

# Mealtime Conversations in Classrooms Can Contribute to Language Development

(Barnes, Grifenhagen & Dickinson, under review)

- ▶ Are a context that can bring home experiences and culture into the classroom.
- ▶ 7 – 14% of the time in preschool classrooms
- ▶ Provide opportunities for extended conversations and talk about past and future events (academic language).
- ▶ Study:
  - 44 Head Start classroom mealtimes transcribed
  - Coded for topics of talk
  - Fall-spring PPVT score
  - Found general patterns of conversations

# Patterns of Talk: Conversational Cultures

- ▶ Home focus (20%): talk about homes
  - Limited academic vocabulary language
  - Managerial and manners
- ▶ Classroom focus (11%)
  - Academic talk (often about food)
  - Managerial and social-personal talk
- ▶ Mixed Low use: (11%) all types of talk(43%)
  - Limited amount of talk
- ▶ Mixed, high (25%): all types of talk
  - Academic vocabulary and topics (most)
  - Social-personal topics (2<sup>nd</sup> highest)

# Mealtime Talk in a Head Start

## Social-Personal Focus

- ▶ Child: Everybody was sick.
- ▶ Teacher: Who was sick?
- ▶ Child: My granny and my poppa mamma.
- ▶ Teacher: What's wrong with granny?
- ▶ Child: She had to get a shot.
- ▶ Teach: She ok? What's wrong with mamma granny?
- ▶ Child: mm she had surgery.
- ▶ Teacher: She did? She in the hospital?
- ▶ Child: Yes.

## Food/Academic Focus

- ▶ Teacher: Do we have a vegetable today?
- ▶ Child: yeah.
- ▶ Teacher: What kinda vegetable do we have on our plates?
- ▶ Child: Banana!
- ▶ Teacher: Umm. Banana's a fruit. What kinda vegetable do we have?
- ▶ Child: Broccoli!
- ▶ Teacher: Broccoli and potatoes. Well potatoes are sorta like something that you call a starch.

# Did Mealtime Talk Predict PPVT Growth?

- ▶ Growth in expressive vocabulary was related to conversation cluster:
  - Mixed use (high and low) was related to larger gains.
  - Social talk provided opportunities for talk about home.
  - Academic talk supplied vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.
- ▶ Managerial talk
  - May have created good climate for talk
  - Fostered self-regulation
- ▶ Take home message:
  - View mealtimes as occasions to foster language.
  - Encourage sustained talk that engages children.

# Lunchtime Conversation

- ▶ Cindy Hoisington
  - Head Start teacher
  - Classroom with 12 ELL children speaking 9 different languages
- ▶ Lunchtime after girls had explored snails during centers time.

# Using Music to Teach Vocabulary



# Music in Classrooms

- ▶ Music and movement are a standard component in most classrooms.
- ▶ Typically teachers do not intentionally use it to build language.
- ▶ Yet it has ideal design features:
  - Children are attending and producing language.
  - Lyrics are repeated multiple times and can include interesting words and grammatical structures.
  - Sounds associated with words can help support word learning (Lawson-Adams & Dickinson, under review).

# Language for Reading Study

- ▶ Prior to the song words are introduced with picture cards. 10 words are taught with a song.
- ▶ The first time words are introduced the teacher gives the definitions. The second use of the song the teacher elicits the words and definitions from children.
- ▶ We tested learning after words were taught using music twice.
- ▶ Long-term recall was tested for words that were never reviewed and for words that were reviewed twice using the same song .
- ▶ Watch it:



# Factors that Support Learning

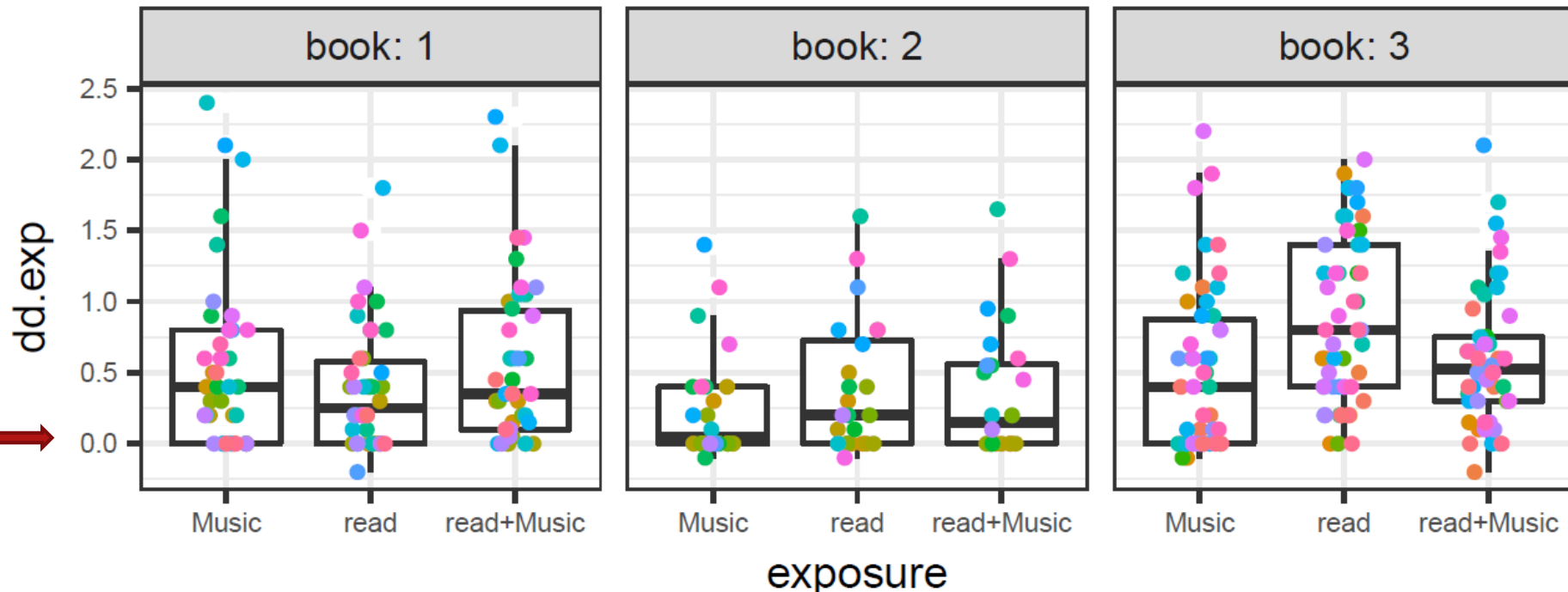
- ▶ Children Talk (and sing).
  - Children are highly engaged
  - Use novel words in ways that build meaning.
- ▶ Ask questions
  - Participation is fostered with closed questions
- ▶ Teaching
  - Word meanings are explicitly taught
  - Repeated exposure.
- ▶ Model use
  - Teachers use words in complex sentences.
- ▶ Culture of use (not exactly conversations)
  - Repeated format that invites child participation.

