

THE NATURE OF TALK IN A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM:
EXAMINING READ ALOUD, GUIDED READING,
AND LITERATURE DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature of talk that surrounds the literacy events of read aloud, guided reading, and literature discussion in an early childhood literacy program. This research describes how teachers promote and sustain talk, and describes the characteristics of student talk in each event. Examining the broad themes of talk that emerged provided a window into students' thinking and meaning making in these pedagogical strategies.

This naturalistic, qualitative inquiry borrowed from two research traditions: case study and grounded theory. Five kindergarten students were audio-taped for three months as they participated in whole class read aloud, small group guided reading, and small group literature discussion. Transcriptions of talk, interviews, and field notes were analyzed to uncover the interactions between students and teachers, the content of talk, and the meanings students created. Analysis included open and selective coding and constant comparative analysis to reach data saturation. Data were further scrutinized through the lenses of conversation and discourse analysis.

Research findings suggest that each literacy event helped nurture behaviors and knowledge necessary for developing readers. In guided reading the teacher dominated the talk, focusing on reading skills and strategies. In the read aloud and literature discussion group, the students had more influence over the direction of the conversation,

and generated comments and questions, expressing their understanding of the text, ideas, and opinions. During the course of the three month study, students in the literature discussion group demonstrated they were capable of sophisticated conversations, at times edging into critical literacy. The teacher played a crucial role in fostering student's thinking in all events through her choice of text, the type of questions she asked, and how long she paused for student talk.

The overarching implication of this study is that the literacy task, as defined by the teacher, determines the kind of language she uses. This in turn, impacts the language and learning of her students. Further discussion addresses implications about the role of talk about text in emergent literacy programs.