

Invited Article

Building on What Children Bring: Cognitive and Sociocultural Approaches to Teaching Literacy

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Abstract — This paper examines what is meant by “building on what children bring.” While many educators maintain that teachers need to build on what children bring to classrooms, the field of education has constructed different understandings of what this entails. This paper explores two different conceptions of what children bring: those grounded in cognitive theories about reading and those grounded in sociocultural theories of reading/literacy. I suggest that despite historical splits in the reading/literacy field that educators must balance cognitive and sociocultural considerations in order to access the vast range of knowledges that children bring to literacy learning. After exploring cognitive and sociocultural models of reading/literacy through the work of Marie Clay and Kris Gutiérrez, I present two theoretical models that hold promise for helping educators to recognize cognitive and sociocultural understandings about what children bring as compatible and integral to exemplary teaching. Finally, I describe some of my own teaching experiences that demonstrate how instruction can build on the full range of knowledges that children bring. My goal is to contribute to the construction of an enhanced view of “what children bring” that balances abilities and knowledges specific to literacy with knowledges about literacy practices and the social meanings of texts.

During one of his first Reading Recovery lessons, Devon, an African American six-year-old, was attempting to write the word “tiger”; he had already written the “t” and the “i”. I said the word slowly emphasizing the “g” so that he could hear that troublesome letter.

Compton-Lilly: (Pronouncing the word slowly)
T--i--g--er.

Devon: I can copy off the book?

Compton-Lilly: No. T-i-g-er. What makes the /g/ sound?

Devon: A “g”.

Compton-Lilly: /g/ Mm-hmm. Good.

Devon: Like in Yu-Gi-Oh.

Compton-Lilly: Yeah.

Devon is building on what he knows. He knows a lot about the word “Yu-Gi-Oh” and the world of Yu-Gi-Oh cards and characters; it is one of the many media-based interests that he shares with his six-year-old peers. Because of his familiarity with these cards, he knows that the /g/ sound in the word “Yu-Gi-Oh” is associated with the letter “g”. In this example, Devon adeptly integrates his home knowledge of media culture and his budding knowledge about words and letters.

Devon knows about letters and sounds but that knowledge is embedded in his interests and experiences outside of school. As educators know, learning involves connecting children’s new knowledge with what is already known. While this interaction may seem small and unimportant, educators need to recognize that learners do this all the time - they constantly make connections between what they know and what they are learning. Sometimes these connections are visible to teachers. This simple illustration references a significant issue. Teaching is more successful when we recognize and develop what is children bring to reading/literacy classrooms and are able to help them to access and utilize the vast sets of knowledges that they bring.

In this position article, I examine what we mean by *building on what children bring* as they learn to read. I argue that while many educators maintain that teachers need to build on what children bring to classrooms, the field of education has constructed different understandings of what this means. The mantra that teachers should build on what children bring is echoed throughout educational literature. Pinnell and Fountas (1996) describe children using their “previously acquired knowledge of language.” Wells (1999) advocates letting “students bring their own experience” (p. 148) to the language of written texts. Valenzuela (1999) maintains the importance of building on “students’ bicultural

experience - which *all* minority youth bring with them to school” (p. 269). Sarason (1997) argues that adults should “start with where the child is: his or her curiosities, questions, puzzlements” (p. 34). Each of these educators frames building on what children bring differently. Some focus on the forms of cultural knowledge that children bring. Others reference children’s literacy experiences and home literacy practices. Still others cite children’s previously learned skills and abilities. As Stuart McNaughton describes, “the business of identifying ‘where the child is at’ turns out to be very complicated. What exactly should we identify and what might we do to build on it?” (McNaughton, 2002, p. 19).

Like Purcell-Gates, Jacobson and Degener (2006), I explore two different but related conceptions of what children bring: one grounded in psychological/cognitive theories of literacy and another that reflects sociocultural theories of literacy. I argue that building on what children bring to classrooms demands that educators balance their attention between these two sets of theories as they design instructional practices and work with students. On the pages that follow, I draw on the work of two scholars whose work I admire and who I believe have influenced the field in significant ways: Marie Clay and Kris Gutiérrez. My goal is to use their work to explore the significance of both perspectives and to argue for thoughtful balance between the two perspectives as we plan and implement instruction with children.

