

children's language

Connecting
Reading, Writing,
and Talk



Judith Wells Lindfors

FOREWORD BY VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

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Children's Language

CONNECTING
READING, WRITING, AND TALK

Judith Wells Lindfors
Foreword by Vivian Gussin Paley



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To the SafePlace children
whose voices fill these pages

Contents

Foreword <i>by Vivian Gussin Paley</i>	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xvii
Author's Note	xix
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
What Is Language?	1
The Kindergarten Child's Language Competence	2
Continuities from Oral into Written Language	4
Language Acquisition: A Continuous Process	8
Connecting Oral and Written Language	14
Chapter 2. Authenticity	17
Ricky's Encounter with Inauthentic Text	17
Responding to Authentic (and Inauthentic) Texts	18
The Social Thrust of Early Writing	24
Copying: Communication or Exercise?	26
The Authenticity of Writing Workshop	30
Connecting Reading and Writing, Text and Talk	31
Writing to Connect with Others: The Case of Maria	31
Chapter 3. Meaning-Orientation	34
Meaning-Orientation Versus Code Orientation to Print: Deshawna and Annette	34
Meaning-Orientation in Oral Language	35
Four Questionable Notions About Oral and Written Language	37
Early School Literacy Experience	45
Shared Reading Experience	48
Read-Aloud	49

Connecting Meaning–Orientation and Authenticity	51
Looking Ahead	51
Chapter 4. Collaboration	52
Collaboration in Early Literacy	52
Collaboration in Writing: Dictation	54
Collaboration in Reading: Predictable Books	59
The Importance of Familiar Texts in Learning to Read	62
Chapter 5. Apprenticeship	65
Kenny’s Story	65
Kenny’s Apprenticeship	68
Approximation in Oral and Written Language Acquisition	69
Kenny’s Index	71
Providing Demonstrations and Invitations for the Literacy Apprentice	74
Megan in a Magic Moment	76
Chapter 6. Individuality	78
A Lesson from Trixie	78
What Is “Voice”?	81
Voice in Early Writing of Books	82
Voice in Early Writing in Reading Response Journals	83
Use of Illustrations in Early Reading and Writing	84
Voice in Early Reading: Book Choice and Response	86
Jay and Mindy: First Encounters With Books	93
The Uniqueness of Every Child	95
Joy in a Literate Community	96
Appendix	101
Further Reading	109
References	111
Index	115
About the Author	123

Foreword

Judith Wells Lindfors, a retired college professor, has a clear goal in mind. She wants the children at SafePlace to love books, to browse among them, to step inside them, memorize, and begin to read them. These are not unusual desires for a reading teacher, but the children Mrs. Lindfors teaches live in a domestic violence shelter and will probably be with her for only 3 to 8 weeks. Learning to love books would not seem to be a high priority—unless you are “Miss Judy.”

Twice a week, Mrs. Lindfors wheels her book cart into the kindergarten and 1st-grade classroom of the secured schoolhouse on premises, then invites the children, one at a time, into the library heaven she calls “The Book Place.” On this magical stage, teacher and child together search for the authentic story that will connect the child to the book. And we are witness to the “miracle moment” when it happens.

Ricky, Maria, Alejandro, and all the others you will meet on these pages, own few, if any, books. But their pathway to the printed page proceeds in much the same way as that of the children I have known. That is to say, they all recognize a good story when they hear it and are prepared to follow plot and character wherever they take them, into play and conversation, or, when the time comes, into writing and reading. After all, the children are already experienced storytellers and conversationalists when they arrive at the school doors. She needs only to show them that the words on paper make the same sense as those they know.

Judith Wells Lindfors, whose widely used texts on early language acquisition have informed generations of college students, returns in this book to her own one-on-one collaboration with children. Now she can feel again “the mystery that is the child’s mind.” In so doing, she may sound more like a friend and confidant than a reading teacher or academic, but this is to be expected when books become a personal and intimate matter between people.

Listen to Alejandro’s response to a picture of two young dinosaurs in a book he has chosen to read with Miss Judy. She wonders if the dinosaurs

are fighting, but he reassures her, “(The big one) roughhouses with his little brother but he pretends he’s little so he won’t hurt him.” In another picture, when told that the mother dinosaur is feeding the baby, he says, “She has a string of beads—a necklace for her little girl.” Alejandro may be a roaring dinosaur when he plays, but he finds the words to express the tenderness he feels toward his siblings when he reads with his teacher. He will borrow this book again and again, for it contains his own story and he must learn to read the words.

“Children learn from where they are, not from where we are,” the author tells us in this well-written and easily accessible blend of theory and practice. We are shown the places where the *child as speaker and thinker* merge with the *child as writer and reader*. It is an exciting human adventure and, as in life itself, its vitality is often illuminated in mysterious and unexpected ways.

