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LANGUAGE AND LITERACY: MEDIATING READING PROBLEMS IN A COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXT

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A week after school had begun in the fall, the big door opened from the outside of the first grade portable classroom. Trevor, a new student, was met with the busy hum of children's voices. Scanning the classroom, Trevor could notice two children reading to each other in what appeared to be a space rocket. Another child was writing in a book in front of two gerbil cages. Three children were sitting at the writing table. One was drawing. The other two were making books. No one seemed to notice the visitor until finally a child reading on the couch, looked up from behind her colorful book and announced, "Mrs. W., someone's here!"

The purpose of this paper is to describe how Trevor, a student who failed first grade because he didn't attain minimal reading skills according to school standards, learned to read during his second year in first grade. We believe that this description of Trevor's program will contribute to the understanding of how oral and written language impact on literacy attainment. We describe (a) Trevor's school history and problems that were noted in his folder prior to his second year in first grade, and (b) Trevor's success in learning to read and write in a program that encouraged his use of language and comprehension strategies. Samples of his writing illustrate how Trevor's increased participation

in the writing process enhanced his ability to build connections between meaning and print.

Trevor's School History

A study of Trevor's school records revealed information about Trevor's previous two years in school. In kindergarten Trevor had attained 100% mastery of the skills delineated within a Basic Skills program developed for his school district. His scores on the Stanford Achievement Test, administered during his last month of kindergarten, were stanine 4 in reading and stanine 3 in listening. The apparent success of his first year of instruction, however, was not a predictor of his first grade performance. By the end of first grade, Trevor had a stanine of 1 in reading on Stanford Achievement and he did not achieve mastery of 60% of the school's predetermined "minimum basic skills". The list of skills on which Trevor did not meet school criteria for successful mastery included word recognition skills (e.g., consonant blends and digraphs, word endings), study aids, word meaning skills (e.g., synonyms), comprehension skills (e.g., details, sequence), and literary plot. The last report card that Trevor received in first grade revealed an F in reading, an F in spelling, and a D in language.

Trevor's previous year of instruction was described as a skills-based program. Reading groups were assigned to basal reader stories and at least an hour a day was spent in drill work on basic skills using workbooks, skilpaks, and ditto sheets. Students worked independently at their desks during skill practice and had little opportunity for group projects or interaction. Skill mastery was assessed by criterion-referenced tests and recorded on student checklists.

A Dilemma For Reading Educators

Determining how to teach the student who exhibits problems in learning to read has been one of the most controversial issues confronting educators. A wide variety of interpretations exist about the cause of reading problems, and each of these engendered different instructional solutions. For example, those who believe that reading is a skills-based process (e.g., Block & Burns, 1977; Bloom, 1976) suggest that students exper-

ience difficulty when they have not mastered a set of predetermined skills. To be successful in such a program, the beginning reader is taught skills that are arranged hierarchically and each must be mastered before a new level of skills is introduced.

Rather than assuming that reading failure is caused by student deficiencies, it may be useful to determine whether the student can adjust existing knowledge and language structures to meet the demands of the instructional program or classroom environment (e.g., Y. Goodman 1985). Some educators (Atwell, 1982; Goodman, 1986; Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987; Murray, 1984) advocate instruction in which children are encouraged to rely on their language experiences to predict meaning as they learn to read by reading and to write by writing. Further --these educators (e.g. Altwerger, Edelsky & Flores, 1987; Goodman, 1986) describe early and continued writing as a way to enhance students' ability to become skilled language users and to encourage reading for self-monitoring so that written compositions make sense. In such a program, students learn about word recognition, vocabulary meanings, syntax, and grammar conventions directly as they compose, edit, and revise (e.g., Edelsky, 1986; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Rather than teaching to weaknesses by targeting specific reading skills to be taught, these authors suggest that students can learn literacy skills holistically through the writing process. When students are provided time to write and allowed to maintain control over their writings, they begin to hypothesize about rules that govern print. Students are encouraged to take risks and self-select topics and structure for their writing. As they use and misuse the skills they select, students learn when rules work and when they are not appropriate.

