From Oral to Written Language: Scaffolding Literacy Development in a Kindergarten Classroom

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From Oral to Written Language: 
Scaffolding Literacy Development 
in a Kindergarten Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore how an experienced kindergarten teacher used oral language to scaffold her students in their development of written language skills. The research design was a yearlong qualitative case study that employed prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. Data sources included participant observation, fieldnotes, audio and video recording of classroom literacy events, informal interviews with the teacher and students, photographs, and a collection of students’ drawings/writings. This article provides examples of read-aloud and writing events where the classroom teacher made connections between oral and written language or re-accented the students’ oral productions into written forms. The findings show the importance of carefully selecting and planning whole group classroom instructional strategies and materials in order to assist young children in their literacy development.

From Oral to Written Language: 
Scaffolding Literacy Development in a 
Kindergarten Classroom

In the 1980s and 1990s, studies of early literacy development and the social contexts that influenced this development evolved into the concept of emergent literacy. From the emergent literacy perspective, literacy learning is viewed as the gradual development of knowledge of written language, influenced by biological properties of the mind, exposure to reading and writing, and participation in social events involving written language (Solsken, 1993). Emergent literacy research has brought to the attention of researchers and teachers of young children (a) the forms of expression used by children as they participate in literate acts and (b) the influence of social environment on literacy learning. This research has shown that young children integrate drawing, body movement, and spoken language with written language in early stages of reading and writing. Children’s drawings and scribbles are seen as early forms of writing (Calkins, 1980; Sulzby, 1983; Sulzby, Barnhart, & Hieshima, 1989), and orally labelling pictures in storybooks and retelling story events are considered early forms of reading (Sulzby, 1985, Dyson, 1982). These "unconventional" forms of writing and reading will later be replaced by standard adult written productions and reading behaviors.

Taking into consideration the body of early literacy research through the present time, Rohde (2015) developed a Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model (CELM) to situate the early literacy skills of print awareness, phonological awareness, and oral
language within the broader context of culture, community, and demographics. She placed writing at the center of the CELM because of the strong reciprocal relationship between writing and other early literacy skills (Teale & Sulzby, 1987) and because children often demonstrate their knowledge of literacy concepts through writing. Rohde concluded that each of the emergent literacy components of print awareness, phonological awareness, and oral language follows its own developmental sequence yet supports the development of the other components. This holistic perspective on early literacy learning views emergent literacy as an interactive process and recognizes the importance of environment on oral language development and early literacy skills.

Two contrasting models of kindergarten education have existed in discourse about kindergarten, a developmental model that emphasizes the social, emotional, and cognitive development of individual children and an academic model that focuses on the development of academic skills and content (Russell, 2011). In her study of kindergarten education in California, Russell (2011) found that academic messages about kindergarten were advanced first by the media and later became state policy. When California developed state academic standards for kindergarten, the California Kindergarten Association (CKA) changed its stance from focusing on traditional developmental domains such as play and social skills to encouraging a more academic focus. CKA leaders realized kindergarten teachers needed to live with the new state academic standards. The President of CKA explained in a 2003 Newsletter, “Standards are a reality and we must now look for ways to incorporate them in our classrooms in such a way as to maintain the curriculum and environment we know is best for our kindergarten children” (cited in Russell, 2011, p. 256).

While kindergarten classrooms may not be exclusively developmental or academic, the current perspective on kindergarten learning has become increasingly academic. Some now consider kindergarten “the new first grade” because of the growing emphasis on test preparation and developing academic skills that had previously been taught in first grade (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016, p. 1). With changes currently taking place in prekindergarten and kindergarten instruction, we must not forget what we have learned from the body of emergent literacy research. Inherent in an emergent literacy perspective is the idea that multimodal forms of expression are valued in preschool and the beginning of kindergarten, but that children will progress towards more conventional forms of literacy as they take part in classroom literacy events throughout the school year (Solsken, 1993; Sulzby & Teale, 1986). Often, there is pressure on kindergarten teachers to adhere to district or state performance standards when setting up their curriculum or to prepare their students for first grade and the expectations of first grade teachers at their particular school. The pressure to have their students functioning at more conventional levels of literacy by the end of the kindergarten year often
results in changes in literacy practices over the course of the year as teachers transition their students from multimodal literacy learning to more verbocentric forms of communication.

