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Intentional Teaching Capstone Part A: Language and Literacy Practices

Talk is used in a variety of ways in the class where I'm doing my fieldwork. The teachers use it to convey instructions, information, or ideas to students. Students use talk to tell stories or communicate their needs and desires. Students are talking almost constantly; during times when it is discouraged entirely (nap time), they are often still whispering, and in times when "strong, silent hands" are requested (circle time), students still will often call out their contributions. The lead teacher, Ms. Inna, uses firm, clear instructions with the children. She often repeats phrases: the rules of the classroom are to use "listening ears," "gentle hands," and "kind words;" she and the assistant teacher instruct the students to "catch a bubble" (fill their mouths with air and puff out their cheeks) before going to the hallway or "turn off [their] noises" during nap time. She guides them to use full sentences, explaining that she does not know what "it" or "that" is without context. With one student, whose parents are from Spain, she uses occasional Spanish phrases to ensure he understands her or to emphasize a point. While reading a story, she frequently asks questions to check students' comprehension.

During center time (which fills the majority of my time in the room), the students use verbal language with each other almost constantly. While they are quieter in some centers (puzzle, science, and sensory centers, where they are often more focused on independently engaging than collaborating), most centers lend themselves to a lot of talk. During dramatic play, they communicate about what roles they are playing—telling each other "You be the mom; I be the baby; Lily, be the cat" or claiming different superhero roles for themselves. In the block center or while working with play dough, the students ask each other questions, tell each other stories, and collaborate on their work (telling each other what they are making or negotiating to create something together).

One conversation that I observed was between two students (Ben and Vincent) in the play dough center. They were the only two students at the table and I was sitting at one head of the table.

Ben was playing with a small piece of play dough (about 1 1/2 square inches), spreading it thin on the table. "I'm making a bubble," he said, looking at what he was doing.

"A bubble?" Vincent asked.

"Vinnie, what's your name?" Ben asked.

"P.O.S. Vinnie," Vincent replied, holding up his hunk of play dough, which he had flattened slightly into an oval shape. (Vincent got spoken to earlier about using school-inappropriate words he'd heard from his brother; I don't know if "P.O.S." was something he heard from him, a random selection of letters, or something Vincent might have heard in another context.)

"I should call you P.O.S.?" Ben asked. "P.O.S., what's your name?"

"P.O.S. Vinnie."

Ben redirected his attention to Charlotte, who had recently relocated to the sensory center nearby.

"Charlotte, are you done?" he asked her, standing with his hands over the play dough "cookies" that she had made earlier.

"Yes," she replied.

"She made so much of those," Vincent noticed.

“I’m going to make a marshmallow,” Ben said, gathering up all of Charlotte’s “cookies.” He combined them with his play dough and patted it all into a thick, flat cylinder. “I made a cake.”

He then used the scissors to cut off two wedges and handed one to Vincent and one to me. “I made you both a piece.”

Ben cut his play dough into more pieces and began moving them over. “One,” he counts.

“Two,” Vincent says.

“Three.”

“Four.”

They continued alternately counting until they get to ten.

“Look what I made,” Vincent said, holding up a small cylinder of dough (about $\frac{3}{4}$ ”).

“I’m pretending it’s chewing gum play dough,” he explained.

He pressed his “chewing gum” around his index finger. “It’s a bandaid.”

Looking over at Ben’s small pieces of play dough (about the same size as his “chewing gum”), he said, “Oh, give *me* a tootsie roll!” Ben did, and Vincent split it into smaller pieces.

“I made it so small! Look, I made it so small,” he told Ben.

“Why you make it so small? Look how small it is!”

“It’s small,” Vincent said.

“It’s small,” Ben repeated.

“It was big for the first time.” (Based on his inflection and the context, I think that Vincent meant “It was big at first,” i.e., before he made it small.)

“Ooh! Look at that, Ben.” Vincent was holding up a small piece of play dough. He turned to me. “Look!”

Then, grabbing a green tube, he said “I need this one. It’s so small. I need it.

“You want one of these snakes?” he asked Ben. “I’m making a snake roller.”

(At this point, the cooperating teacher joined this center and I moved to another one.)