# Research Design

1. Will children learn words when they are taught through music?
  2. Will teaching words using music be as effective as teaching them:
    - a) During book reading?
    - b) With a combination of book reading and music?
- ▶ Words were taught in three ways: music, book, music and book.
  - ▶ We compared learning of taught words with words that were not taught.
  - ▶ We used this method with 3 books.

# Teaching Words in Music, Book Reading and Combined: Expressive Task

Music resulted in significant learning on our expressive knowledge task ( $p < .003$ )



# Other Strategies

# Book Reading

- ▶ Consistently associated with improved vocabulary learning.
- ▶ Key elements:
  - Reread books 3-4 times
  - Teach selected 8 – 10 words explicitly.
  - Support understanding of the story across readings:
    - Begin by establishing basic events, characters.
    - Later encourage inferential thinking, often about character motivations and feelings.
- ▶ Use nonfiction informational books.

# Centers Time

- ▶ Provide activities linked to your theme that encourage use of words being taught.
  - Prop boxes with theme-related toys
  - Centers with thematic connection
  - Books that are read to the large group
- ▶ Develop a conversation station (Bond and Wasik, 2009). Have toys, pictures books to prompt talk.
- ▶ Spend time playing and talking with children in varied locations.
- ▶ Post words and phrases you want to remember to use in key locations. Model use.
- ▶ Engage and support, do not interrupt with didactic instruction.

# Involve Parents

- ▶ Let parents know the topics of your units.
- ▶ Encourage them to tell children their personal stories related to the topic.
- ▶ Have parents encourage to children to talk. Pictures can be good starting points.
- ▶ Send home the vocabulary you are addressing (in L1 and L2 if possible).
  - Create simple games to provide a meaningful way to practice words.
  - Invite parents to share learning moments from home.

# Changing Patterns of Informal Language Use Is Hard

(Dickinson, 2011)

- ▶ Extended effort is needed
- ▶ Strategies for becoming aware of your patterns.
  - Checklists
  - Systematic self-reflection
  - Audio or videotaping
- ▶ Teamwork – coach, co-teacher
  - Others see things you may be unaware of.
  - Observing others can help your self awareness.



# Changing How You Plan Teacher-led Activities is Easier Than Changing Informal Uses

- ▶ Unit planning should include identifying words and concepts for systematic instruction.
- ▶ Identify words, create definitions and plan questions to use in structured activities.
- ▶ Plan for home involvement
- ▶ Return to the same topics in future years. Build a reservoir of resources and activity ideas.

# Use a Content-rich Curriculum

- ▶ Topics should include intellectual challenge.
- ▶ Extend topics long enough to build and deepen understanding (at least 2 weeks, preferably longer).
- ▶ Build connections among activities and materials to provide multiple opportunities for learning and practice.
- ▶ Include hands on science-related activities and discussions.

# Strong Leadership Is Needed

- ▶ **Adopt a strong curriculum and support effective use**
  - Support planning consistent with your goals
  - Seek to provide time for planning
  - Develop systems for sharing ideas and materials
- ▶ **Be Reflective:**
  - See yourself as a researcher
  - Engage teachers self-reflection
    - identify issues/questions
    - Develop systematic a method to address it

# Teachers Must Be Supported

- ▶ Effective professional development that builds knowledge and pedagogical skills.
  - sustained and focused on learning
  - includes coaching or mentoring
  - has clear linkage to curricula
- ▶ Mentors/coaches are available
  - know how to work with teachers in ways that support improved instruction
  - provide concrete, objective feedback
  - are knowledgeable about development, instruction
- ▶ Building level administrators know instructional expectations; support educational goals

# Sensible Accountability

- ▶ Reliable and valid information about children's learning of different types
- ▶ Strive to ensure teachers' progress monitoring does not only focus on easily measured, "basic" skills. Include:
  - Children's talk about past and future events, ability to answer different kinds of questions.
  - Children use of language to solve problems and communicate feelings
  - Children are learning new words
  - Rating tool that has been useful: The TROLL (Dickinson et al., 2003)
- ▶ Encourage use of observations to plan activities and target needs of individuals.

# Guiding Principles



Teach with intentionality.

Reflect constantly.

Believe passionately in the importance of your work.

# Be "The One" for Each Child

I am only one.  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything.  
But still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do  
everything  
I will not refuse to do the  
something that I can do.

*Rev. Edward Everett Hale*  
from: [Singing the Living Tradition](#),  
Unitarian Universalist hymnal

