

# TEACHER INTERVENTION TO SUPPORT ORAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN DRAMATIC PLAY CONTEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

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*A speech-language pathologist and former primary teacher who is now a researcher conducting action research with kindergarten teachers in northern rural Canadian classrooms collaborate in an analysis of one teacher's interactions with her students in a dramatic play center. We use three principles to show how the teacher supports children's language, literacy, and conceptual learning, and to propose additional ways to extend children's learning. The principles are observing what the children are interested in and following the children's lead, building on children's funds of knowledge to keep the conversation going, and posing a problem to invite deeper thinking about the problem and propose possible solutions. We conclude with suggestions for teachers in grades one and five to address social studies and health curriculum objectives from the Texas curriculum, while at the same time supporting and extending children's language.*

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In this paper we draw on a dramatic play context in Lila's kindergarten classroom in Eagle Hills, a northern Canadian community (all names are pseudonyms), to show how teachers can scaffold children's language and literacy in dramatic play and other contexts involving role-play in primary classrooms. Janice is a speech language pathologist and Shelley is a former elementary teacher who now collaborates with primary teachers on action research to support young children's oral language and writing. In this paper, we present what we have learned through working with Lila and her students, drawing on our speech language pathologist, teaching, and research experience. We believe that the fields of speech language pathology and education have many common goals and that sharing experiences and knowledge from each field is mutually beneficial. To that end, we offer the following perspectives to teachers who wish to broaden their pedagogical repertoires for scaffolding children's oral language, literacy, and conceptual knowledge.

Our paper is based on an assumption, well supported in the literature, that children's oral language provides a foundation for literacy (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Lindfors, 2008; Snow & Resnick, 2009) and for all learning (Barnes, 1992; Vygotsky, 1986). In their interactions with others, children encounter new words and new ways of using words to make sense of their world. They gain new perspectives and learn about social expectations for using language in a range of contexts. They hear sounds of language and play with sounds, developing phonological awareness that supports their reading and writing (Snow & Resnick, 2009). Additionally, children "use talk to

facilitate their own thinking and learning in all subject areas, and to jointly construct meaning and knowledge with others” (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 49).

Teachers have an important role in creating an environment and in interacting with children in ways that support and extend children’s oral language (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002, 2010). They have knowledge about the world, about language and possible ways to use language in a range of contexts, as well as knowledge about children’s language development and pedagogy. Yet, many teachers say that they are unsure of how to scaffold children’s oral language, seeking suggestions for encouraging children’s authentic talk in classrooms (Peterson, McIntyre & Forsyth, 2016). Additionally, the results of many studies show that traditional classroom interactions provide limited opportunities for children to talk (Alexander, 2011; Barnes, 1992; Cazden, 2001). These studies indicate a need for classroom environments that encourage:

1. sustained interactions between students and between students and their teachers;
2. children’s questions about content, rather than points of procedure;
3. the use of children’s exploratory talk as “stepping stones to understanding” (Alexander, 2011, p. 99).

In response to this research showing the need for sustained classroom interactions that deepen children’s thinking and the need for teachers to provide ample opportunity for students’ ponderings and authentic questions (Alexander, 2011; Murphy et al., 2014), we introduce a set of principles for teachers’ interactions with children in dramatic play settings. We draw on Hirsh-Pasek’s and Golinkoff’s (2011) notion of “guided play,” where teachers provide a physical environment with materials that support children’s language and learning, and where teachers interact with children in ways that enhance children’s self-discovery (p. 113), to make a case for the pedagogical possibilities of play. In guided play settings, children learn language and concepts in authentic, highly motivational contexts that involve interaction with peers, adults, and concrete objects, and that provide space for children’s creativity and for developing their interests (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2011).