This article reports on a yearlong qualitative case study that explored the ways an experienced kindergarten teacher well-read in studies of emergent literacy used her students’ knowledge of multimodal means of expression to scaffold their learning of written language throughout the kindergarten year. While students in this classroom participated in numerous literacy events that incorporated multiple forms of expression, including forming alphabet letters in dough for baking and reading recipes to create meals in a crock pot, the focus of this article is on the teacher’s use of oral language and the ways she connected her student’s spoken language to print and their written productions. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) have noted, “activities involving oral language provide contexts for most instances of print use,” and it is through oral language that most conventions of how to interact with printed texts are passed on (p. 6). At the beginning of this study, I entered the kindergarten classroom with a general research question about literacy learning: How are children in Ms. Williams’ class learning about literacy? After beginning data collection, I observed numerous occasions when Ms. Williams created contexts for her students’ multimodal expressions to move towards more conventional forms of written language. I then narrowed my research questions. In this article I discuss findings related to the following research questions:

How are students’ interactions with texts reworked by Ms. Williams into reading and writing events?

**Research on Oral Language and Emergent Literacy**

The National Early Literacy Panel synthesized quantitative findings from studies of oral language interventions and found that measures of complex oral language skills, such as grammar, definitional vocabulary, and listening comprehension, related to decoding and reading comprehension skills in first and second grade at mid to high moderate or strong levels (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). Overall language composite measures such as the *Preschool Language Scale* (Zimmerman, Steiner, & Pond, 2002) that included vocabulary, syntax, and listening comprehension resulted in almost 50 percent of the variance in reading comprehension. While oral vocabulary as a separate variable had low moderate or weak relationships to decoding and reading comprehension in this meta-analysis, the Panel concluded that more complex oral language skills are dependent on vocabulary, so “an instructional focus on vocabulary during the preschool and kindergarten years is likely a necessary but insufficient approach to promoting later literacy success” (National Institute for Literacy, p. 78). The Panel also found that book-sharing interventions and language-enhancement interventions were successful in increasing children’s oral language skills with statistically
significant and moderate to large effects.

Many of the seminal studies of emergent literacy employed qualitative methods so they are not included in the synthesis of the National Early Literacy Panel. Qualitative studies, however, provided details of children’s early literacy development and classroom practices that could enhance children’s literacy learning. In addition to exploring literacy development in young children, another goal of emergent literacy researchers was "to find developmentally appropriate ways to continue children's literacy growth when they enter school" (Martinez & Teale, 1987, p. 444). Findings from studies of children's literacy learning in the home were applied to the planning of literacy activities and the setting up of supportive environments for learning in preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary school classrooms (Dickinson, 1989; Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Martinez & Teale, 1987). Children's participation in read-aloud events in school, where they could actively respond to literature, was found to assist in their acquisition of vocabulary, their comprehension of information in stories, and their understanding of the relationship between parts of a narrative (Elley, 1989; Martinez, 1983; Martinez & Roser, 1985; Morrow, 1987; Pelligrini & Galda, 1982). Setting up classroom library centers, well-stocked with a variety of picture books and props for dramatization, and writing centers with various types of materials for writing and book construction provided children with the means to further explore functions of written language in school (Morrow & Weinstein, 1982, 1986; Taylor, Blum, & Logsdon, 1986).

Comparing survey responses of about 2,500 public school kindergarten teachers in 1998 and 2,700 in 2010, Bassok, Latham, and Rorem (2016) found high percentages of kindergarten teachers in both time periods included the following literacy activities in their curriculum on a daily or weekly basis: listening to the teacher read aloud from books where the children can see or not see the print, doing activities related to books, practicing alphabet letter writing, working on phonics, reading self-selected books, discussing new and difficult vocabulary, and writing stories in a journal. By 2010, literacy activities that had increased in public kindergartens included reading from basal reading texts, composing and writing stories, writing with encouragement to use invented spelling, writing sentences, and using conventional spelling. The International Literacy Association and National Institute of Child Health in their joint publication *The Reading and Writing Connection* concluded “we know surprisingly little about… interactions between reading and writing with regard to development and student achievement” (IRA/NICHD, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, it is important for literacy researchers “to document what actually happens in classrooms and determine which approaches are most effective at what ages in helping students improve in both reading and writing” (p. 3).
Theoretical Background

Halliday’s theories of children’s language learning provided a theoretical background for this study. Halliday (1975, 1978, 1986) was among the first to develop a theory of social semiotics. His studies have shown that as children explore the potentials of communicating through various semiotic systems, especially language, they also learn the social and cultural meanings that are associated with particular signs. Language learning, and the learning of other sign systems such as visual images and gestures, always takes place in a social context. The conclusions that Halliday (1975) arrived at from studying his son Nigel’s oral language development apply equally well to children's learning of language, and other sign systems, in the classroom.

