


Chapter 3

Transacting With Texts: Pre-Readers Utilizing Executive Function as Problem-Solvers, Interpreters, and Analysts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an applied model for supporting preschool children's executive function, skills that serve as protective factors against risks associated with poverty, using Rosenblatt's transactional theory. The authors posit pedagogy that elicits children's responses to an author's/illustrator's picture-book whereby preschool readers' responses are mediated by the teacher through reflective discussion. Children are encouraged to reflect upon literary characters' motivations, behaviors, and problem solving. A demonstration case analysis shows how this model is implemented in a diverse and inclusive university laboratory preschool program where approximately half the children are served through Head Start, a federal program for children living in poverty. Given the preschool years are an especially sensitive period for acquisition of executive function skills, the authors assert that supporting young children's transactions with and interpretations of a text is the type of transactional strategy that has potential for narrowing the opportunity gap.

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INTRODUCTION

In his constructivist framework of education, Dewey (1896/1975) emphasized that we select from the environment what we will respond to in our daily lives. Rosenblatt (1994) asserts it is the same with written and visual texts. Utilizing Dewey's premise, she describes a text as interpretable linguistic symbols that create opportunities for transactions between readers and an author's text. Reading responses are shaped by the reader and transactions are dynamic. This kindles new ways of reading and creating meaning. Building on a child's meaning making during reading experiences, teachers can support a child's interpretation of a text and their executive functions, a set of cognitive processes that undergo a spurt of development during the preschool years (De Luca & Leventer, 2009). Executive functions foster focused attention, ideation, recall, reasoning, problem-solving, analysis, empathy, reflection, and conceptual generalization. Executive functioning further addresses the development of working memory, making it possible for young children to problem-solve and building cognitive flexibility, which supports goal-directed behaviors that emerge during the preschool years (Zelazo et al., 2016). Cognitive flexibility, or shifting, also allows children to think about others' ideas, values, and points of view, which can be seen through a child's interpretations and responses to a text such as a picturebook. Research suggests that poverty negatively impacts the development of these skills in young children (Hair et al., 2015; St. John et al., 2019).

This chapter explores the premise of using transactional theory to support executive functioning in the preschool classroom using reflections on a series of reading events and subsequent literature circles with preschool children using a picturebook that intentionally addressed differing perspectives. First, several concepts related to this premise are addressed, including the importance of 1) early childhood education (ECE), 2) executive function (EF) and young children, 3) the disruption of poverty in respect to EF, and 4) picturebooks and Rosenblatt's (1994) transaction theory. Then a discussion of the process employed to investigate what happens when young children participating in a Head Start (ECLKC, 2019) preschool program engage in a reading event and subsequent literature circle with other children. Finally, there is a discussion of current understandings about the potential of reading events that privilege children's transactions and meaning-making and how such privileging might disrupt the negative impact of early poverty.

BACKGROUND

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education (ECE) varies greatly in quality, accessibility, and affordability around the world. Of the 175 million pre-primary aged children in the world, nearly half are not enrolled in preschool (UNICEF, 2018); approximately one third of eligible children are not enrolled in preschool or kindergarten in the United States (NCES, 2018). Yet, given what is known about the importance of high-quality early education, attention to quality, accessibility, and affordability of educational opportunities is of national importance.

Current preschool options are found in public schools and the private sector where they are often embedded within childcare settings. Additionally, university laboratory child development centers have provided early education and research on high-level practices for over a century (Elicker & Barbour,

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