Purcell-Gates and her colleagues (2006) describe cognitive perspectives on reading as introspective, focusing on human capacities of the mind including “perception and attention, representations of knowledge, memory and learning, problem solving and reasoning, and language acquisition, production and comprehension” (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson and Degener, 2006, p. 42). Researchers who assume this perspective examine various reading abilities including letter/word recognition, reading automaticity, strategic activities in reading, bottom-up/top-down processing, schema development, and stages of skill learning. Specifically, I define cognitive approaches to literacy as attending to the *in-the-head* processes that accompany the act of reading. To illustrate these approaches, I reference the work of Clay (1991, 2001, 2005a, 2005b) and explore Clay’s understandings of reading as strategic activity with text that involves making the “maximum use of the [child’s] existing response repertoire” while supporting the child through “astute selection of tasks, judicious sharing of tasks, and by varying the time, difficulty, content, interest and method of instruction, and type and amount of conversation” (Clay, 2001, p. 225). These emphases reflect Clay’s interest in helping children to extend the range of strategic activities that they can apply to text. The acquisition of concepts and processes related to directionality, self-monitoring, searching for cues in text and in the world, self-correcting errors while reading and independently solving challenges in text are prominent in Clay’s approach to reading.

In contrast, sociocultural theorists conceptualize reading as a social practice; Brian Street (1984) describes “literacy practices” that involve recurring interactions with written texts and the meanings that people ascribe to these practices.

As Purcell-Gates and her colleagues (2006) argue, “Reading and writing are always associated with and mediate different social activities; they are socially situated” (p. 29). Unlike cognitive theorists who look within the minds of individuals to understand the reading process, sociocultural theorists focus on *literacy practices* that involve socially dependent values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and relationships related to literacy. This perspective has led researchers to examine local literacies in particular communities (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984), multiple literacies (Street, 1995), discourses that surround literacy (Gee, 1990, 1992), and the interface between traditional and technological literacies (Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002). To explore sociocultural possibilities, I reference the work of Gutiérrez and her colleagues (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997) who describe the importance of creating “third spaces” or hybrid learning spaces that build upon what students bring while exploring and reconceptualizing official school and home knowledges. These third spaces “create ‘discursive spaces’ in which ‘alternating and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning’” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999, pp. 286-287). Unlike the *in-the-head* strategic activities that are the focus of Clay’s work, Gutiérrez and her colleagues place language and culture at the center of learning highlighting the *in-the-world* experiences of students.

While both Clay and Gutiérrez recognize other perspectives, I argue that many reading researchers and educators are only beginning to recognize the importance of balance between these perspectives and to address the complexity of acknowledging and valuing both *in-the-head* and *in-the-world* experiences of children. Teachers and researchers must balance both cognitive and sociocultural conceptions of reading/literacy in order to access the full range of knowledge that children possess. Building on only one set of skills or literacy practices without attending to the other will ultimately limit the ability of children to use all of what they know as they learn to read.

In the first section of this article, I focus on the contrasting views of literacy described by Clay and Gutiérrez; in addition to highlighting differences between these perspectives, I also attend to often-unacknowledged points of confluence. This article is not about which perspective is right or wrong. It focuses on possibilities for instruction grounded in attending to dimensions of both perspectives. In the second half of the article, I present two frameworks that invite balance. I present Dyson’s et al. (1997) description of horizontal and vertical knowledges, and Freebody’s and Luke’s (1990) “four resources model.” Finally, I present scenarios from my own teaching experiences that demonstrate how instruction can build on the full range of knowledges that children bring. My goal is to contribute to the construction of an enhanced understanding of “what children bring” that balances abilities and knowledges specific to literacy with knowledges about literacy practices and social meanings.

COGNITIVE THEORIES OF WHAT CHILDREN BRING

Cognitive theorists attend to the in-the-head processes that students use as they decode and encode print; research interests focus on various reading abilities such as phonemic awareness, letter and word knowledge, speed/fluency, and the processes involved in making sense of texts. Cognitive theorists suggest that children may or may not bring a wide range of skills and experiences to literacy tasks; these abilities include letter/word skills, phonemic abilities, book handling skills, concepts about print knowledge, and knowledge of the types of text and story structures that are likely to be encountered in classrooms. If children do not bring these abilities to classrooms it is the teachers' responsibilities to assist children in learning these skills. While Clay recognizes that children's lived experiences and cultural backgrounds play a role in literacy, she focuses primarily on the strategic cognitive activities that occur in the head while reading and the need for readers to orchestrate these activities to accommodate the challenges they encounter in print.