The meanings by which the child is surrounded are, as always, meanings in context. They relate to their environment, and are interpreted in relation to their environment – to the context of situation (Halliday, 1975, p. 125). Halliday (1978) suggested that when young children are learning oral language and when they first begin to read and write, they can successfully communicate with parents and teachers because of shared knowledge of joint experiences. If teachers or parents do not share a child's language or reality, problems in communication can result. Children and their caregivers construct shared knowledge of the world and describe their experiences with shared language. Shared experiences, therefore, shape communication. Through social interaction with adults, children are motivated to take part in literacy events. The systems of signs that children see around them and use in their interactions with adults become important in their lives. When children talk about their production of texts and ask questions while they participate in literacy events, their conversations are part of the process of literacy learning. As children, their parents, and teachers interpret texts, they make connections between their existing knowledge and current experiences, drawing on their repertoire of learned associations of meanings and signs.

Methodology

Research Design

Dyson and Genishi (2005) in their book On the Case about qualitative case studies for language and literacy researchers summarized the application of this type of research to everyday teaching and learning contexts.

In their case studies, qualitative researchers are interested in the meaning people make of their lives in very particular contexts…. Everyday teaching and learning are complex social happenings, and understanding them as such is the grand purpose of qualitative case studies. (p. 9)

The present study was set up as a qualitative case study of one kindergarten class over the course of a school year to explore, as Dyson and Genishi have explained, everyday teaching and learning in a particular context.
Participants and Setting

The setting for this study was Ms. Williams’s kindergarten class in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Ms. Williams is an experienced teacher who at the time of this study had taught for seventeen years, the last seven years in kindergarten. She was knowledgeable about emergent literacy research and applied what she had learned about children’s literacy development to her teaching strategies and selection of curriculum materials. There were 23 children in Ms. Williams’s class, thirteen girls and ten boys. The school is located in a rural area of the school district. Commercial and industrial areas lie to the north and west of the district. The children’s parents worked at various blue collar and white-collar jobs. The two African-American children in the class were bussed from their urban homes. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

I familiarized myself with classroom routines and established a working relationship with Ms. Williams the spring before formal data collection began. Then I collected data the following school year. Data collection methods included a) participant observation, b) fieldnotes, c) informal interviews with the teacher, students, and parents, d) photographing, e) audio and video recording classroom multimodal literacy events, and f) collecting children’s writings/drawing. I collected data every day for three weeks at the beginning of the school year, then two to three days per week throughout the school year for a total of 86 days. Three research activities suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) were followed in order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings: a) "prolonged engagement," b) "persistent observation," and c) "triangulation." I persistently observed and audio and/or video recorded literacy events every day I was present in the classroom. Findings were triangulated by using a) different sources (the teacher, various children, and parents) and b) different methods (participant observation, audio and video recording, interviews, and artifact collection).

Much of the data analysis dealt with the micro analysis of language and social action during classroom events. I selected transcriptions of literacy events for analysis based on a) their representation of general patterns of language use, teacher presentation, and student responses during similar activities or b) their reflection of a change in pattern. Representative samples of types of literacy events at different times of the school year were transcribed, as well as events that showed children changing in their use of modes of communication and their ways of participating in the social creations of texts. I focused on read-aloud events and multimodal "writing" activities since these were the primary components of Ms. Williams’s language arts curriculum. Patterns in the types of literacy processes and types of interactions that took place during literacy events were discovered by inductive analysis of collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Findings

By spending a year in Ms. Williams’ classroom, from the first day of school through the last day, I was able to document the instructional strategies and materials Ms. Williams used to move her students to more conventional uses of literacy and to communicate with her about her curriculum and her goals for teaching in particular ways. I also was able to observe the students in this class grow in their literacy development and could talk to them about what they were learning and how they were making meaning from classroom events. Working closely with this experienced teacher, I saw how much effort she put into planning particular activities, including the ways she would talk to students, as well as her impromptu responses to situations such as children’s inappropriate language. While I have extensive data from this project, in this article I will focus on oral language as a springboard to reading and writing development.

