

# Research Currents: Talk Story and Learning to Read

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*Department Editors' Note:* In this year's column, we have highlighted issues of control. Who controls or should control knowledge and information? How do all social groups get equal access to information? How does literacy ensure access and control? How do teachers empower children with information and skills without overpowering them?

Kathryn Hu-Pei Au and Alice Kawakami, both of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in Honolulu, provide a fitting conclusion to this year's column, as these issues of control underlie the problem they address and the solutions they offer. As their piece suggests, teachers and children share an interest in stories (although their reasons for that interest may vary). Teachers and children, though, may have different ideas about how people talk about stories in classrooms. By loosening their attempts to control *how* the children talked, the teachers described in this article were able to share control with them—to collaborate with the children in exploring stories and, therefore, in teaching/learning to read. Although Au and Kawakami focus on teachers of Hawaiian children, all educators might benefit from reflecting upon what's essential (books?) and what's optional

(conventional rules for classroom talk?) in learning to read.

A.H.D.  
C.G.

Young students of Polynesian-Hawaiian ancestry, from underprivileged backgrounds, often progress very poorly in learning to read. In our work at the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in Honolulu, we set out to discover why this was so. There are, of course, many different factors which may affect the reading achievement of underprivileged minority students. On the basis of our work with Hawaiian children, however, we found that making two departures from conventional school practices greatly improved the children's learning to read. The first departure is to focus reading instruction on comprehension or understanding of the text, rather than solely on word identification, even when the children are in kindergarten and the first grade. The second is to conduct lessons using a culturally compatible, rather than incompatible, style of interaction.

We are studying the implementation of these ideas in two kinds of settings: small group reading lessons in first through third grade classrooms, and the

reading aloud of storybooks to kindergarten classes. In both settings the children develop as readers by being involved with their teachers in a partnership: the teacher and children together construct or work out the meaning of the text. In this comfortable and cooperative learning environment, the children do not have to worry about remembering special school rules for interaction. Because they are allowed to converse with the teacher following rules they already understand, little or no time needs to be spent in management, and more time is available to learn about stories and books.

### Small Group Lessons

To test the idea that Hawaiian children would benefit more from reading lessons conducted in culturally compatible rather than incompatible ways, we compared lessons taught by two teachers to the same group of six second graders (Au and Mason 1981, 1983). Both teachers had equal levels of education and years of teaching experience, but Teacher LC (for low contact) had not previously worked with Hawaiian children, while Teacher HC (for high contact) had had considerable experience in this area. We analyzed closely videotapes of two reading lessons given by each of these teachers.

As expected, Teacher LC used conventional rules for classroom recitation to structure interaction. She began by posing a question or setting a task for the children to perform. She then asked for volunteers to answer the question. She was looking for an answer from one child, and only one child. When she

chose a child to answer, she did not want anyone else to be speaking.

But while this seemed a perfectly reasonable way to have children participate in a reading lesson, it simply did not work with these young Hawaiian students. Instead of just one child speaking at a time, more than one tried to respond. The child Teacher LC called on was hardly ever the only one who answered.

As a result, Teacher LC spent a great deal of time not in teaching reading, but in trying to get the children to understand the rules for interaction. In a sense, then, the subject of the lesson became management, not reading, because the teacher and children had such different ideas about how participation in the lesson should be managed. For example, here is what happened when Teacher LC asked for a volunteer to read a sentence on the board, "A grasshopper is green."

*(Overlapping speech is bracketed. Simultaneous nonverbal interaction is italicized within parentheses. The children's names are abbreviated as follows: A = Annabelle, E = Eloise, L = Leroy, M = Mary Anne, S = Samuel, To = Tony. T is the Teacher. X is an unidentified child.)*

- T: Now, is there a volunteer for the (Annabelle raises hand.) third sentence?
- A(?): Happier?
- A(?): Hopper
- T: I see—a hand is up over here. Annabelle, good, what is—(T. points at Annabelle. T. turns to board, points. Annabelle lowers her hand.)

