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The Nature of Teacher Talk during Small Group Activities

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How many wings does the bumblebee have?

How does a bumblebee fly?

What does this remind you of?

The first question, posed by a preschool teacher during a small group activity, asks children to remember information or count the number of wings on an insect. There is only one correct answer. The other two questions require more imaginative thinking. Question two asks the children to explain or demonstrate how a bumblebee flies. To answer question three, children must compare an object to something else in their experience, looking for similarities. They have to think beyond the current activity.

What do you think is the teacher's purpose in asking these questions? Which ones might the preschoolers find most cognitively challenging? Which of the questions encourage conversation? Does it matter who initiates the question or controls the conversation?

This article examines *teacher talk* and its elements—kinds of language, functions of language, promoting children's thinking, and power—during small group activities with 2- and 3-year-olds. After observing and videotaping activities in two early childhood classrooms, we are convinced that teachers can promote children's thinking and encourage their participation in authentic conversations (Durden & Rainer Dangel 2008). We examine how two teachers (in toddler and preschool classrooms) talk to children and facilitate small group activities to encourage children's thinking.

The power of teacher talk

Teacher talk is a powerful classroom tool. Studies document the importance of teacher language in children's development (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog 1997), in early literacy development (Genishi 1988; Roskos & Neuman 1993; Smith & Dickinson 1994; Girolametto & Weitzman 2002), in children's perceptions of self and others (Colwell & Lindsey 2003), and in facilitating play (Wilcox-Herzog & Kontos 1998; Kontos 1999). Sociocultural theories suggest the power of language to convey and construct meaning. Because language has cultural and psychologi-

As teachers we need to question our language in terms of the context it provides for children's thinking.

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cal functions—communicating and thinking (Mercer 1995)—teachers' words and the way they use them create meaning for children as well as for themselves. Johnson (2004) and Barratt-Pugh (1997) remind us that it is important to consider the actual words we say to children: "It is not only the songs, rhymes, and books that present a particular view of the world, but the very language we use" (Barratt-Pugh 1997, 87).

The literature also provides practical suggestions on how to talk to young children and offers basic guidelines for conversations with children (Mooney 2005), common purposes or functions of language (Kumpulainen & Wray 2002; Mooney 2005), and activities for developing children's language (Massey 2005; Sharp 2005). Mooney (2005), for example, suggests getting down to children's level, using simple words and short sentences, and remembering the importance of body language and tone of voice. She also identifies four specific functions or purposes of teacher language: providing direction or instruction, correcting or redirecting behavior, developing concepts or skills, and discussing classroom or family life. Sharp (2005) recommends activities such as songs, poetry, and role play to help children access the language of school. These suggestions are helpful, but as teachers we also need to question our language in terms of the context it provides for children's thinking.

The teachers

Mr. Max, who teaches 2-year-olds, is calm, reserved, and a good listener. Mrs. Mollie, who teaches 3-year-olds, is energetic and talkative. It is spring, and both classrooms are full of flowers, seedlings, insects, colorful eggs, and baby chicks. Mrs. Mollie and her children are making "ants on a log" snacks, decorating yogurt cups as flower vases, and planting grass seeds in milk cartons. Every day Mrs. Mollie brings items from her home to share with the children—for example, celery, tall grass, or fresh flowers. In Mr. Max's class, children are sculpting with clay, drawing with wax pencils, decorating Mother's Day cards, and playing with plastic insects and a balance scale.

Mrs. Mollie and Mr. Max bring different styles of teaching and interacting with children to their respective classrooms. However, both recognize the importance of offering small group activities that model descriptive language, make connections to children's homes and families, allow the children to initiate conversations, and challenge them to think beyond the moment.

Both teachers value small group activities as ideal opportunities to talk with and listen to children. They intentionally plan activities that encourage not only conversation but also thinking. They set up conditions and activities that give children concrete experiences and require their participation.

Small group activities

The activities in both classrooms have four characteristics. They are (1) flexible, (2) voluntary for children, and (3) open-ended, and (4) they offer materials for the children to explore.

Typically, in their classrooms, Mrs. Mollie and Mr. Max invite three to five children to join in an informal, small group activity. The children are free to leave at any time. The teachers begin the conversation, and the children initiate and interject ideas, all in a relaxed, conversational manner. Both teachers welcome children who are not participating in the small group activity to join the conversation; they are not considered interruptions. There are materials for the children to investigate, and often a child or the teacher goes to find new materials, as ideas call for them. The activities themselves are open-ended—that is, while teachers might

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guide children on how to use some materials (such as glue), there are no prescribed products.

Teachers' language

Mrs. Mollie and Mr. Max consider the kinds of language they use, their purpose in using the language, issues of power, and language that promotes children's thinking. We will discuss each of these points in the following sections; even though they are presented separately for emphasis, they are intertwined and should be considered holistically.