Organization of Classroom Literacy Events

Ms. Williams organized her curriculum around thematic units that integrated concepts from language arts, social studies, science, and math. She selected themes based on what she thought was important knowledge for her students – to help them become independent, to help them in their academic learning, and to address some of their special interests (Interview, June 13). Looking back at the end of the year and reflecting on her choice of thematic units, Ms. Williams concluded:

This class was really turned on about the units. They were really into science stuff. Some of the parents were scientists, so maybe that’s why. I didn’t have to promote the topics. The kids egged me on and wanted more and more and more. (Interview, June 13)

Science units included Water, Transportation, Insects, and Plants. She also had a unit on the alphabet, which included a focus on handwriting, and other units tied to holidays, such as Pilgrims and American Indians for Thanksgiving. Ms. Williams began the year with a unit on personal safety, followed by a unit on fire safety, because she wanted the children to be aware of potentially dangerous situations they might encounter both in and outside their homes. Knowledge about fire safety was a particularly pressing issue this school year since several young children in the community had recently died in tragic fires in their homes (Interview, Sept. 24).

The thematic units provided a curriculum framework for Ms. Williams to make connections between oral and written language and between reading and writing. Read-aloud events and writing projects were tied to the thematic unit. Within the thematic units, Ms. Williams integrated subject knowledge with multimodal literacy events. She selected both fiction and informational picture books to read-aloud that were related to the theme. For example, she read Curious George Rides a Bike (Rey, 1952) and Freight Train (Crews, 2003) during her transportation unit.
and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1981) and *Amazing World of Spiders* (Palazzo-Craig, 1990) during her insect unit. She also tied group writing/drawing projects to the theme, such as having the children make Creepy Crawler Books (pop-up books about insects), bug detective journals, and spider books as they learned about insects. Ms. Williams explained, “The thematic units served to direct the children's attention to the subject matter of reading materials so they could build up the background knowledge necessary for them to become good readers and writers” (Interview, June 13).

Reading-writing connections can be seen in ways Ms. Williams tied her read-aloud of *Firehouse Dog* (Hutchings & Hutchings, 1993) to a group writing activity, the first of the school year. To introduce her unit on fire safety, Ms. Williams had an interactive reading of the book, and the students practiced Stop, Drop, and Roll as explained in the book: “First you stop right where you are. Then you drop to the ground. And then you roll on the ground until the fire is out.” The following day, she reread *Firehouse Dog,* but before reading she asked the students to “get ready to draw your favorite part of *Firehouse Dog* or something about fires.” After the reading, Ms. Williams led the students in a pretend fire drill. As she made the sound of a siren, the students lined up in two rows and marched out of the room. When they returned, they began to work on their drawing.

*Ms. Williams:* Now you can draw a picture to tell about *Firehouse Dog.* That would be a good thing to do. If you want to show people how to stop, drop, and roll, you can show that in your picture. I want you to show something that you know about fire.

As the children drew their pictures, spread out on the large rug with papers laid on portable chalkboards, they talked among themselves, but each child created his or her own unique drawing. Ms. Williams got down on the rug with the children and encouraged their “story writing”:

*Ms. Williams:* (to Mitchell) How are you doing with your pictures? (to Joshua and Kevin) What are you guys trying to do with the fire? Is there a fire at your house?

When the students completed their drawings, Ms. Williams collected their papers, sat in her read-aloud chair, and wrote down on each child's paper the oral story the child associated with the picture. The following segment shows how Ms. Williams carried out this activity.

*Ms. Williams:* Alice, what happened in your fire story?

*Alice:* Um. That was a person trying to get out.

*Ms. Williams:* A person trying to get out of the house? A person tried to get out of the house.

*Alice:* Yeah. You already read it.

*Ms. Williams:* Oh, OK. (She then wrote on Alice's paper,
stretching out each word as she was writing.) A person...
Tired... to... get out of the house.
Thank you for sharing, Alice.

Ms. Williams: (holding up Loretta's drawing) Loretta, what happened to your, what happened at this house here?