Marie Clay and Learning to Read

Clay defines reading as a "message-getting, problem-solving activity" (2005a, p. 1). She explains that learning to read involves helping children to link the invisible patterns in oral language to the patterns of written texts. Specifically, Clay focuses on helping children to understand how written texts work, develop sets of strategic activities that they can use when confronted with problematic text, and coordinate various strategic activities in fluent and flexible ways.

Clay developed the Observation Survey (2006) to enable teachers to observe children's understandings about print. The tasks that comprise the Observation Survey assess children's knowledge of letters and words as well as various concepts about print including left to right directionality, concept of word, and one-to-one correspondence between spoken and written words. In addition, the observation survey includes writing opportunities and the reading of connected text. Text reading and writing samples are analyzed to reveal the strategies used by the child. It is critical that teachers carefully assess students' understandings about print so that they are constantly aware of what the child controls and what the child is learning to control as a reader (Clay, 2005a). Thus, what each child brings to literacy lessons is critical; teachers must know what each child brings to literacy in order to design expertly crafted lessons that meet the needs of individual children.

Understandings about text also include the child's knowledge of how letters, words, and word parts operate in written text. Children must begin to understand how letters form words and how words work together to form messages. Recognition of familiar word parts and the ability to use them to solve unknown words is one of the many lessons that children learn about print:

When the first grade reader came to the word 'landed' in a story, he appealed to his teacher for help as he did not know the word.

T: What do you already know about that word?

C: 'And', oh, 'land', no, 'landed'.

The following day he was reading a different book. He encountered the word, 'sandwiches'.

C: There it is again! 'S-and-wiches!'

He had learned an important generative principle – that he can use what he knows about known words and known word parts to solve new words. (Clay, 2005b, p.131)

Not only must children understand how text operates but they also need to develop sets of strategies that will allow them to problem-solve when they encounter challenging text. Although, there is no comprehensive list of the strategic activities that young readers need to master, the following are examples of strategic activities identified by Clay:

Self-monitoring is described as a "highly skilled process" (Clay, 2005b, p. 108) through which readers are able to check their own reading to know whether they read a passage of text correctly or incorrectly.

Searching involves "the child's abilities to search for all types of information" (Clay, 2005b, p. 111) and use the information they find to solve dilemmas in text.

Self-Correction occurs when readers correct themselves as they read without assistance from others.

The ability to integrate these strategic activities is goal of successful reading and a sign that a novice reader is developing a "self-extending system" (Clay, 2005b, p. 114) by "connecting up and integrating the elaborate networks of several strategic activities" (Clay, 2005b, 114), which in turn facilitate the processing of text. Throughout a child's instructional program, teachers are encouraged to monitor the child's ability to demonstrate these strategic activities and their abilities to integrate these activities into effective working systems by using "running records" to record children's reading behaviors for later analysis. While Clay recognizes the role social interaction and language play in reading; her focus is on the ways children develop in-the-head processes for making sense of print.

Clay's Attention to Culture

While Purcell-Gates et al. (2006) and I describe Clay's work as highlighting cognitive dimensions of the reading process, Clay recognized the role played by culture and language as children learn to read. In her most recent publications, Clay (2005a, 2005b) wrote about the importance of teachers maintaining sensitivity to cultural and language differences. She explained that classroom communication is challenging when children bring a range of cultural backgrounds and that believed that teachers needed

to learn new lessons about communication. As Clay explained, communication differences extend beyond language; “Children learn to communicate according to the rules of their home culture, which may be different from the rules of other groups in the same society. Their behaviors and gestures can be misunderstood” (Clay, 1998, p. 26). Clay (1998) illustrates miscommunication by referencing a fictional story written by Patricia Grace (1987) in which a teacher criticizes a child for killing butterflies; the teacher fails to understand that butterflies are considered a menace in the child’s New Zealand farming community.