The account of how even one child is brought forward into the language of books and journal writing, and of how one teacher gains the insight with which to guide that child further, is the ultimate teacher story. Judith Wells Lindfors *is* this teacher, but she is also a philosopher, researcher, and child advocate who reawakens our faith in the natural powers of self-expression and curiosity to draw the child to the printed page. She does this by telling us moving and unique stories, and we respond as the children are programmed to do: We want to step into every story and make it our own. Judith Wells Lindfors’s newest book informs and educates us, but, above all, it inspires us all to become better teachers.

—Vivian Gussin Paley
Chicago, Illinois

Preface

As we watch young children—our own or those of friends or relatives—we see that the vast majority learn to talk effortlessly and successfully. Some immature pronunciations or structures linger a while, and some irregular forms take a while to get sorted out. But by and large, kindergarten children can ask us questions, tell us what they want or don't want, joke with us, complain about others' actions and justify their own, and tell us about their experiences. They communicate with us and with one another, and we with them. They lack complete mastery, to be sure, but they have made a strong start and are moving right along. And they have accomplished this without a specific curriculum, without sequenced objectives, without periodic standardized tests. They have accomplished this through the ongoing, day-to-day business of interacting with others in various social contexts.

We may wonder, then, if written language and oral language are both *language*—if they are simply different systems for expressing meaning—then why do children acquire the one expression system (oral: speaking and listening) so effortlessly and successfully; yet—despite our carefully designed, step-by-step instructional sequences—so often experience difficulty and sometimes failure in acquiring the second expressive system (written: reading and writing)? When the child learns the first system (oral means of expression), he is also learning the world that the spoken words represent, its categories and relations. This would seem to be far more challenging than learning a second expressive system (visual symbols) for the words and world that the child already knows. So why are there so many children who have difficulty learning to read and write, when they so easily accomplished the seemingly more challenging task of learning all about the world and also our ways of representing it in talk? And what does it mean to say that speech and writing are both *language*? What exactly is the relationship of oral and written language and, especially, the acquisition of the two? How is the child's acquisition of written language (reading and writing) continuous with her (earlier) acquisition of oral language (speaking and listening)?

I often pondered these questions during the 27 years I taught language acquisition and language arts methods courses at The University of Texas. Then, in 2001, after I had retired, I began doing volunteer work at the small charter school at SafePlace, Austin's Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survival Center. My work with emergent and early developmental readers/writers there has enabled me to address my questions; specifically, to identify some important continuities and connections between a young child's oral and written language acquisition.

The setting I work in is the Kozmetsky Charter School for the children living at SafePlace. The school is located in a very secure compound that also includes the shelter (where the children are living), the warehouse (for donations), and the daycare center. The school opened in the fall of 2001 and is comprised of two nongraded classrooms (K/1/2, and 3rd grade and up) and a small library, The Book Place, which I started a few months after the school opened. Two mornings a week, I work with the children in the younger class, the majority of whom are 5 and 6 years old (kindergarten/1st grade).

There are several features of this classroom that distinguish it from a nongraded classroom in a public school:

1. There are only a few students at any given time, typically five to ten.
2. The children attend for short periods of time (however long it takes for the family to arrange a violence-free living situation into which they can move). This varies, but a typical stay is about 5 or 6 weeks.
3. Because the stays are brief, the composition of the class is constantly changing. The community is not a stable one. Children come and go, sometimes with no warning (as, for example, when a housing option suddenly becomes available and must be seized immediately).
4. The children in the younger class do not take any high-stakes standardized tests.
5. The diversity is remarkable across ethnicity, nationality, economic situation, and handicapping conditions, reflecting the pervasiveness of domestic violence in our society. (Any child currently housed at the shelter qualifies to come to the school.)

This K/1/2 classroom is a literacy-rich environment. The children have many authentic engagements with books. Their teacher is an avid reader herself and infuses book interactions throughout the curriculum.

- There is a listening center with a wonderful collection of tapes and accompanying book sets where friends can listen and read along together.
- There is a flannel board where the children can retell familiar stories and create new ones.
- The teacher reads aloud to the children at least twice a day.
- The children read to one another every day after lunch.
- Reading infuses math and science activities.
- In the comfortable book corner, there is an inviting collection of books and a picture of each child in the class reading a favorite book.
- Several times a week, the children read to their “reading buddies” in the daycare classrooms down the hall.
- The teacher often takes the children into The Book Place after lunch for a half-hour of exploring, browsing, or reading aloud.
- The children participate regularly in a writing workshop (a modified version designed to accommodate the small and ever-shifting community).

Books are at the heart of this classroom, and it usually takes only a few weeks for the children who are new to books to become active participants in this literate community.

It is the children from this K/1/2 classroom who, every Tuesday and Thursday, share one or several books with me in a group read-aloud, then come with me one at a time to The Book Place for some literacy engagement (e.g., sitting on the couch reading books with me or sitting at a small table writing a book or a journal entry), and, at the end of the day, take with them the note I have written to each one about our shared experience of the day.