We begin by providing an example of a dramatic play context from Lila’s classroom involving authentic writing (Boldt, 2009). We analyze Lila’s interactions with her students and provide examples of ways in which she and other teachers might use such contexts as springboards for supporting children’s language, literacy, and conceptual understandings. We conclude with suggestions for other contexts that would be appropriate in kindergarten and beyond.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Lila, a kindergarten teacher with two years of teaching experience, and her 22 students in Eagle Hills, a northern rural Canadian community, are participating in a six-year action research project exploring ways to support young children’s oral language and writing through play. Lila meets with

colleagues in her northern school division and university researchers five times each year to talk about initiatives that she might undertake in her classroom to foster children's language and literacy. Between these visits, she carries out a play-based initiative, records children and herself engaged in the play activity, and uploads the video recordings to the project's website. During each of the five visits to Eagle Hills per year, the university researchers meet individually with Lila for collaborative discussions about the ways in which children respond to Lila's teaching (as shown in the video recordings and Lila's observations), and then propose refinements to her teaching. These are later discussed with Lila, seven of her colleagues from other rural communities, and the researchers in after-school meetings. In this paper we discuss one video clip that recorded a teaching initiative undertaken by Lila in her first year participating in the project.

### MAILBOX CENTER IN LILA'S CLASSROOM

One corner of Lila's classroom houses the dramatic play center. Each month, Lila brings materials to the center to create a new setting for children's play. In February, she created a mail center by placing paper, envelopes, and writing materials on a table, and creating mailboxes from milk cartons for each child (taping them all together so that they look like the super mailboxes in suburban neighbourhoods). Lila told us that she created the mail center to provide authentic contexts for children's writing (see Figure 1 for image of the mailbox center).



Figure 1. Mailbox center in Lila's classroom

One day during center time, while two students were writing at the table with writing materials and two were taking up roles as kittens, Lila entered the center in role as someone who wanted to mail a package. The full transcript of Lila's interactions with children at the center can be found in the appendix. As we discuss our analysis of Lila's interactions with her students in the *Findings* section, we will provide excerpts of the transcript.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for the action research project include videos that Lila records using an iPod set up on a tripod at the dramatic play center. After Lila uploads the video recordings to the project website, the video clips are transcribed and analyzed for various purposes (e.g., how children use language; how children use social understandings to further their intentions; and in this case, how teachers scaffold children's language). For this paper, we have selected a 10-minute video clip of Lila carrying out one of her action research initiatives. We conducted a deductive analysis of her interactions with the children, using the following framework of ways in which teachers can scaffold children's language, literacy, and conceptual learning. These principles arise from Janice's work as a speech-language pathologist. She has found the principles to be very helpful in her work with teachers and children.

The teacher:

1. observes what the children are interested in, waits to give the children an opportunity to share ideas, and follows the children's lead (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002)
2. keeps the conversation going by building on children's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This involves making comments and asking questions that add ideas and vocabulary, and encouraging children to make connections with previous experience and knowledge (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002, 2009).
3. poses a problem, adding ideas that deepen children's thinking as they talk about the problem and contribute to its resolution (Damhuis & DeBlauw, 2008; Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010).

We used these principles to identify Lila's scaffolding strategies and to suggest additional ways in which she might further extend their language and learning. Our analyses and suggestions are organized according to the three principles in the following section, though there are some scaffolding practices that address more than one principle.

## FINDINGS

### LILA'S SCAFFOLDING AND SUGGESTIONS FOR OTHER POSSIBILITIES

As Lila joins her students in the pretend mail center, she promotes oral language and literacy by engaging students in an extended conversation. Some of this learning is intentionally planned by

Lila, but other learning happens incidentally as the conversation continues. In the following, we identify ways in which Lila follows the framework for scaffolding children's language and literacy, as she talks with the children. We also propose further opportunities where language and literacy learning can be enhanced.

#### LILA ENHANCES CHILDREN'S LEARNING: POSING A PROBLEM

*Lila: I need to send this box of bananas to my grandmother. She really loves bananas. But I want to make sure that it doesn't get wrecked.*

*Child: My sister likes bananas!*

*Lila: Oh does she? So I brought with me some of these to put in here (Styrofoam packing material) to pack it with.*

*Child: I'm gonna take some too! (children help pack the box with Styrofoam packing)*

*Lila: Okay, I think that's enough. Thank you! All done!*

In this excerpt, Lila decides to enter the center and take on a pretend role to advance the play and the potential learning. She introduces an interesting problem to be solved (e.g., fragile bananas that need to be sent to her grandmother) and a potential solution – Styrofoam packing material.