Clay, however, tends to conceptualizes cultural differences as difficulties to overcome rather than as assets to be developed. While she warns of the difficulties that accompany cultural difference, she offers little help to teachers in avoiding cultural lapses. She recommends that teachers prepare instructional materials with an eye to what the child may not understand and avoid materials for the teaching of reading that do not reflect the child’s experiences. Clay offers few suggestions for how teachers can build upon a child’s language or cultural experiences to facilitate literacy learning.

Some critiques of Clay and her intervention program, Reading Recovery, have focused on what is perceived as the cultural and political unresponsiveness of the program and the teacher to the student. For example, Curt Dudley-Marling and Sharon Murphy (1997) examine the role of Reading Recovery plays in “maintaining a status quo in which people have unequal access to . . . social and economic riches.” They offer Reading Recovery as an example of an intervention program that preserves “the status quo by protecting the structures of schooling - and, by implication, the society within which schools reside - from social criticism” (p. 461). As Dudley-Marling and Murphy explain, Reading Recovery does not challenge existing “assumptions about learners and knowledge underlying school practices” (p. 462). Little attention is cast upon the effects of racism, classism, or sexism, and academic failure continues to be located within individual students or teachers. The possibility that schools systematically alienate and exclude particular groups of students and their families or that they privilege particular ways of being literate (Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 1997) is not examined or explored.

I expect that some would argue that attention to race, class, and gender are beyond the scope of reading instruction. Others believe that the individualized nature of intervention programs, like reading recover, allows teachers to be responsive to children as individuals and thus address these differences. Still others could argue that the skills and abilities associated with successful reading are universal and that cultural differences have little effect on mental processes. Sociocultural theorists and researchers disagree; they draw out attention to the significance of difference and challenge educators to find ways to address differences in classrooms.

SOCIOCULTURAL THEORIES OF WHAT CHILDREN BRING

Sociocultural theorists and researchers recognize “literacy as a social and cultural practice that is shaped by history, social context, and institutionalized power. Attention is paid to literacy practices that include the ways written language is used and the beliefs, feelings, values, attitudes, and social relationships that accompany its use. Research interests focus on various ways of using written texts; multiple types of literacies (Street 1984), social and political uses and purposes of literacy practices (Street, 1995; Fairclough, 1995), the ways literacy is situated within particular histories and local contexts (Brandt, 2001; Gregory & Williams, 2002), and the intersections between traditional and technological literacies (Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002). Sociocultural theorists maintain that children bring a wide range of skills and experiences to school literacy tasks; however, some of these literacy and life abilities are not recognized, valued, and developed in classrooms and schools.

Kris Gutiérrez and Literacy Learning

Gutiérrez and her colleagues (1997) developed a sociocultural model of literacy learning in which educators work toward developing a shared “third space” in which students’ experiences and the expectations of schools and teachers intersect, cohabit and contribute to new and uniquely viable contexts in which rich discussion and learning can occur. The goal is to foster and develop distinct ways of being literate that respect cultural ways of being while providing students access to the resources, knowledges, skills, and opportunities that accompany school approved ways of being literate.

Gutiérrez and her colleagues (1997) describe a classroom in which the teacher builds upon the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources of students. In this classroom, one of the children called another child a name that referenced homosexuality. With parental and district approval, the teacher turned this altercation into a pedagogical opportunity utilizing the students’ linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources to explore issues of sexuality and difference. Gutiérrez and her colleagues offer this example of a “third space” in which “two *scripts* or two normative patterns of interaction intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and learning to occur” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 372).

Specifically, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejada (1999) have examined the official scripts and counter scripts that exist within learning communities and have explored various political, social, linguistic and material conflicts that erupt in those settings. These conflicts are viewed as “potential sites of rupture, innovation, and change” (p. 287) that can facilitate student learning by revealing and exploring the ruptures that separate students’ and teachers’ lived experiences from the official knowledges of classrooms and learning communities. Gutiérrez and her colleagues have worked with educators to seek ways to construct hybrid learning spaces that build upon what students bring while

exploring and reconceptualizing both official school and home knowledges.

Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Turner (1997) present a “theoretical view on literacy in which language is part of and inseparable from the sociocultural context” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 369). This view of language and literacy conceptualizes learning as a social process that actively engages students and teachers in collaborative learning practices in which both teachers and students assume the roles of experts. Gutiérrez, et al. recognize the importance of “co-participation that provides students opportunities to jointly construct new ways of using language and participating. When teachers, students, and peers engage in tasks collaboratively, their knowledge and literacies become available to one another” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 370).

Gutiérrez’s Attention to Learning to Read

While Gutiérrez and her colleagues highlight the cultural and historical knowledges that students bring to classrooms, they do not dismiss cognitive aspects of learning. Gutiérrez, et al. (1997) describe two views of literacy learning: one that “defines literacy learning as a problem requiring educational approaches that separate learning from its context and the learner from the resources of her diverse community of peers” (p. 370) and another extreme that tends to “exaggerate the benefits of discovery learning across tasks or attempt to be so student-centered that explicit instruction of literacy skills and strategies is rarely considered appropriate or useful” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 370). They argue that neither of these practices fosters instruction that will address the language needs of all children in diverse classrooms. They argue for a “radical middle” a “new theoretical and pedagogical space in which learning takes precedence over teaching; instruction is consciously local, contingent, situated, and strategic; and our current knowledge about language learning and language users informs the literacy curriculum” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 372).

However, Gutiérrez et al. have yet to fully realize their ideal. Some studies were conducted in an after-school computer club where children “engage in a variety of language activities, including bilingual (Spanish-English) language games, problem solving and board games, phonics, and electronic mail writing activities” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 375). While this example is informative, it involves an after-school program that is exempt from the expectations and institutional policies of schools. Another example is the one presented earlier involving a second and third grade class involved in a thoughtful discussion of human reproduction (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999b). This topic, while laudable as a topic of study, is outside the scope of the official school curriculum for children in grades two and three and provides little guidance for teachers who are attempting to find culturally responsive ways to meet school expectations and teach concepts and abilities that are

required by curricular mandates. Specifically, teachers face the very real challenge of teaching all children to read, write, compute, and comprehend and at times this requires specialized knowledge of the reading process and how it is learned. While Gutiérrez’s examples provide intriguing and useful examples of instructional practices that clearly access children’s home cultures and linguistic resources, these examples do not yet solve the full range of instructional dilemmas faced by teachers.

CONCEPTUALIZING BALANCE AND POSSIBLE PRACTICES

I argue that part of our responsibility as academics is to help craft excellent examples of instructional practice. In the case of teaching reading, these would be examples that reflect a balance between cognitive and sociocultural frameworks. While we cannot ignore culture, we must also not be afraid to acknowledge that there are things that children are expected to learn in school and teachers must possess clear theoretical understandings of the range of the behaviors that are involved in learning complex processes such as reading. Like Gutiérrez, I do not claim that, “learning language or becoming literate is a process of linearly moving through stages of learning or through sequential roles. Nor . . . that instructional materials or tasks must be simplified into discrete skills and sub-tasks” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997, p. 369). I agree that literacy development relates to the access children have to various types of learning activities and to multiple opportunities to use language in a variety of ways that lead to recognized competence (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997).

In a similar vein, Clay (1998) argues that there are “different paths to common outcomes” (title page). She recognizes the diverse experiences that children bring and implores teachers to build upon those differences:

If children are to achieve common outcomes after two or three years in school it will be necessary to recognize that they enter school having learned different things in different cultures and communities. I assume that what one already knows is important in determining what one will come to know and, if teachers believe that, they would search for what each new entrant to school, or any slow-to-get-started learner, already knows about how one can learn (Clay, 1998, p.1).

As Delpit (1995) explained, schools must prepare students to succeed within the culture of power. Students are expected to learn particular skills and abilities; ignoring this reality is a disservice to students. Cognitive literacy skills are generally recognized as evidence of learning and academic progress and these skills enable children to successfully complete in school. In this section, I offer two examples of theoretical frameworks – crafted by Dyson (1997) and Freebody and Luke (1990) - that advocate a balance between cognitive and sociocultural approaches to learning.