You might think that working with children in this setting would be depressing. After all, it is domestic violence that has brought the children and their caregivers to the shelter. Indeed, there are moments of sadness:

Maria (6 years old, 1st grade), Dawn (7 years old, 1st grade), and I are seated at a small table. Dawn is drawing a picture while Maria is reading me the book she has written: *All About Me*. She turns to one page and reads, “I don’t like when my mom gets hurt.” Dawn, still drawing, says quietly, “I don’t like that either.”

Five-year-old Evita (kindergarten) writes a letter to her father: “I wish you were not in jail.” On one page of the book she has written, *I Can Do All Kinds of Things*, she directs my attention to the tear she has drawn on the face of the little girl in her picture. Her text reads, “I don’t like being alone.”

And the children's eagerness for hugs suggests neediness as well as affection. Yet when I walk into the children's classroom or into the cafeteria while they are eating breakfast, I do not see "needy, traumatized children." What I see are *kids*—bright, funny, frustrating, unpredictable, challenging—all the things that children in any classroom might be.

During my first 5 years at SafePlace, I kept an informal, reflective journal as I tried to make sense of the experience I was having. I did not have a specific focus as I wrote, but simply recorded my spontaneous reactions to my Tuesday/Thursday encounters with the children. The journal includes descriptions, puzzlements, frustrations, reflections, plans, and wonderings, but most of all *stories* of what individual children said and did as we read and wrote together. The possibility of writing this book did not occur to me until well into my 4th year. I had never gone back and read my journal entries, but during that 4th year, I found myself wondering whether there might be something of interest in the writing. So, I read carefully through the 3½ years of journal entries and realized that I might have material there that would help me address my questions about the continuance of language acquisition processes as children learn to read and write. A closer study of the journal entries has enabled me to identify five continuities from oral into written language. These continuities are what this book is about.

You can see that my situation at SafePlace is unique. I have the opportunity to observe many individual children across a wide social spectrum as they engage with written language (reading texts, creating texts). I get to observe these children one at a time, up close and personal. How different this is from the classroom teacher's situation as she deals with 20-some children for 7 hours a day, 5 days a week (to say nothing of dealing with parents, administrators, test pressures, and so forth). It is precisely the uniqueness of my situation that has enabled me to learn what I pass on to you in this book. Whatever your role (teacher, parent, daycare professional), I hope that what I have learned will be helpful to you as you select, create, and structure reading and writing engagements for your group of developing readers and writers. I hope you will think about these literacy experiences from a language acquisition perspective, that is, a perspective that assumes that oral and written language development are similar and continuous in important ways.

In the coming pages, you'll see real children engaging in a variety of literacy activities: discussing books during read-aloud, reading predictable books, writing in reading response picture journals, writing letters to others, and making informal on-the-spot books (dictating, illustrating). You'll

also encounter many more literacy activities that I mention in passing, such as shared reading of Big Books, browsing, reading to/with “buddies” from other classes, listening to favorite books at a listening center, and reading an adult’s personal notes. If you are a teacher, you may want to adapt some of these for use in your own classroom. You’ll also find the children engaging with a variety of books, and some of these, too, might find their way into your classroom—books for your read-alouds, for your library corner, for your shared reading events, for your reading/writing workshop minilessons, and so on. But although these classroom activities are very much present in this book, they are not its focus. The goal is to understand a deeper “activity”—namely, the child’s continuing action of using the (oral) language competence he already has to master a second expression system: written language.

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Thanks to my family—supportive as always—but especially to *Ben*, who knew before I did that I would write this book.

Finally, thanks to my mother, Ruth Wells (who died in 2001) for advice she gave me when I was 9 years old. She found me sitting at the dining room table, struggling to write thank you notes to distant relatives I hardly knew, for Christmas gifts I didn't even like. "Oh, writing's not hard," she told me. "You imagine the person is right here, and then you just talk to them." It turned out to be good advice.

Author's Note

No name that I use in this book is the name of any child who has been in the 5-to-8-year-old classroom at the Kozmetsky School during the August-to-May school year, 2001 to 2006. Further, I do not know the surname of any child who has been in the school since its opening.

In some instances, I have modified details in order to ensure anonymity. I believe these changes will not affect the reader's understanding.

The children's literacy curriculum is carried out in the classroom, and my literacy interactions with the children are not a formal part of that. However, the classroom teacher and I work in a very close partnership, constantly sharing our observations and ideas about individual children.

I have alternated generic "he" and "she" by chapters: generic "he" in Chapters 1, 3, and 5; and generic "she" in Chapters 2, 4, and 6.

The children I work with are in a nongraded, K/1/2 classroom. However, they arrive at SafePlace with a grade designation and will return to a graded classroom when they leave. When I first mention a particular child, I give the child's age and grade if I have been able to retrieve this information from school records or from my journal. However, in some instances, this information is unavailable.