Joining in the play with an interesting problem, Lila actively engages the children's interest as a conversation develops around how to package the bananas to prevent damage. The children are encouraged to think about what could happen to the bananas if they are not packed properly and how to solve this problem. By promoting thinking beyond the here and now, Lila is also laying the foundations for literacy success (Rowe, 2013). To comprehend written texts, children must often think beyond the information at hand. For example, they may infer why events are occurring, the motivations of the characters, and what may happen next.

As Lila successfully engages the children in an extended back and forth conversation, she is well positioned to add language to extend the children's learning. In the next section, we propose further opportunities for enhancing language and literacy learning.

*POSSIBILITIES FOR EXTENDING THE LEARNING.* Lila could enhance the children's learning by posing the problem to the children to solve and then encouraging children to consider possible solutions to the problem at hand. This would challenge the children to consider other perspectives, explain reasons for their opinions, and make comparisons. After hearing how the children might pack the bananas to prevent damage, she could then introduce the Styrofoam as a viable solution. Examples of possible questions and comments that could occur are:

- *Bananas are very fragile. That means they can get wrecked or damaged really easily. How can we make sure they don't get damaged?*
- *Wrapping the bananas in paper is not such a good idea because the paper is not thick enough to prevent the bananas from getting bruised.*

- *Styrofoam is a good idea because it is thick and strong and will protect the bananas from getting damaged. This is just like when you are wearing your heavy coat. When you fall down, you don't get hurt because your coat protects you.*
- *Styrofoam is also a good solution because it is very light and will not make the bananas too heavy. If the bananas are too heavy, it will cost more money to mail it to my grandmother.*

Extending the conversation in this way would also provide opportunities for Lila to model and encourage use of more complex language such as compound sentences, embedded clauses and phrases (e.g., *Styrofoam is a good idea because it is thick and strong and will protect the bananas from getting damaged*) and expose the children to more sophisticated vocabulary, such as *fragile*, *solution*, *thick*, *protect*, and *prevent*. Additionally, Lila could introduce words like *bruised* and *damaged*. Lila could also talk further about the meaning of these less familiar words to deepen the children's understanding. For example, she could use the word, "Styrofoam," when talking with the children, describing what Styrofoam is, talking about how it is the same or different from other kinds of foam, or proposing other uses of Styrofoam.

Broadening the number of words that children know also significantly contributes to the children's ability to communicate with specificity and has a positive impact on reading comprehension. In fact, the breadth and depth of children's vocabulary in the preschool years is one of the strongest predictors of later literacy success (Lee, 2011).

Lila engages the children and focuses them on her topic around mailing bananas to her grandmother. She could also follow one child's lead and extend the learning. When told that Lila's grandmother likes bananas, one of the children says, "*My sister likes bananas!*" Lila acknowledges the child by saying, "*Oh does she?*" and could also take this opportunity to follow the child's lead and extend the topic by asking questions like, "*Why does she like bananas?*" "*What about you? Do you like bananas? Why or why not?*" or making comments like, "*I love bananas too because they are very sweet and very nutritious. That means they are make you healthy and strong.*" By following the child's lead, Lila would create opportunities for explaining, offering opinions, sharing different perspectives and adding new vocabulary (e.g., *nutritious*).

## LILA ENHANCES LEARNING: EXPANDING ON CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

In the following excerpt, Lila prompts a child to generate the specific word *parcel* and then repeats *parcel* in a complete sentence, "This is a parcel for my grandma." Expanding on children's shorter productions with a longer, more grammatically complete sentence is a positive way to promote language learning. Encouraging children to use more context-specific words, (e.g., *parcel* refers to a mailed box as opposed any box), is critical to developing children's vocabulary knowledge.