Kinds of language

The types of questions and statements teachers use with children can have an effect on children's thinking (Fowell & Lawton 1992; Massey 2005). Most of the language used by Mrs. Mollie and Mr. Max are in the form of questions and statements. Rarely do they command children to do something. Their language is encouraging, extending, descriptive, and relevant to children's lives.

Language that extends children's language. Mr. Max repeats and extends children's questions and statements, not only correcting words and grammar but also expanding their vocabulary and extending their ideas, as recommended by Cazden (1972) in her early work on *expansion* and *extension* in language that is interesting and personally meaningful to children. Here is an example of an exchange between Mr. Max and a 2-year-old child about weighing plastic insects on a balance scale.

Teacher: How did you make it balance like that?

Child: I maked it balance with one down and one up.

Teacher: Oh, I see. You made it even. How can you make the other side go down?

Child: Oh, oh, look.

Teacher: That must have been a heavy insect. Maybe that one was heavier.

Child: That one [side] have two.

Mrs. Mollie also uses descriptive language and provides specific wording (avoiding nonspecific words such as *that* and *there*, when possible). She thinks aloud and describes her actions as she completes them. For example, while assisting children with an art project, she says,

> "OK, let me wipe this spill up. I should put the water in something else. . . . I'll put a paper towel under the cup so if the water spills, it will spill on the paper towel."

Language that encourages children through specific feedback. In addition to extending children's talk, teacher talk is encouraging and lets children know that their teacher values their efforts and accomplishments. Mr. Max uses both questions and statements to provide feedback and encourage children in their efforts. His comments range from task specific to general encouragement. For example, he may comment to a small group that he has noticed them working hard, or he may speak with an individual child about her selection of colors. Here are some examples observed during small group activities.

> "Wow, Angie, you have spent a long time working on a big project!"

> "That's so colorful! It really stands out on that purple paper."

> "Whoa! You guys chose a lot of colors to work with."

Rather than simply saying "Good job," Mr. Max gives children feedback that is specific and focused on the process involved.

Teacher talk is encouraging and lets children know that their teacher values their efforts and accomplishments.

Language that makes connections to children's lives. Mrs. Mollie incorporates many references to school activities and the children's homes and families in her conversations. For example, as the group finishes making vases, she mentions the dandelions the children had collected on the playground:

> "You can take this vase to your home, and if your mommy has some dandelions in your yard, like the ones on the playground, you can ask your mom if you can pick them for the vase."

(Note that this is also an example of how words can carry assumptions—in this case, that the children have yards and that there might be dandelions in the yards. In analyzing their language, teachers should evaluate their assumptions and underlying purposes or functions.)

Functions of teachers' language

Preschool teachers use language to communicate with children for multiple purposes. Mr. Max and Mrs. Mollie use language for seven primary functions:

1. encouraging participation
2. responding to children's needs and ideas
3. managing the class or providing a necessary instruction
4. fostering children's language
5. conveying ideas
6. assessing children's knowledge
7. promoting children's thinking

It wouldn't be unusual to hear Mr. Max managing small group activities by saying, "Ronald, there is only room for four people to roll the playdough at one time. When one of the children is finished, you can have a turn with playdough too." In Mrs. Mollie's classroom, the primary functions or purposes of her talk are to encourage participation, foster children's language, and convey ideas. Questions to promote children's thinking are also evident (for example, "What do these remind you of?"), but she asks few formal questions to assess children's knowledge (such as, "How many eggs are there?"). Here, Mrs. Mollie asks a child to compare and think beyond the immediate focus on celery:

Teacher: What other vegetable makes a crunch when you bite it?

Child: Carrots.

Teacher: Carrots do make a crunch. How do you eat carrots?

Child: With my teeth.

Teacher: You know what? That's why you need strong teeth to bite

into fruits and vegetables. If you didn't have strong teeth, how could you bite that celery, or an apple, or a carrot?

Challenging talk **builds on what children say and moves beyond the immediate conversational context.**

Promoting children's thinking

Children's thinking, like talking, may go unnoticed. Teachers have to carefully organize time, space, and materials to encourage children to think (Hubbard 1998). We believe teacher talk that challenges children to use and build their cognitive skills is one of the most important functions of language. *Challenging talk* builds on what children say and moves beyond the immediate conversational context (Smith & Dickinson 1994; Nekovei & Ermis 2006). Instead of asking, "Does it fly?" or "What did you make?" for example, ask "How does it fly?" or "What was your favorite part of making this?"