Participation and Collaboration Guide Trevor's Learning

On his first day of school, Trevor was introduced to his reading-writing curriculum within a classroom that had an abundance of oral language, reading and writing activities. Children's literature, poetry, students' writing, and written notes from the teacher were displayed throughout the room. The students and teacher

were involved in activities such as reading aloud to share stories, writing information in personal journals, and constructing and illustrating books for stories they wrote.

Two and a half hours each day were devoted to the language arts activities. This time was filled with reading, writing, and social learning. Students chose books they wanted to read from a large collection of classroom books, including books the children had made. If a child had trouble with a word in print, s/he learned a variety of strategies (e.g., think of the theme, look at the pictures) which included asking a friend.

Students wrote from the first day of school about topics of their own choice. They selected their ideas from the books the teacher read in class, events that happened at home or at school, and ideas from other children. Scribble writings were accepted and invented spellings were encouraged. Meaningful writing was the goal, so students were always asked to read or talk about what they had written. Large group conferences allowed the student authors to share their writings with the entire class and to invite comments and questions about the meaning and form of the writings.

From the Hardware Store and Computers to Mailboxes and the Dog Downstairs--Writing for Different Reasons

Students in this classroom wrote for multiple reasons and about many topics. A predictable time was provided every day when the children planned and initiated their writing. This writing time began with the students and Mrs. W. writing for an uninterrupted five minute period. Then individual conferences with the teacher and peer conferences among the children occurred simultaneously. Writing projects were continued throughout the morning. Classroom news, personal narratives, journal entries, poems and prose were among the daily genre. Trevor had his reasons for wanting to write.

1-To Convey Personal Experiences and Feelings

From the first day of school, Trevor wrote about his personal experiences and feelings in his new journal. Trevor's first entry was:

"I h a a F a e f o"

(I had a physical.)

Mrs. W.'s written response was:

"When you had the physical, did you get a shot?"

She read her message as she pointed to the words. Trevor started to answer verbally but his teacher asked him to write his answer. Trevor smiled and wrote:

"Y e s a e D h e t."

(Yes and it didn't hurt.)

Again his teacher wrote and read her response as Trevor focused on the print:

"I'm glad it didn't hurt. I don't like shots."

Trevor often wrote about his joy with school.

"ILveyoutesro.Iamhype toBeAt Shool."

(I love you teacher. I am happy to be at school.)

Trevor also wrote about classroom events. For example in late September, a group of firefighters made a presentation to Trevor's class. They brought the fire engine for the children to see. As the class was about to view the fire engine, the firefighters had to respond to an emergency call. When the firefighters returned, they explained that a man had jumped off a building. They said that the man was taken to a hospital by ambulance.

When the children returned to the classroom, Mrs. W. suggested that the students could write about this event and/or write a thank-you letter to the firefighters for their visit. Trevor chose to write to the firefighters but instead of writing a thank-you letter, he had a specific question to ask.

"the Mamis going to the ^{Rhe} Man jomppoff

^{WDSro}
the belding.

I-hap-you-git-was-oN-Tim

Sin Yes ro No

frm Trevor

(The man is going to the hardware store. The man jumped off the building. I hope you got there on time. Sign yes or no. from Trevor)

Mrs. W. asked Trevor where he got the idea to write hardware store that way. He responded, "Cause that's the

way it looks on the sign." Trevor often talked about where he got his ideas. He seemed to notice environmental print and to use this knowledge in his writings.

As can be seen by the above examples, Trevor's writing about personal feelings and experiences commonly shared with his classmates provided an opportunity for him to translate true experiences to print.

To Seek Permission

Numerous events encouraged this aspect of writing. For example, when the classroom computer arrived in October, Trevor wrote:

"C a N I P a w e F P O U"
(Can I play with the computer)

One day Trevor forgot his permission slip for a field trip to the school's farm. Written permission from a parent was required for this excursion. Later in the day, he handed Mrs. W. the following note written in his own manuscript writing.

"Trevor have my pamesh to go to the fam."
(Trevor has my permission to go to the farm.)