*Lila: Okay, I think that's enough. Thank you! All done!*

*Now I'm going to tape it up. What is it called when you pack up a box like this?*

*Child: A parcel!*

*Lila: A parcel. Okay. This is a parcel for my grandma.*

*Child: Can we make a parcel for my mom?*

*Lila: We have to make sure my grandma gets this. It's very important.*

*POSSIBILITIES FOR EXTENDING THE LEARNING.* Laila could further encourage the children's thinking by asking them why it is important to tape the box or what would happen if the tape is not strong enough. Discussion of reasons and possibilities might foster the use of more complex language. Here are some possibilities:

- *We need to tape the box so the bananas don't fall out when the mail workers are taking the parcel to grandma.*
- *If the tape is not strong enough, the bananas might fall out and get damaged or even lost. How do you think Grandma would feel if she ended up getting bruised bananas?*

This kind of conversation requires children to connect their existing knowledge with the information they have at hand to think and talk about reasons and predict possibilities. The last comment would also encourage the children to imagine how Grandma would feel with a delivery of battered bananas. Having empathy and being able to take another's perspective is key to children's social emotional development as well as to comprehension of narrative texts where the reader must understand the perspective of the characters (McTigue et. al, 2015).

When a child asks, "*Can we make a parcel for my mom?*" Lila could promote further perspective taking with questions like:

- *What would you like to send you mom?*
- *Does she love bananas like my grandma?*
- *Would she want something else?*

Lila could then re-focus the conversation with a comment like, "*Well, let's finish sending this parcel to my grandma and then maybe you can get a parcel ready to send to your mom,*" to invite children to apply the knowledge they gained from their interaction with Lila.

Also adhering to the principle of building on children's funds of knowledge, in the following paragraphs we discuss this excerpt:

*Lila: We have to make sure my grandma gets this. It's very important. So how are we going to know that it is going to get to her? How will I show that this is for my grandma? What can I write on it so that I know it is supposed to go to my grandma?*

*Child: Write her name!*

*Lila: Write her name? Okay, let's do it together. Her name is Violet. (She sounded out her grandma's name and the children told her the letters she should write.)*

*What else? Do you think if I give this to the post office, they're going to know where my grandma lives?*

*Child: Nope! We have to know the numbers. . .*

*Child: We have to find out what the numbers are so we can write it down.*

*Child: We usually write the number of the house.*

*Lila: Oh, that's a good idea. She's at 40. Forty is her house number. What else should I write down? (This continues as children provide information about the address.)*

*Child: Her phone number!*

*Lila: Okay, I'll write her phone number, too. Thank you. I've got her phone number, I've got her house number, I've got her name. What else do I need to write? Now I have to tell you, my grandma doesn't live in [name of province]. She lives all the way across the country in Ontario. Should I write that?*

*Child: Yep. You should write to Ontario right there.*

*Lila: I'll write On: ta:ri:o (she says the sounds of each syllable as she writes). Maybe we should write the street too. (she writes the street name)*

In this excerpt, Lila engages the children in figuring out how to ensure that the parcel gets to her grandma and scaffolds their thinking with questions like:

*So how are we going to know that it is going to get to her?*

*How will I show that it is for my grandma?*

*What can I write on it so that I know it is for my grandma?*

*Do you think if I give it to the post office, they're going to know where my grandma lives?*

*What else do I need to write?*

*She lives all the way across the country in Ontario. Should I write that too?*

Lila also supports children's learning of concepts about print (Clay, 1972) by stretching out the sounds as she writes her grandma's name, *Violet*, and the province where her grandma lives, *Ontario*. She helps the children see the connections between the sounds in the words we say and how these sounds are represented by letters in the writing. By showing the children the value of writing for communicating important information, she is also motivating the children to attempt their own writing (Boldt, 2009; Parr, Jesson & McNaughton, 2009).

*POSSIBILITIES FOR EXTENDING THE LEARNING.* Lila could further promote thinking and language development by continuing the conversation with additional figuring-out questions that require the children to predict, explain, and add information such as:

- *What would happen if we send this parcel without writing where Grandma lives on it?*
- *Where would we look if we are not sure where Grandma lives?*
- *Why do we need to put Grandma's phone number on the parcel?*
- *Why do we have to add the street name? What would happen if we just put the number?*

She could also encourage the children to relate the activity to previous experiences they have had with sending or receiving mail or parcels. Continuing the conversation would also present Lila with opportunities to add vocabulary such as *address, destination, location, province, distance*.