Getting the opportunity to listen to and transcribe this conversation illustrated to me how much these kids have grown in the six or seven months I have spent observing and interacting with them each week. While they sometimes repeat themselves and use developmentally typical grammar (most sentences are in the present tense, forms of “to be” are often elided, etc.), their conversation (at least around me) has gotten much more complex and rich, and their interactions are a lot more intricate and coherent to an adult listening. They carried on conversation pretty much continuously for the full five minutes I was taking notes (and continued it after) and stayed on a single subject for significantly longer than they did when I began observing their class in September.

Ben has shown a particular interest in names. In addition to asking Vincent his name, Ben had told me earlier that day that his mom’s name was “Mom.” I asked him if that’s what his dad calls her, and he said “No, he calls her ‘Tracy.’ I call my daddy ‘Dad,’ but my mom calls him ‘Nir.’” He went on to tell me his full name (his first, middle, and two last names, one of which he shares with his mother and the other with his dad). I told him my full name and explained that I also share one name (my middle name) with my mom and another (my last name) with my dad, and told him their full names. When I first told him my full name he smiled and looked like he might have thought I was joking. “But everyone calls you ‘Ms. Natasha,’” he said, almost like a

question. I told him that “Natasha” is my first name, so “Ms. Natasha” is what I like to be called. When one of his classmates overheard our conversation, she asked me what my “Dr. Seuss name” was. I told her I didn’t know, but they could help me figure it out later. “It’s ‘Natasha Dasha Ba,’” Ben told me, which I thought was clever rhyming.

A few weeks after the conversations recounted above, Ben got very excited towards the end of nap time when he saw me typing on my iPad, and asked if he could type his name and mine. After typing our names, he moved on to spelling some of his friends’ names, including Jing (whose name he had written the day before), Vincent, and Charlotte (who informed us from her cot that she has a “big name,” whereas other kids, like Lily, have “small names”).

While Ben can identify every letter and what sound they make, with me, he has only ever been interested in using them to spell names. This exemplifies the connection between names and early literacy discussed in our readings. As stated in “La Historia de mi Nombre” (2018), by Kindel Nash, Leah Panther, and Alicia Arce-Boardman, studying names (one’s own and others’) is culturally responsive and “support[s] cumulative and increasingly complex understandings of language and literacy” (606). Ben’s interest also demonstrates the ideas in the article “Follow the Line” (2022), by Melissa Fine, which cites research indicating that names are especially meaningful to children because they “symbolize their identity and the identity of the important people in their lives” (72).

The class studies a new letter every week. To support their learning about the shape of the letter and the sound(s) that it makes, they do show-and-tell with objects from home that begin with the letter of the week; art activities where they create a picture that uses the letter of the week as a base; and whole-group activities, such as making a “letter T soup” and adding

“ingredients” (any word they can think of that start with the letter T, represented by dropping a small object in a play soup can). Many of the students are often excited to tell me what letter their name starts with, especially when their name begins with a letter they’ve recently studied.

In addition to the letter studies, text is also used in transcribing children’s descriptions of and comments on their art, which is displayed around the room with the transcription. Center times and toy bins are all labeled in clear, capital-letter print. There is a schedule on the wall in the whole-group meeting area with pictures and text indicating the order of events of each day. Reading is also a central part of classroom activities: Ms. Inna reads a book that acts as the basis for the content they will be learning at morning circle time, and she chooses a student to pick the book she will read in afternoon circle time as a reward for good behavior. Before nap, the students have “book time,” during which they quietly read a book they have chosen from the class library. Reading is framed as both an essential part of everyday routines and something that is joyful, relaxing, and a reward.

Literacy and language are vital and crucial parts of this classroom. Frequent repetition of phrases throughout the day helps students (including those whose language skills are less advanced or who have a home language other than English) to understand routines and what is expected of them. Letters, phonemes, and precise use of spoken language are intentionally and explicitly taught by Ms. Inna. While expectations for fluent reading and spelling skills would be developmentally inappropriate in a 3K curriculum, read-alouds and independent book time are important and treasured parts of the day. These studies and routines allow children who are cognitively ready to explore more advance literacy skills to do so. I hope to incorporate many of these methods of teaching literacy and language into my practice.

BEN

MS. NATASHA

JING

CHARLOTTE

VINCENT

KAHAN



AX VAMFFFCFCVBBNNNNNNMMFghhh

HHGHUJGGHHGGHHHHJJHGHJJHJNHHJKWW

FB MCDGGSSDBCSAHSGS3@