Loretta: There's a fire in the house and little kids in it and nobody knew.

Ms. Williams: (writing) The fire was in the house and nobody knew. Oh no! And then what happened?

Loretta: And they went and then their friends found out and they told their mom and dad, and they told the cops to get the kids out.

Ms. Williams: Oh, they called the cops. Did anybody call the fire department? To bring the fire department out too?

Loretta: Yeah, the cops called the fire department.

Ms. Williams: Oh, the cops called the fire department. OK. (writing on Loretta's paper and reading as she writes) Mom and Dad called the cops and the cops called the fire department.

Ms. Williams reshaped Loretta's oral story into a form more appropriate for written language. "There's a fire in the house" became "A fire was in the house." She reduced some of the episodes of the original – the children's friends finding out about the fire and telling the children's parents. But she also suggested a
conclusion for the story, that somebody should call the fire department. Ms. Williams not only transformed Loretta's wording, but she also changed the narrative.

After Ms. Williams wrote each child's story on their individual page, she assembled the pages together to make a class book. The next day she read the book aloud to the students and told them they could read it too. She placed it on a table directly inside the door so they could easily see where it was placed. I noticed Alex, Nathan, and Marshall looking through the book as they walked by on their way outside to the playground. This was the first literacy event where group writing projects were tied to read-aloud texts. Others followed throughout the school year.

**Scaffolding Read-Aloud Texts**

Within the thematic units, Ms. Williams scaffolded her students’ experiences with written texts. She used different genres of picture books for different instructional purposes, but what was central to all her read-aloud events was her solicitation of student responses and interpretations and her acknowledgement of the value of their responses. Her first read-aloud events of the school year involved predictable texts, including *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin & Archambault, 2000) and *Roll Over: A Counting Book* (Peek, 2000). Ms. Williams immediately reread these texts and encouraged her students to repeat the repetitive lines. Every day for the first month of school she read two or three predictable texts to promote the idea of “reading as the reciting of repetitive phrases word for word from a book.” Also, she used predictable texts to make oral-written language connections: “By pointing to the words as I read them aloud, I want the children to see the connection between print and oral language” (Interview, Oct. 15). Ms. Williams created a positive setting for all students in her class to be successful readers by encouraging them to follow the rhythm of the predictable texts, repeat the repetitive phrases, and call out the names of alphabet letters and numbers as she read. She explained her rationale behind such literacy events: “That little exercise, I made it totally success oriented, but that’s gonna establish a mindset and a pattern for future books and future activities that we do with future books” (Interview, Sept. 20).

Ms. Williams also read-aloud books at the beginning of the year that made home-school connections to transition her students to kindergarten. For example, on the second day of school, Ms. Williams read-aloud the picture book *Love You Forever* (Munsch, 2000). She allowed her students to comment freely on the content of the book as she read, and if she heard a student make a point she wanted to elaborate on, she would stop reading and continue the conversation initiated by that child. When Ms. Williams read that the child in the book turned two years old and got into all sorts of trouble, such as flushing his mother’s watch down the toilet, the class began responding by telling stories of when they were babies.

**Alex:** He's bad.
Ms. Williams: (laughing) Well you know what? Little boys and little girls when they're babies, do they know what to do?

Children: (together) No.

Ms. Williams: Do they know all the rules?

Children: (together) No.

Ms. Williams: Sometimes they do things that are slightly bad. But really, it's how they learn.

Alex: When I was a baby, I did a lot of things.

Ms. Williams: Did you? Did you get into a lot of stuff?

Alex: Yeah.

Sally: My mommy has a friend named Lori and she had a baby and brings her to our house.

Ms. Williams: That's real neat. So that's special in your family. And Jesse has something special when he was a baby that he wants to tell us.

Jesse: When I was a baby I was doing everything wrong. I was putting the toilet paper in my um mom's shoes. (laughs)

Ms. Williams: Marshall?

Marshall: You know what? When I was a baby, I got the toilet paper. And my Dad was in there. He was shaving and um and he didn't see me flush the toilet paper down the toilet. All of it.

Ms. Williams: He didn't see you?
Marshall: No. (Several children laugh.) I flushed all of it. (laughing)

Ms. Williams: Was it a lot?
Marshall: Yep. It was a whole roll of toilet paper.