#### LILA ENHANCES CHILDREN'S LEARNING: FOLLOWING CHILDREN'S LEAD

In the following excerpt, Lila follows the child's lead when she comments that "You should also put a flag on it," and adds information by telling him that the flag is a stamp. By validating the child's comments, Lila build's the child's confidence in himself as a valuable and competent communicator.

*Child: You should also put the flag on.*

*Lila: The flag? That could be my stamp! Because I need a stamp to mail it so I'll draw our Canada flag here. That will be our stamp.*

*POSSIBILITIES FOR EXTENDING THE LEARNING.* Lila could build further on the child's comment about the flag to discuss why it is important to put a stamp on a letter and how we know what value stamp to use. She could challenge the children's thinking with questions like

- *Why do we need to put a stamp on the parcel?*
- *What would happen if we tried to send this without a stamp?*
- *How do we know which stamp to put on our parcel?*
- *Where can we buy stamps?*
- *What other kinds of pictures can there be on stamps?*

Questions that ask the children to provide information, to explain, and to predict would extend the conversation and provide further learning opportunities. These questions could also set the stage for a new inquiry-based activity building on the children's interests in stamps to explore the different stamps used around the world.

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CONTENT AREA LEARNING: KINDERGARTEN AND BEYOND

The three principles for scaffolding children's language, literacy, and content area learning provide a useful starting point for teachers at all grade levels. Although our examples come from one dramatic play context in Lila's kindergarten classroom, we propose that teachers can implement these principles (e.g., following children's lead, making connections to children's prior experience, and posing a problem for children to solve) to support children's language, literacy, and learning across the curriculum and across grade levels. The support is particularly effective when provided while children are interacting with each other. Through their exploratory talk as students create something in small groups, solve problems together, or carry out any other small-group tasks, they provide teachers with information about their prior knowledge and experience. Teachers can listen and observe, and then build on this knowledge and experience.

In the following paragraphs, we offer possibilities for teachers in grades one and five to address social studies and health curriculum objectives from the Texas curriculum (Texas Education Agency, 2016), while at the same time supporting and extending children's language.

Setting up the Grade 1 classroom to support children in achieving the social studies objective of creating maps of the classroom or community might involve inviting small groups of children to recreate the classroom in miniature, using readily-accessible objects, such as erasers, pencil sharpeners, boxes from products such as toothpaste, etc. to represent the tables, desks, computers, book shelves, and other objects in the room. In addition to these three-dimensional maps, children might also collaboratively draw two-dimensional maps using paper and pencil or collage materials. As children talk with each other about how they will use small objects or symbols that they draw on a page to represent classroom furniture and other items in the classroom, and as they determine how far apart and where to place objects on their classroom maps, the teacher might follow children's lead and build on what children show that they know about mapping by introducing mapping concepts and vocabulary. The teacher might also introduce a problem (e.g., "How would you explain to someone new in the school how to get from the door to the classroom library? In what direction would the new person be going? Is it as far as walking from the door to the window?") that requires students to think about concepts such as direction, distance, and scale as they recreate the classroom with the various objects.

The primary grades are not the only place for creative, interactive learning activities that provide opportunities for teachers to support students' oral language using the three principles. The Grade 5 Health objective of being able to analyze food labels and menus for nutritional information provides one example. The teacher could pose a problem, such as asking students to plan a breakfast or lunch for their small group, ensuring that the meal has certain nutrients and no more than a certain percentage of the daily intake of sugar and fat. As the children plan the meal, identify what they need to purchase, and then either look up nutritional information available on the product websites or read labels from products that they or the teacher bring to class, the teacher can ask questions and provide prompts, following students' lead as they show what they know about how to read the labels, about the vocabulary used to provide nutritional information, and

about the recommended daily amounts of sugar and fat. The teacher could also invite students to seek out information to explain why certain foods are more or less nutritious, to evaluate different options and provide the reasons for their opinions, or perhaps to predict the impact of certain foods on health.

