

ORAL LANGUAGE AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

BARBARA T. BOWMAN

IRVING B. HARRIS PROFESSOR OF CHILD
DEVELOPMENT

ERIKSON INSTITUTE

Bbowman@erikson.edu

- One of the most pressing problems for schools today is the gap in achievement between children from poor families and those from more financially advantaged ones.

PUBLIC POLICY

- The gap is largely the result of public policies we have (or do not have) that contribute to unemployment, low wages, residential segregation, discriminatory hiring practices, an unequal justice system, low quality schools, etc., etc.

PRESCHOOL: A STRATEGY TO AMELIORATE THE GAP

- The gap begins early.
- Research shows benefits.
- Evidence for language focus:
 - Major developmental step.
 - Preschoolers primed to learn language.
 - Primary form of communication.

SCHOOL AND HOME LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

- *School*

- English
- Decontextualized language
- Large vocabulary
- Language as social control
- Interest in formal literacy

- *Home*

- Spanish/Black English
- Conversational language
- Small vocabulary
- Physical prowess as social control
- Interest in non-literacy activities

CAUSES OF SCHOOL/HOME LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE

1. Developmental compromise

- Biological factors

- Environmental stress

2. Limited opportunity to learn school language

3. Low motivation to learn school language

4. Cultural differences in the use of language

WHAT SHOULD CHILDREN LEARN

- 1. Home language
- 2. Conventions of school speech
- 3. Usages for speech
- 4. Vocabulary
- 5. Standard English grammar

USING PLAY TO TEACH

Types of play	Natural use	Structured Use: EXAMPLES
Fantasy	Relieve affect	Play therapy
Play with rules	Social and cognitive control	Games: board games, lotto, dominos
Practice	Exercise	Jumping, running, bouncing balls Tracing, puzzles, cutting
Socio dramatic	Practice real life roles and skills	Directed play: enact stories, build and operate stores

HOW SHOULD TEACHERS TEACH?

- Developmentally appropriate practices: methods tied to children's interests and capabilities designed to make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable.
- Principle: Children learn best if they have meaningful relationship with the teacher.
- Principle: Children who play with ideas learn better.

WHAT ELSE?

Bowman, B., Donovan, S., & Burns, M. (Eds.). (2001).

Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers. Washington, DC: National Academy Press

Curricula should:

- Deepen children's knowledge and understanding of language.
- Introduce other forms of representational and symbolic thought.
- Promote understanding of the world around them, including the social world.

WHAT SHOULD CHILDREN TALK ABOUT?

- SCIENCE
- MATH
- LITERACY
- FANTASY
- INFORMATION
- IDEAS
- EVERYTHING

POLICY CHANGES

- Focus on education
- Desegregation of Head Start
- Encouragement of Title 1 preschool programs
- Outreach to families