Dyson's Horizontal and Vertical Models of Differences

Dyson and her colleagues (1997) identified *horizontal and vertical differences* among children. They described horizontal differences as “differences of language, cultural style, or familial circumstance” (Dyson et al., 1997, p. 11). Dyson and her colleagues were concerned that sociocultural and linguistic differences were often assumed by educators to be indicators of academic deficiencies. Like Gutiérrez, they viewed these differences as strengths that teachers could access. Collectively, they challenged teachers to identify the resources that diverse children bring to the classroom and utilize these resources within instructional activities.

Dyson and her colleagues (1997) also recognized the existence of vertical differences among children. These differences are monitored by grade level checklists and achievement tests; they evaluate children in terms of their academic progress relative to peers and accepted benchmarks and generally reflect cognitive dimensions of reading. In the scenario that opened this article, Devon's knowledge of the letter “g” and its sound constituted a piece of his vertical knowledge about letters; his connecting the sound he heard in the word “tiger” to his personal knowledge of the word “Yu-Gi-Oh” accessed his horizontal cultural and familial knowledges. A balanced approach to literacy requires teachers to attend to both horizontal and vertical differences.

The Four Resources Model

Like Dyson's conception of horizontal and vertical knowledges, the *four resources model* (Freebody & Luke, 1990) recognizes that both cognitive and sociocultural knowledges relate to literacy learning. In this model, Freebody and Luke describe four types of literacy practices. They maintain that students should be provided with opportunities to develop all of these textual practices.

Coding Practices: Developing resources as a code breaker - How do I crack this text? How does it work? What are the patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and the marks relate, singly and in combinations?

Text-meaning practices: Developing resources as a text participant - How do the ideas represented in this text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed from this text?

Pragmatic practices: Developing resources as a text user - How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives?

Critical Practices: Developing resources as text analyst and critic - What kinds of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naively and unproblematically? What I this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voice and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent? (Luke, 2000, p. 454).

Freebody's and Luke's (1990) model recognizes that becoming literate involves a wide range of literacy practices

ranging from being able to decode written information by applying strategic activities to written text to being able to analyze and critique texts. While neither Clay's nor Gutiérrez's theories fit neatly into one of the categories listed above, Clay's description of cognitive processes, aligns most closely with “Developing resources as a code breaker.” Gutiérrez's notion of third space overlaps with “Text-meaning” practices and “Critical practices.” Expecting that children will participate in a wide range of practices with texts extends the scope of literacy instruction and recognizes the many ways readers act on and with texts. When Devon related the letter “g” in the unknown word “Tiger” to the familiar word “Yu-Gi-Oh,” he merged coding practices with text-meaning practices.

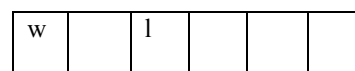
Cognition Meets the Third Space

As I was pondering these questions related to ways of balancing the various knowledges that children bring to the classroom, I was also helping Devon, a struggling six-year-old African American child, learn how to read and write. Devon helped me to understand ways cognitive and sociocultural models of reading/literacy intersect during reading instruction.

Devon was attempting to write the sentence, “My bed has Hot Wheels on it.” As the reader may know, Hot Wheels are small toy cars that have long been popular with six-year-old boys. Like many toys, these cars have inspired a range of ancillary products Devon proudly declares that his bed spread and pillowcases are adored with hot wheel cars. To support Devon in writing the word “wheels” I sketched a series of six letter boxes on the workspace area of his journal.



Devon became adept at recording the sounds that he heard in words in sequence. I had purposely drawn a box for every letter in the word even those letters that are not voiced. Before Devon began to sound through the word, I reminded him that he had seen the word many times on the cars and on the packaging and that he should think about what the word “looks like.” Devon said the word “wheels” and easily recorded the “w” in the first box. As he repeated the word slowly, he said ‘It's an “e”.’ I concurred; I pointed and instructed him to record the “e” in the third box. To both of our surprise, he drew a straight perpendicular line in the third box and said with a tone of amazement, ‘I almost wrote an “h.”’



As I praised Devon for remembering what the word “looked like,” I tore off a piece of correction tape and helped him to relocate the “h” to the second box and then record the “e”, “l”, and final “s.”

w	h	e		l	s
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Devon was again able to access his visual memory of the word “wheels” to record the second “e”; I suspect that his success is attributable to his experiences with written texts that surround his meaningful interactions with the toy cars (i.e., trademarks on toys, packaging, bedspread).