## IN CONCLUSION

The three principles, which draw on research about effective teaching *and* about effective practice of speech-language pathologists, represent our collaborative learning, as we have sought out ways to support children's language, literacy, and learning. Whether the principles introduced in our paper have been long-held by teachers or whether they present something new that teachers can integrate into their practice, we believe that there is much for teachers and speech-language pathologists to learn from each other. We hope that our collaboration inspires other teachers and speech-language pathologists to find opportunities to work together to support children's language, literacy and content learning.

Additionally, as shown in our analysis of Lila's interactions with students and examples from the Texas social studies and health curricula, teachers can draw on the three principles to create environments for children to explore ideas and to explore ways of expressing those ideas using a variety of vocabulary and sentence structures, through talk (Alexander, 2011; Boyd & Galda, 2011). Teacher scaffolding is meant to extend children's thinking and vocabulary across the curriculum, and to provide new perspectives; all the while recognizing that the children are learning in all of these ways from each other in these interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher is a contributor to the students' small-group conversation, but does not take over the conversation.

As we hope to have shown in our analysis of Lila's interactions and in the proposed examples for grades one and five classrooms following the Texas curriculum, the three principles for scaffolding can readily be taken up in daily classroom activities across the curriculum. When students at any grade level are collaborating with a peer or a group of peers, whether it be to discuss a text that has been read in literature circles, to carry out a science activity, to discuss an issue in social studies, or to work through a process for solving a problem in mathematics, their language and learning can be supported using these principles. Setting up opportunities for students to talk to each other is the first step, as students' conversations are forums for constructing meaning together, as well as windows into their meaning-making. Observing and listening to children's conversations then provide information to guide teachers' input; whether it is for the purpose of helping students to make connections to their previous knowledge, introducing new information that builds on what students have been talking about, or posing a problem based on the ideas that students are discussing. In the process, teachers are addressing curriculum objectives in ways that are meaningful to students because teachers' input builds on what students show that they know through collaborative conversations.

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## APPENDIX

### FULL TRANSCRIPT OF LILA'S INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN AT THE MAILBOX CENTER

Lila: I need to send this box of bananas to my grandmother. She really loves bananas. But I want to make sure that it doesn't get wrecked.

Child: My sister likes bananas!

Lila: Oh does she? So I brought with me some of these to put in here (Styrofoam packing material) to pack it with.

Child: I'm gonna take some too! (children help pack the box with Styrofoam packing)

Lila: Okay, I think that's enough. Thank you! All done!

Now I'm going to tape it up. What is it called when you pack up a box like this?

Child: A parcel!

Lila: A parcel. Okay. This is a parcel for my grandma.

Child: Can we make a parcel for my mom?

Lila: We have to make sure my grandma gets this. It's very important. So how are we going to know that it is going to get to her? How will I show that this is for my grandma? What can I write on it so that I know it is supposed to go to my grandma?

Child: Write her name!

Lila: Write her name? Okay, let's do it together. Her name is Violet. (She sounded out her grandma's name and the children told her the letters she should write.)

What else? Do you think if I give this to the post office, they're going to know where my grandma lives?

Child: Nope! We have to know the numbers. . .

Child: We have to find out what the numbers are so we can write it down.

Child: We usually write the number of the house.

Lila: Oh, that's a good idea. She's at 40. Forty is her house number. What else should I write down? (This continues as children provide information about the address.)

Child: Her phone number!

Lila: Okay, I'll write her phone number, too. Thank you. I've got her phone number, I've got her house number, I've got her name. What else do I need to write? Now I have to tell you, my grandma doesn't live in [name of province]. She lives all the way across the country in Ontario. Should I write that?

Child: Yep. You should write to Ontario right there.

Lila: I'll write On: ta:ri:o (she says the sounds of each syllable as she writes). Maybe we should write the street too. (she writes the street name)

Child: You should also put the flag on.

Lila: The flag? That could be my stamp! Because I need a stamp to mail it so I'll draw our Canada flag here. That will be our stamp.