To(?): Green  
 T: Can you read this one?  
 (Eloise looks away.)  
 To: Oh I know.  
 A guess—  
 T: Just a minute.  
 (Leroy raises his hand.)  
 S: A grass.  
 L: I know  
 (T. leans toward Tony,  
 puts arm forward, turns  
 and looks at Tony.)  
 T: Is your name  
 Annabelle? Are you  
 Annabelle?  
 To: No.  
 T: You—you sound like  
 you're Annabelle.  
 I called Annabelle to  
 read.  
 (T. puts hand to her  
 throat, looks at Annabelle  
 then back to Tony.)

As her words show, the teacher seemed to feel that the children's chiming in was disrupting the discussion. The children, on the other hand, seemed to feel that they should work together to answer the teacher's questions.

A very different situation was evident when we studied Teacher HC's lessons. This teacher did not insist that only one child speak at a time. Instead, although she occasionally called on one of the children, she did not actively prevent others from also giving answers to her questions. What happened, then, as a result of her allowing more than one child to speak at a time, seemed on the surface to be somewhat disorderly. The children were so enthusiastic about joining in the discussion that there was a lot of talk going on at once. However, a close analysis revealed that almost all of this talk centered on text and text-related ideas.

For example, here is a segment from one of the lessons given by Teacher HC, based on a story entitled "A Surprise for Pat." There was a picture showing an ear of corn placed in the branches of a tree, and Teacher HC invited the children to guess how the corn came to be there.

T: Did they eat the corn?  
 (T. holds her book up,  
 points.)  
 Look, here it is.  
 M: Put it on the treeee.  
 A: (inaudible)  
 E: Yeah, I know (inaudible).  
 A: (inaudible)  
 E: Yeah.  
 T: Maybe  
 (T. lifts book, points to  
 something, puts book  
 back on table.)  
 the squirrels put it on the  
 tree.  
 Maybe.  
 (T. leans forward, hands  
 on chin.)  
 To: And the squirrels gonna  
 eat it.  
 X: (inaudible)  
 T: You think a  
 squirrel is gonna eat it.  
 L: It's too heavy  
 for a squirrel  
 E: Yeah, it is.  
 To: It's (inaudible)  
 T: It's too heavy, what does  
 that mean?  
 (T. frowns, looks at  
 Leroy.)

As this excerpt shows, Teacher HC structured the discussion so that five of the six students were able to share their ideas, all within a very short period of time. While she channelled the discussion by acknowledging the children's answers, she did not try to control who among the children should be speaking.

Differences in the teachers' styles of managing talk during the reading lessons seemed to be related to differences in the amounts of learning the children were doing. For example, we found that the children were attending to reading 80 percent of the time in Teacher HC's lessons, as opposed to only 43 percent of the time in Teacher LC's lessons. In Teacher HC's lessons 77 percent of their responses were about reading and they mentioned 46 percent of the ideas in the text. In Teacher LC's lessons only 50 percent of their responses were related to reading, and they mentioned only 19 percent of the ideas in the text.

### Talk Story

How can we explain these differences in the amounts of productive reading behavior shown by the students? This is where the idea of cultural compatibility comes in. Our analysis showed that the style of interaction used by Teacher HC resembled that in *talk story*, an important nonschool speech event for Hawaiian children (Watson 1975; Watson and Boggs 1977). During talk story, the children present rambling narratives about personal experiences, often joking and teasing one another. The chief characteristic of talk story is *joint performance*, or the cooperative production of responses by two or more speakers. For example, if the subject is going surfing, one of the boys may begin by recounting the events of a particular day. But he will immediately invite one of the other boys to join him in describing the events to the group. The two boys will then alternate as speakers, each telling a

part of the story, with other children present occasionally chiming in.

Thus, there are very few times during talk story when just one child monopolizes the right to speak. This is because what seems to be important to Hawaiian children in talk story is not *individual performance* in speaking, which is often important in the classroom, but *group performance* in speaking. Children who are leaders, who are liked and have many friends, are usually those who know how to involve other children in conversation during talk story, not those who speak at length on their own. This value attached to group rather than individual performance seems to be consistent with the importance in Hawaiian culture of contributing to the well-being of one's family or circle of friends, rather than working only for one's personal well-being.

