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Toolkit* (Smith, Dickinson, Sangeorge, & Anastasopoulos, 2002) is one way in which we have described classrooms. This tool includes a checklist for rating materials and class-

room spaces, a means to code literacy-related activities that occur while the observation is carried out, and an anchored rating scale that evaluates classrooms along 14 wholistic dimensions. These 14 dimensions are clustered into two groups: those that relate to language, literacy, and curriculum, and those that depict broader and more generic aspects of classrooms (e.g., climate, management, materials). We analyzed results from 125 classrooms throughout New England and found that scores for items in the language, literacy, and curriculum cluster were consistently weaker than scores for more standard early childhood practices (e.g., materials, classroom organization, management, climate). For the general early childhood cluster, 41 percent of the classrooms received strong ratings, whereas for the language, literacy, and curriculum cluster only 13 percent of the classrooms were rated as 'strong.' We also found that in 100 classrooms where we spent 169 days of collecting data, there were 66 occasions when no book reading was observed during our two to three hour observations. We also observed adults reading to individuals or small groups in only about one-third of the classrooms (Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, in press).

Teacher-child conversations

We have also examined details of conversations between teachers and children in Head Start classrooms using a tool called *The Teacher-Child Verbal Interaction Profile* (Dickinson, Howard & Haine, 1997). We observed classrooms during mealtimes and free play and coded between eight and 16 30-second intervals of teacher-child conversations for whether the teacher was verbally engaged, the content of the conversation (e.g., control, past or future event, talk about literacy or math, general world knowledge); whether or not the interaction stayed on one topic; and whether or not the teacher dominated the conversation. Results from the *Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development* had shown this to be a powerful factor in predicting children's language growth.

We found that during 93 percent of intervals, teachers were verbally engaged for some portion of the 30-second interval. However, during mealtimes, 42 percent of these interactions included teacher talk for less than five seconds of the interval, suggesting that this is a time when teachers may tend to be verbally engaged to only a limited degree. We also considered the child's role in the conversation, by coding the extent to which the children played a central role in determining the topic of conversation or did most of the talking. The degree of child control of conversational topic was similar across free play and mealtimes (41 percent free play, 49 percent mealtimes), suggesting that many conversations are dominated by teachers. Given that children benefit most when teachers encourage them to extend their comments, this is a worrisome pattern (Dickinson, 2001; Dickinson & McCabe, 2001).

A third feature of conversations that we considered was the extent to which conversations stayed on and deepened a single topic. On average, conversations devel-

oped a topic in some depth less than one-fifth of the time in both settings (19 percent mealtime, 14 percent free play). Conversations that ‘develop a topic’ are important because prior child language research has established that children benefit from such interactions with adults (McCabe & Peterson, 1991), so it is important that teachers find ways to have more sustained conversations with children.

We also coded the content of teacher-child conversations, attending in particular to the extent to which teachers engaged children in conversations about the past or the future, or in conversations that expanded the children’s knowledge about the world. Such topics were found in 34 percent of the mealtime conversations and 27 percent of the free play conversations. Thus, two-thirds of teacher’s conversations did not deal with the kind of content that our research indicates is most likely to support language and literacy development. One would hope more such talk would have been found, considering that we sampled conversations from optimal times for such conversations.

Summary

In a series of studies using varied methods of examining classrooms, we consistently found that the overall quality of support for children’s language and literacy development fell far short of the ideal. We hypothesized that one reason for the observed limitations was that many teachers had only limited knowledge of early literacy development.

Improving preschool classrooms through professional development

In an effort to help preschool teachers better support children’s early literacy development, I worked with colleagues at the Center for Children and Families at EDC to develop an intervention called the Literacy Environment Enrichment Program (LEEP). This program is given as an academic course for teams of teachers and supervisors. It introduces teachers to basic theory about language and literacy development that is grounded in classroom practice, introduces effective strategies, and helps teachers to begin to reflect on classroom instruction. Teachers link theory to practice in their own classrooms and supervisors are helped to adopt effective methods to coach teachers.

To determine the impact of LEEP, we used a comparison group design in which LEEP (n=40) and comparison group classrooms (n=62) were observed before and after the class. Children in these classrooms (LEEP n=231; comparison group n = 328) were assessed using a battery of tools that evaluated the quality support for language and literacy. Analyses were done using multiple regression analyses that controlled for the score a classroom received in the fall prior to the intervention, and for information about the teacher (e.g., teacher education, years of experience, racial background). We found strong evidence that LEEP made a difference after taking into

account all of these other factors. Using the same approach, we examined our data for evidence of an impact of teacher's participation in LEEP upon children's learning. After we controlled for variables such as age, parental education, gender, and pre-intervention scores on our assessments, we found evidence that, on average, children whose teachers had been in LEEP had better scores on assessments of vocabulary, phonological awareness, and early literacy.

Conclusion

Research has made eminently clear the importance of early success in school to long-term literacy success. Our data and those of many others are beginning to highlight that the preschool years play a critical role in ensuring that children are able to benefit from classroom instruction and continue to have academic success as they encounter more demanding literacy challenges in the upper grades. Child care programs must make special efforts to ensure that the children receive maximal support for language throughout the day. Here are some practical steps that I suggest:

- engage in sustained and high-quality professional development that links understanding to classroom practices
- build shared understanding with teaching colleagues and supervisors regarding expectations related to providing children support for language and literacy
- read to children at least once every day – preferably more often – and strive to ensure that every child is read to in a small group setting several times a week
- when reading to children, discuss selected aspects of the text in ways that encourage analysis and talk about the meanings of words
- strive to have enough adults during mealtimes so that each table group has one adult; instruct that adult in the importance of actively striving to engage children in conversations
- strive to create a culture of classroom conversation that includes the following:
 - teachers talk about non-present topics, provide children information, and encourage questioning and speculation
 - teachers stay on and deepen topics over multiple turns ('strive for five!')
 - teachers use varied vocabulary and draw children's attention to words
 - teachers encourage children to listen to each other
 - engage in sustained and varied efforts to get parents to talk to their children

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