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Toward Increasing Child Talk in Early Childhood Centres: Results of Systematic Observation.

Heather Peters

The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Background

Recent New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) reports (1998, 2005) highlighted a problem; that some Early Childhood Educators were unaware of the opportunities they could provide to optimise young children's language development. To assess the extent of the problem a research study was undertaken in the region of Northland.

Literacy experts and practitioners (Cazden, 2001; Clay, 2001, Pressley, 2006, McLachlan-Smith & St. George, 2000; McNaughton, 2002; Wells, 1987) acknowledge the importance of oral language in literacy development. Also explicit attention to improving the quality of oral language between teachers and children has raised literacy development (Phillips,McNaughton & MacDonald,2002). However, oral language development is a legitimate objective in its own right (Hart & Risely, 1999), if only because it is an important resource for coping with life at school. Wylie, Thompson and Lythe (2001), in their study of early childhood quality factors, identified oral interaction between teacher and children as one of the most important. (See also Currie, 2000; Smith, et al., 2000). "The quality of talk that each child hears and participates in is an important part of the quality of that child's education" (Cazden,1992,p.3.).

This study has focussed on the oral English language of 3 - 4 year old children, enrolled in kindergartens

Research Questions

- 1. To describe teacher-child oral interaction (with a focus on increasing child talk) in Northland kindergartens.
- 2. To investigate whether interaction rates were affected by the child ethnicity and/or child's gender.

Methods

Purposive sampling (Neuman, 2000) was used in the selection of a range of kindergarten centres based on location (rural, town and city centres). The study involved 8 kindergartens, 16 teachers, 64 children (32 male / 32 female; ethnic composition 32 Maori/32 non-Maori).

The observation method used was adapted from one used in earlier studies of New Zealand New Entrants' classes (Clay, 1985; Kerin, 1988). Their instrument was described by Smith (1998) as a 'continuous record' used for the purpose of observing the totality of behaviour, a feature important for descriptive research (Neuman, 2000).

Systematic observations of teacher-child talk in eight kindergartens with 64 children (equal numbers of boys and girls and equal numbers of European and Maori), and 16 teachers were conducted. Variable included centre activity (i.e.meeting and greeting, mat time and small group activities) child ethnicity (European / Maori), child sex and situation (one teacher to one child, one teacher to a small group of children and a teacher with the whole class), and individual teacher.

Data were captured in two minute intervals, supplemented by audio recordings of each of the two co-operating teachers. Observations took place when the child was alone with the teacher (1 to 1) but also when the child was in a small group (1 to few), or together with the rest of the class (1 to many).

The nature of teacher and child talk was classified into seven major categories (i.e. Teacher Encouraging and Supporting Talk, Teacher Modelling Talk, Teacher Discouraging Talk, Child Initiated Talk, Child Expanded Talk ,Child Verbalised Feelings and Child Non-verbal Response.

Frame

Exploratory and inferential data analyses were conducted to determine whether statistically significant relationships could be detected. It was possible to explore the effects of the following factors on teacher-child interactions: activity (meeting & greeting, mat time, and small group activities), child sex (male, female), child ethnicity (Non Maori, Maori), situation (1 to 1, 1 to few, 1 to many), and individual teacher. Inferential analyses involved determining the strength of relationship between variables (i.e. correlations) and determining whether statistically significant differences in mean score by factor sub-group existed (i.e. analysis of variance).Such procedures require that the variables meet the assumptions of the statistical tests being applied, and if necessary transformations have to be implemented to improve conformance with these assumptions. Transformations are used only to identify non-chance patterns within the data.

Research findings

- I. Children experience more teacher talk than their own child talk
- II. For all teachers, their observed rates of encouraging talk behaviour were greater than their rates of discouraging talk behaviour.
- III. Children expanded their talk most in a one to one situation, while teachers invited verbal expansion most in the one to few situation.
- IV. The sex and ethnicity of the child produced no significant differences in interaction rates.
- V. Some individual teachers produce significantly different rates of interaction, with a few individual teachers standing out in producing either much or little interaction.

The study has contributed to an important aim; that of informing teacher's pedagogy. Positive feedback from local Early Childhood Teachers has resulted in a group of teachers undergoing professional development, specifically targeted at supporting teaching strategies for encouraging child talk.

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