While consistent with this value, talk story-like reading lessons, such as those given by Teacher HC, are not exactly like nonschool talk story events. They are easily recognized as reading lessons in purpose, because discussion is focused closely on the text and text-related topics. In practice, then, talk story-like reading lessons are actually hybrid events, having the same goals for instruction as other classroom reading comprehension lessons, but making use of different rules for participation.

### Balance of Rights

In order to keep lessons given to culturally different students centered on reading, and not have them turn instead to management issues, teachers may

need to achieve a *balance of rights*. Achieving a balance involves teachers' retaining control over the topics to be discussed, while giving the students control over the way talk in the lessons is managed. For example, in talk story-like reading lessons, teachers make sure that only text and text-related ideas get discussed. The children, however, have some control over the way turns to speak are managed, since they are allowed to discuss the text following the rules of talk story.

In talk story-like reading lessons, we find that effective teachers follow two practices to maintain the balance between teacher's and students' rights. First, they allow the children *breathing room* by seldom calling on individual children and instead letting the children themselves decide exactly when they will participate. Second, teachers give the children *equal time* to speak. They may occasionally hold the floor so a quieter child will be able to enter the discussion. They are also careful not to take up too much time lecturing the children. In several lessons we studied, the longest utterances came from children and not the teacher. In short, learning to read can take place because the teacher and children have, together, created a cooperative lesson environment, sharing both rights and responsibilities.

#### Whole Class Lessons

In analyses of storybook lessons in KEEP kindergarten classes, we see similar benefits to structuring students' participation in talk story-like ways (Kawakami 1984). Students from low income backgrounds may not have had

much previous experience with storybooks and hearing stories read aloud. Thus, the teacher's goal during story reading is to foster a positive attitude toward literature by familiarizing students with books, written text, and ways of talking about text.

Early in the sample lesson studied, the teacher encouraged the children to talk about their personal experiences related to text ideas that she planned to explore in the lesson. This opening discussion led the students to become very interested in hearing the story. While she read the storybook aloud to them, the teacher encouraged the children to read along with her. She did not single out students but allowed them to choose when they would join in. As the lesson progressed, the teacher and children discussed text ideas in a manner consistent with talk story, rather than conventional classroom recitation.

In this segment, for example, the teacher and students are looking at a picture of a mouse in a cage and trying to identify the tiny pink things on the side of the mouse.

*T:* Do you think a mouse would have that many feet?

*Several children:* No.

*C1:* No way.

*C2:* Only have four.

*T:* What do you suppose they are?

*C3:* Toes.

*C4:* Babies.

*T:* Babies. Do you think they're babies?

*C5:* Yeah.

*T:* Could be.

Several  
children: [ Yeah.  
C5: [ They are.

We see that the teacher and students worked together to develop an understanding of the story. In this way the children were introduced to books and talk about books in a familiar interactional style.

### Conclusion

Research on both small group reading lessons and whole class storybook lessons leads us to believe that cultural compatibility in interactional patterns may be a necessary, and not just nice, aspect of effective reading instruction for culturally different minority students. In the case of Hawaiian students, talk story is a particularly significant nonschool speech event with group performance being an important value. With children from other ethnic groups, different nonschool speech events and values might be similarly significant. It seems important, then, for teachers working with young, culturally different students to be aware of the different values which may underlie different ways of speaking.

Cultural compatibility in reading lessons means maintaining a balance of teacher and student rights, thus setting the stage for progress in the very demanding task of learning to read.

Ideally, the foundation is laid early, during storybook lessons in kindergarten. In culturally compatible classroom reading lessons, a sense of mutual responsibility develops. This makes learning to read in school a cooperative venture, with teacher and students working together to achieve their goals.

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Fiction reveals truths that reality obscures.

Jessamyn West

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