He had quickly learned that he had the ability to translate his request to printed messages and that they were functional and evoked responses.

To Respond to Literature

Trevor responded to literature in many of his writings. One early experience occurred when Trevor became captivated by the book T-Shirts by Estelle Corney (1985). The first verse in the book reads:

I've got a t-shirt,
A big orange t-shirt,
And on my orange t-shirt
There's a great, big,
ME!

The next week Mrs. W. read Blue Jeans (Cummings & Sykes, 1985), patterned after T-Shirts and written by two teachers in the school district. The children loved it and could read the verses chorally. Only a few days later, Trevor began to work on "Mailbox". His verse read:

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| I've got a mailbox, | My neighbors have a mailbox, |
| A big orange mailbox, | A big, purple mailbox, |
| And on my orange mailbox, | And on my purpose mailbox, |
| There's a code called 247 | There's a code called 242. |

This was only the beginning of this verse for Trevor. He wrote eleven verses using this rhythmic pattern before the end of the year.

To Revise and Publish

At the beginning of the year, Mrs. W. introduced her students to

the concept of publishing. She explained that the students could choose to have one of their writings published each week. These compositions could be published either singularly or in books that contained several writings. Mrs.W. shared published works that she had collected from previous students to illustrate that the published product was hard-bound, typed on the classroom computer by both the teacher and students and illustrated by the student authors.

As early as November, Trevor began to use the editing checklist independently. For example, he decided that his writing about Chad, his best friend, was important and should be published.

"Imis Chad and heis mi bstfmd and we
alwys patoger whin we go otsidfor the xtr paprd."

He used the editing checklist to correct the mechanics of his writing. He deleted the "and's" to create three sentences. Each began with a capital and ended with a period. After he made these changes he asked his teacher for a publishing conference so that his finished product could be published. At the conference, she asked him to encircle two words that may be misspelled. He encircle pa and prd. She helped him find these words on classroom signs before he rewrote the words with correct spellings. She then directed him to another question on the editing checklist—spacing between words. Together, they marked his page at the end of each word to signal a need for a space. When typed, his published writing was:

I miss Chad. He is my best friend.
We always play together when we go
outside for the extra play period.

Publishing the children's writings into a book or newspaper gave the children a reason to write, revise, and edit. In an interview with his classroom teacher, he answered her question about how he felt about his work, saying, "I'm a good author and a good boy. We are learning to write and I'm learning to read."

Indicators of Progress

By the end of the year Trevor had written 209 pieces. He had published 25 stories and 6 books (that contained several compositions) and co-authored 20 newsletters. Trevor's results on the Stanford Test at the end of the year yielded a stanine 6 in total reading. Analyses of his reading miscues (Goodman, Watson & Burke, 1987) on a full-length story revealed that 90% of his miscues were judged to not change the meaning of the story. Although Trevor had only mastered 40% of skills taught and tested in reading at the end of his first year in first grade, he had mastered all skills listed on the school's checklist by

the end of his second year in grade one. Trevor learned these skills even though they were not taught directly within an isolated format or with the help of worksheets or workbooks. Instead, skills were taught within the context of Trevor's reading and writing activities. Likewise, these skills were determined as mastered when Trevor actually used them consistently (at least three times) in samples of his writing.

Summary and Conclusion

This story about Trevor is important, it shows how a language-rich program that deviated from traditional skills-based lessons impacted on a student who was viewed as reading disabled. While this case study does not settle any debates, we can conclude that Trevor experienced early and sustained success in reading and writing in this language and meaning centered program.

Trevor learned to read and write within an environment that is similar to a home in which children learn oral language. In these surroundings ideas are presented in meaningful contexts, and students are encouraged to decide what they will learn and use according to interest and function. Peer and teacher audiences provide a reason for making sense of language experiences and social interactions occur naturally and purposefully. Central to the success of this program, in addition to stressing language and meaning, is the generative nature of students' learning. These students become active participants in literacy acquisition by choosing topics for their writing, producing written work for multiple purposes, and reading to revise and make sense of their writing.

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