Questions that promote children's thinking require children to think beyond one-word responses to make connections, compare, and hypothesize. Using Tizard and colleagues' (1982) categories of questions, here are examples of cognitive challenges we heard during Mrs. Mollie's and Mr. Max's small group activities:

- **Label**—What is this called?
- **Describe**—What do these look like to you?
- **Explain**—How does it work?
- **Connect to prior knowledge**—What do these remind you of?
- **Compare**—What other vegetable is like this one?
- **Hypothesize**—What do you think this is?
- **Imagine possibilities**—Guess what happened when _____.
- **Offer an opinion**—Why do you like this?
- **Evaluate**—What do you like about this?

Power and teachers' language

Another important consideration in examining teacher-child conversations is the role of power (who decides who talks, when, and about what). Do the experience and the language encourage children to initiate ideas and share regularly in the conversation? Who controls what is said and done? Is there a balance of teacher and child talk? Sharing power during conversations and allowing children to initiate conversations maximizes children's voices (Hayes & Matusov 2005).

(cont'd on p. 80)

Questions to Guide Reflection on Language Use with Young Children

Small Group Activities

Are activities flexible to accommodate children's ideas? Are they conversational?

Are activities and materials open-ended, so children can make choices about what to do and what to use to carry out their plans?

Do activities invite children to explore or use interesting or authentic materials?

Do children choose whether to participate and when to leave the activity?

What kinds of thinking do the activities encourage?

Kinds of Language

Does my language help children make connections to their lives, their homes, their families?

Does my feedback motivate children to think more deeply? To share their ideas?

Do my comments and questions help children expand their vocabulary? Extend their ideas?

Do I "think out loud"?

Functions of Language

What is the intended purpose of my comment or question?

Am I purposefully trying to challenge children's thinking? Assess their thinking? Encourage their language? Convey ideas? Guide their behavior?

Does my conversation build on children's interests?

Is there a balance of these functions of language—encouraging participation, responding to children's needs and ideas, managing the class or providing a necessary instruction, fostering children's language, conveying ideas, assessing, and promoting children's thinking?

Promoting Children's Thinking

What kinds of language do I use to challenge children's thinking?

What opportunities do I provide to expand children's thinking?

Do I encourage children to think beyond one-word responses?

Do I encourage children to make connections, make comparisons, offer an opinion, or imagine?

Power

Who controls what is said and done during small group activities?

Is there a balance of teacher and child talk?

Does my language show respect for children's ideas?

Does my language allow children to initiate ideas and share equally in conversation?

Both reciprocal and child-initiated conversations take place in Mrs. Mollie and Mr. Max's classrooms. Consider this exchange from Mrs. Mollie's seed-planting activity:

Child: Mrs. Mollie, orange seeds grow.

Teacher: What will they become?

Child: Bushes.

Teacher: Orange trees, right? If you have an orange seed at your house, bring it and we'll plant it. Or an apple or watermelon seed.

Child: Mrs. Mollie, my mommy didn't buy any.

Teacher: Well, maybe she will.

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We noticed that when children initiated a conversation, they often began with complete thoughts (phrases or sentences), but when they responded to teachers, they often used single words. Children tend to actively participate in conversations that they initiate, that are relevant to them, and that invite reciprocal exchanges (Hayes & Matusov 2005).

In both classrooms, the small group activities included teacher- and child-centered approaches. Kumpulainen and Wray (2002) distinguish *teacher-centered activities,* those in which children step into the teacher's way of thinking, from *child-* or *peer-centered activities* that are characterized by negotiation of meaning. From our observations, both types of approaches have some similar characteristics (such as informality and interesting materials), but the language varies according to whether the teacher's or children's influence is predominant. In most teacher-directed activities, teachers use closed-ended questions and declarative sentences, but child-oriented activities involve open-ended questions that provoke children's thinking and make connections to real-life experiences.

We found that the approach influences the function, the power, and the promotion of children's thinking. In both approaches, teachers respond to children's needs and model appropriate language; however, in child-centered activities, teachers' language focuses more on encouraging participation, extending language, and promoting thinking and less on managing instruction and conveying information (Durden & Rainer Dangel 2008). Child-centered activities promote more reciprocal and child-initiated conversations. In addition, the conversations tend to be more cognitively challenging and authentic—an observation consistent with Cazden's work (1972).

Conclusions and recommendations

Our choice of words is important (Johnson 2004). Consider the power of a hurtful word or how words are used in advertising to persuade us to buy products. Words shape our attitudes, feelings, and thoughts. Yet language is such a part of our lives that we often take it for granted. As educators, we must continually ask ourselves how we can use language for our ultimate purpose: to support children's development and learning.

Videotaping small group activities can help teachers reflect on their own use of language and the language children use. "Questions to Guide Reflection on Language Use with Young Children" (p.78) also can help teachers examine the language they use when talking with children.

Teachers can improve the quality of early childhood education by focusing on their language as well as the conditions likely to produce effective interactions (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog 1997). During child-centered small group activities, early childhood teachers can carefully attend to language, including its purpose, its power, and how it promotes children's thinking.

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