Ms. Williams: Joshua wants to tell us something.

Joshua: When my sister were a baby, she took everything out of the cabinet and went in it.

Ms. Williams: Oh, and she went IN the cabinet? She took everything out and SHE went in?

Joshua: Uh-HUH.

Ms. Williams: Oh my.

Ms. Williams continued her reading and her students participated in the creation of the read-aloud text by repeating the words "Back and forth and back and forth" and by rocking back and forth imitating Ms. Williams’ body movements as she read those lines of the story. When she finished reading, she invited the students to share their comments on the story: "Who can tell us something special about this story?" Alex offered his thoughts: "When somebody grows, when they get older, they rock their babies." Jesse said, "He was rocking around," referring to the main character playing rock n roll. Karen
concluded the event with her comment, "He made a big mess."

By letting her students share their personal experiences at the beginning of the story, and then asking them to share their responses at the end of her reading, Ms. Williams gave the students the opportunity to use oral language in the social creation of a read-aloud text. The children could also make connections orally between their own experiences and the experiences of the boy in the story. Ms. Williams carried on a conversation with the children as they told her about things they had done when they were babies. This read-aloud event established a pattern Ms. Williams would follow when reading aloud to the class from picture books. She often allowed the children to share their personal stories that related to themes of books she read aloud and to respond with connections to other texts or ideas. This was another way she helped her students see connections between oral and written language (Interview, Oct. 15).

Another purpose of read-aloud events, in addition to building background knowledge in content areas, was to help students develop a sense of narrative and to understand and identify story elements. Ms. Williams believed understanding story elements would help her students in both their reading and writing development. She articulated the importance of narrative in her teaching: “I believe the most critical issue in literacy is reading for meaning or a sense of narrative – getting the beginning, middle, and end of a story, the characters, setting, and events” (Interview, June 25).

Her reading of The Mitten (Brett, 1996) shows how she focused on characterization and events by allowing her students to freely comment on the characters in this cumulative tale. The students were intrigued by how the animals fit into a single mitten that a boy had dropped in the snow. From the illustrations they could predict who the next animal would be to crawl into the mitten. As the story progressed, a mole and a rabbit snuggled into the mitten. Then a hedgehog came along.

Ms. Williams: But not being ones to argue with someone covered with prickles, they made room.

Vanessa: Then it's a eagle. Then it's a eagle.

Nathan: No, it’s a owl.

Ms. Williams: Oh, what is it?

Alex: It's a owl.

Other children: Owl.

Ms. Williams: I think so. As soon as the hedgehog disappeared into the mitten, a big owl attracted by the commotion, swooped down and he decided to move in also. The mole, the rabbit, the hedgehog grumbled. “Brrr Rrrr Rrrrr.” But when they saw the owl's glinting talons, they quickly let him in. Up through the snow appeared a badger.
Vanessa: Then a fox.

Ms. Williams: *He eyed the mitten and began to climb in. But the mole, the rabbit, the hedgehog, and the owl were not pleased.* You know how you look when you're not pleased?

Sarah: What does that mean?

Ms. Williams: They weren't happy. Because, are they a little bit crowded in here do you think?

Several children: Yeah

Sarah: What is that for? (pointing to the picture of the badger)

Ms. Williams: This is the badger. He's the one that looks like this.

Sarah: What is it?

Ms. Williams: Well, he's kind of like an animal that goes around hunting for smaller animals, and he's known to be kind of mean. He's a wild animal. (The students continued to name the animals getting into the mitten, but then Ms. Williams asked them to focus on the mitten itself.)

Ms. Williams: But look at the mitten. (Joshua laughs lightly) Is it the same size it used to be?

Children together: No..

Allison: It's all stretched out.

Ms. Williams: I wonder why?

Joshua: All those animals are in it.

Ms. Williams: Lots of animals in it. Good thinking, Joshua.

Katha: I like that one (pointing to the rabbit).

Jesse: It was getting fatter and fatter and fatter and fatter and fatter and fatter and stretcher and stretcher and stretcher.

Ms. Williams: It was stretching. I like these words. Fatter and stretching.