Contingent teaching occurred when I was able to build upon Devon’s “vertical strengths” or emerging “coding practices” as I helped Devon attend to the critical features of the word he was attempting to write through the use of the letter boxes and through language that directed his attention to visual features of words. A third space was created as when I welcomed his popular culture experiences with Hot Wheels (“horizontal resources” and “text-meaning and “pragmatic practices”) into the classroom setting creating a personally and culturally significant writing opportunity that tapped into his visual familiarity with a personally meaningful word.

In a second example, I was concerned about Devon’s ongoing struggle to develop fluency as a reader. Devon could often solve words in reading and writing and was highly adept at making sure that the sentences and stories he read “made sense”. However, Devon’s reading was ponderously slow. I had tried on several occasions to help Devon to attend to the pace of his reading and to read with phrasing and intonation.

It was the beginning of December and we were reading the book *Ten Little Bears* (Ruwe, 1976). Devon was successfully reading the words, but read the patterned and repetitive passages in a slow, word-by-word manner. I modeled fluent reading and he imitated me, but when we encountered the repeated pattern on the next page it was again word-by-word. The repetition and the rhythm of the line, “Then nine little bears were left at home,” inspired me to comment that it almost sounds like a song. This comment had no apparent impact on Devon. Then I suggested, “You know this could almost be a rap.” I modeled the line applying my white middle-class attempt at rap rhythm and Devon’s eyes brightened. Immediately he assumed a swanky position in his chair and repeated the line with an excellent rap rhythm complete with body and hand motions. He suddenly knew what I was asking as we worked toward fluency on a variety of texts. Devon demonstrated fluent reading when his horizontal resources, knowing how to rap, and envisioning one’s self as the type of person who might rap, were tapped (Dyson et al., 1997). Devon’s reading of this text enlisted various textual practices, particularly pragmatic and critical practices (Luke, 2000) as he used this text to perform a particular reading identity.

CONCLUSIONS

While many researchers and educators reference the importance of building on what children bring, this phrase means different things to different speakers. Some researchers describe children as bringing particular

understandings about how letters, words, and connected texts work while others will describe children as bringing particular understandings about the social and cultural uses and purposes of texts. With the help of Devon, I have come to recognize possibilities for achieving balance between these views and suggest that developing the multiple resources and ways of knowing that children bring to literacy is essential. Cognitive theories and sociocultural theories related to literacy share an interest in building on the resources that children bring and both describe how learning is enhanced when teachers are able to build on these resources.

Theoretical perspectives such as Luke’s “four resources model” and Dyson’s description of horizontal and vertical knowledges, provide theoretical models for helping educators to recognize the importance of balance in exemplary teaching. As Luke explains, “we argue that in a culturally diverse society, many students will require explicit introduction to the code. But that introduction needn’t be decontextualised, monocultural, and monolingual” (Luke, 2000, p. 454).

Despite a historical tendency for people in the field of reading/literacy to separate the cognitive from the sociocultural, Purcell-Gates and her colleagues (2006) maintain that they cannot be separated. They argue that:

Existing data strongly suggests that learners’ abilities to take from instruction the skills needed to learn the code (decode and encode) are rooted in their experiences with print embedded within socioculturally shaped literacy practices in their communities. Therefore, it is again not possible to consider either the cognitive skills of decoding and encoding print, or the success of instruction that treats those skills as purely cognitive and autonomous, as independent of the social practice of literacy. (Purcell-Gates et al., 2006, p. 133)

Thus, even when educators attempt to teach to particular strengths and weakness of children, the children bring all of their resources to texts. The danger is that some of these resources tend to be utilized and valued in schools while others remain unnoticed and ignored. Children from some homes bring resources that are readily recognized while children from other communities find that the resources they bring are often unacknowledged and undervalued. Building on all of what children bring requires that teachers bring a balanced notion of what literacy entails and how it is taught to the children they teach. As teachers, we must remain vigilant in our ability to recognize the vast range of abilities and knowledges that all children bring and build upon these abilities and knowledges in their myriad shapes and forms.

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ISSN: 2328-0816