By looking at the illustrations and listening to the story, the students identified the animal characters and the main event of the animals squeezing into the mitten. Ms. Williams revoiced Jesse's word “stretcher” into stretching, adding that she liked the way he used the descriptive words. In this situation, she applied revoicing comments a student made during her reading. She concluded the read-aloud event by having students retell the story using photocopied images of the mitten and the various animals. Each
student received copies and worked in pairs for the retelling. Ms. Williams then asked them to take the sheets home to practice because the next day they would retell the story again. They could color the animals and mitten if they wished.

**Early Morning Talk**

Orally sharing stories from home became a regular part of the school day as some of the students, on their own initiative, created their own personal sharing time with Ms. Williams the first thing in the morning. For the brief period of time between their arrival at school and taking attendance, several students would individually approach Ms. Williams and share stories about things that had happened since the closing of school the previous day. Once put into practice, this Early Morning Talk continued throughout the school year. For example, on September 20, Jesse, when he first came into the classroom, showed Ms. Williams the scab on his knee, a reminder of his fall from his new two-wheeled bicycle. He told the story of his mother helping him ride without training wheels and how he had fallen, even with his mother's help. Then Ann, who enjoyed dressing up and wearing jewelry, showed Ms. Williams her new earrings and told of her grandmother giving them to her as a gift. Nathan gave Ms. Williams a drawing of his house, open in the front so you could see the bunk bed that he had drawn on the second floor. He pointed to the image of the bunk bed and told Ms. Williams his parents had just bought him a new bed.

When the students told Ms. Williams their stories about home, she listened carefully and made thoughtful remarks. The following brief conversation is typical of Early Morning Talk:

**Alice:** My mommy was sick this morning. She couldn't make me breakfast.

**Ms. Williams:** I'm sorry to hear about that. I hope she feels better soon. Did your daddy get you something to eat?

**Alice:** Yeah. He got me some cereal and toast and orange juice.

**Ms. Williams:** That was nice of him.

Ms. Williams showed concern when her students told her of such experiences. Her responses reflected her belief that the classroom should be a nurturing community: "Children can be nurturing and caring. They can support each other and nurture when others need help" (Interview, June, 21). In such conversations, Ms. Williams modeled for the children how to communicate their concern for others.

At times when the students were not taking part in group activities Ms. Williams had organized, they could speak among themselves in their natural conversational styles. As I moved among the children, observing what they were doing and listening to their conversations, I often heard them telling each other stories based on incidents that had happened recently at home or in their community. On the
first day of school, as the students played with manipulative objects spread out on the large rug, I overheard Marjorie tell Marshall about her cat.

Marjorie: (noticeably upset) They're not gonna let me have my kitty back. I'm gonna get another, but they won't let me call her Baby Sis.

Marshall: Why not?

Marjorie: But the other ones are not babies.

Marshall: Tell them give it back please.

Marjorie: Well, I don't know what happens. [Fieldnotes, Sept. 7]

Throughout the year, I heard similar narrative vignettes and conversations about home and the larger community outside of school as the students played, relaxed, or worked at independent activities and informal group projects. Ms. Williams did not discourage the students from such talk unless she wanted their attention for a specific group activity. These informal conversations later became an integral part of the composing process as students talked among themselves during Writers Workshop.

Sometimes Early Morning Talk led to opportunities for Ms. Williams to improvise a reading or writing lesson, making connections between oral and written language. On September 20 after his Early Morning Talk with Ms. Williams, Jesse continued to talk about his bicycle accident during group time, showing the other students his scab and telling how he had fallen off his new two-wheeler. On the spot Ms. Williams created a shared writing activity from his experience. She told the students, “I’m going to pretend I’m a kindergartner, sounding out ideas.” Then she stretched the individual sounds in the words and asked the students to call out the alphabet letters the sounds represented. She wrote the dictated words on a large sheet of paper attached to the easel, creating the following written story, and added a stick figure of a boy on a bicycle.

My Bike I was riding my bike. My mom was holding me. I fell off my bike.

When she finished writing, she reread the story to the students.

Ms. Williams: We got your ideas down. I pretended like I was you. But I’m not really you. Can you write your ideas down? Can you draw a picture? Of course you can.

After class that day, she explained her motivation to me. “With the mini lesson that popped out today, I said the time is right. When the apple is ripe you pick it. You don't wait till it rots the next day or a few days later. And the kids were ripe for that little thing today because Jesse was very intent with what he said, you know falling down and hurting his knee. Let's express all this down on paper” (Interview, Sept. 20).
Writing Workshop

Early Morning Talk set the stage for Writing Workshop, which became the first activity in the morning. On October 13, Ms. Williams introduced her students to Writing Workshop and modelled for them how to “write” in their Word Book journals. To complete a Word Book page, students first thought of a story and a word they would need to tell the story. They asked Ms. Williams or me to write the word on an index card. Then they drew a picture to tell the story and copied the word from their word card onto the page. After the students completed their page, Ms. Williams asked them to share it with her or the class, to tell their story and read the matching word from the index card. Ms. Williams had taped an envelope on the inside front cover of the Word Books for students to place their index cards. Students could associate their drawings with their oral stories to recall the words on the word cards. These word cards made connections between oral and written language. Ms. Williams hoped the association would help her students develop sight vocabulary (Interview, Nov. 22). The oral sharing of the stories also made connections between students’ oral language and their printed texts. Writing Workshop occurred twice a week when it was first introduced. By November it had become a daily activity.

As students became more proficient in phonics, Ms. Williams encouraged them to use invented spelling to write their stories in their Word Books. They also could copy words from books she read aloud or placed on a special table for books related to her thematic units. When students shared their stories with Ms. Williams, either personally or with the class, she often wrote a sentence in conventional English at the bottom of the page for students to read later or share with parents after they completed a book. They also could copy words from their collection of word cards or share a card with a classmate. When Ms. Williams taught her thematic units on science topics, she changed the title of Word Books to specialized journals, Plant Journal and Insect Journal, and students wrote pages about those topics.

Reading aloud from Word Books during Share Time was an opportunity for students to show they were beginning to read in a conventional sense. For example, Sarah read aloud to the class her pumpkin and watermelon poems she had written in her Plant Journal.

Inspired by a poem Ms. Williams had read to the class, Sarah looked through her word cards for appropriate words and drew small pictures of a pumpkin and a watermelon. Her "Pumpkins" poem follows.

Pumpkins

Pumpkins are beautiful.
I like pumpkins.
Pumpkins need water.
Pumpkins are orange.
Pumpkins you carve.
Pumpkins are in Halloween.
Pumpkins I like.
Pumpkins all over.

Throughout the school year Ms. Williams introduced a number of writing activities involving specialized books related to her thematic units. Some were step books where sheets of paper were folded and stapled to create a book with pages of different lengths, each page getting longer. She also introduced scientific and math writing with bug detective journals, bug word problems, and water journals. These writing activities encouraged family involvement where a parent, caregiver, or sibling could work with the child, and they could write together in the journals. By showing her students how to connect their spoken language to their writing, Ms. Williams created a positive literacy learning environment. After moving up to higher grades, some of Ms. Williams’ former students stopped by during lunch time or after school to give her copies of current writings they had completed. Sometimes they read aloud their poems or stories to Ms. Williams. I had the pleasure of experiencing this. I believe this is a true measure of the effectiveness of Ms. Williams’ teaching strategies and approach to literacy learning.

Conclusion

Over the nine months of the school year, Ms. Williams planned literacy activities to help her students move from drawing pictures and taking part in storybook read-aloud events to reading and writing in a conventional sense. At the beginning of the school year, she involved her students in multimodal group literacy activities that made connections between spoken and written language, and she revoiced her students’ oral stories into more appropriate written texts. During the last months of school, she allocated more time in the school day for the students to read and write, including reading their own writings. While literacy events throughout the year continued to involve oral and written language and pictures, written language took on greater importance towards the end of the year. Hodge and Kress (1988) have pointed out that “semiotic conditions in education differ from those of other pre-educational contexts in one decisive respect: the dominance of the written code. The transition from an oral to a literate cultural system is a major achievement of the education process” (p. 253).

Ms. Williams helped the students in her class make the transition from an oral to a literate cultural system. Through the literacy events Ms. Williams planned as part of her integrated curriculum, she gradually moved her students to use more written language during literacy events. She knew the importance of written language in school culture. She also knew she would be held accountable for preparing her students for the first grade curriculum which would focus even more on conventional forms of reading and writing. Ms. Williams saw it as her professional responsibility to familiarize her students with written language while at the same time respecting their experiences with multimodal literacy. She took this responsibility seriously and considered her reading and writing events a means of moving her students in this direction (Interview, June 17).
References


Children’s Book References


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