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Name Games:

Literacy and Inventive Play in the Pre-kindergarten Classroom

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A child's own name is often the very first word she learns to read and write. Motivational factors work together with related identity issues to create a positive, successful early literacy learning experience. Names are intensely personal, and, as a result, children learn to write their own names much more quickly than other words. This literacy work begins as young as age 3 (Bloodgood, 1999), and literacy development can be seen through name writing over time (Green, 1998; Martens, 1999). Further supporting this practice, strong correlations exist between children's ability to read and spell names (their own and those of their classmates) and their knowledge of alphabet letters (Levin & Ehri, 2009).

Teachers and researchers have found that having writing materials in all play centers in early childhood classrooms makes it easy for children to experience and work with print as they play with names. Children's interest in their own names can be used as a tool for increasing their awareness of and experiences with print awareness and writing. Such experiences can: 1) increase children's meaningful work and interest with print, 2) facilitate their understanding of the relationship between alphabetic symbols and the sounds they represent, 3) increase children's understanding that names and print convey meaning, and 4) encourage children to experiment with the tools of writing (Welsch, Sullivan, & Justice, 2003).

As a result, a considerable number of classroom activities now exist that are designed to leverage children's interest in their own names into basic literacy skill learning. Name walls for teaching reading and writing are frequently used in early childhood classrooms (Wagstaff, 2009). Classroom activities and games using children's names are often promoted for teaching the alphabet, rhyming, and other literacy skills that fall under the phonics and phonemic awareness umbrellas (see, for example, DeBruin-Parecki & Hohmann, 2003, and/or Kirk & Clark, 2005).

Inventive Name Play

Playing with one's own name also has proven to be fun. Quite a few name games exist for both children and adults. One only has to spend a brief time in our Web 2.0 world to encounter them. Multiple iPhone applications exist that are devoted to these games. On Facebook, opportunities exist for determining one's witness protection name, NASCAR

name, Star Wars name, detective name, soap opera name, superhero name, fly name, street name, rock star name, porn name, gangsta name, goth name, and stripper name. Similar games (without the problematic stereotypes found in many of the adult games—or at a minimum, to a lesser extent) exist for children (see, for example, Pilkey, 2000; <http://apps.scholastic.com/captainunderpants/NameGame/play.htm>).

It seems, though, that we have only just begun to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities afforded by a focus on names. Thinking of how children have historically played with names, structured games provide only part of the picture. While names can provide an important avenue into phonetic and phonemic awareness knowledge, naming is an important business in its own right—ask any writer of fiction, neighborhood developer, expectant parent, or game developer.

Naming as a Complex Creative Action

Naming is complex; names have important gender, ethnic, culture, and social class implications, and these implications offer important critical literacy teaching/learning possibilities. Naming is an important decision with critical cultural identity implications. Immigrant parents consider these identity implications when deciding whether to keep a child's heritage name or help that child assimilate (e.g., protect against stereotyping, etc.) by (re)naming her with a more American sounding name (Souto-Manning, 2007). While making the connections between a child's name and her cultural heritage is the theme of a growing number of children's books (see list at end of article for examples), most educators have not acknowledged how these (re)naming practices “constitute and represent the very precarious social and institutional relationships taking place in schools involving immigrant children” (Souto-Manning, 2007, p. 404).

Furthermore, naming is an important literary technique (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2007). A name is often a first window into a character or setting, assisting the reader as she brings up a certain set of assumptions. When an author names a character or setting, she does so in a way that establishes tone, time period, setting, and much, much more (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2007). Authors realize that

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In real life, people's names are lexically packed, meaning that they usually carry information about one's gender and in more subtle ways about one's racial ethnicity, the era in which a person was born, the attitudes and aspirations of the person's parents, and, if the person has a nickname, what kind of friends he or she has. In fiction, this is even more likely to be true because authors purposely design their characters' names to reveal such matters. (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2007, p. 104)

Acknowledging this complexity means that when we direct name work and play toward only the most basic literacy skills, we are constraining children's opportunities to fully develop these higher-level literary techniques.

Moreover, children have always demonstrated interest in names and naming. They name their baby dolls, their stuffed animals, their pets, and their imaginary friends. Following Vygotsky, in play a child "performs as though he were a head taller than himself" (1978, p. 102). So the fact that most early childhood classrooms' attention to names is aimed at basic literacy skills means that we, as educators, are not working from the highest possible expectations for our students.

Supporting Creative Name Play

Teachers already include names as part of structured classroom routines and play. Within most birth through kindergarten classrooms, one can easily find children's names used to label cubbies, with daily sign-ins and morning circle songs, and more. However, we argue that children's interest in names and naming should become incorporated into unstructured play as well. Expanding the scope of name work need not involve drastic changes. Indeed, making subtle changes within the classroom environment and classroom interactions can offer the potential for powerful learning opportunities. We advocate for adult-led interactive prompts, appropriate materials for naming work, and teacher modeling to support higher-level name play.

First, simple interactive prompts by an interested adult can foster children's imagination for name creation and play. When seeing a child care for a baby doll, take a pet for a walk around the classroom, or build a character from play dough, the teacher has an opportunity to engage students' interest in names (e.g., "What's your kitty's name?" or "Ooh, Clarabelle is a fancy name—your baby must be very sophisticated"). These natural (yet purposeful) propositions encourage children to build imaginary names into their playfulness.

Second, we should make available materials capable of cultivating this inventive naming work. Given access to materials and open opportunity, unstructured name play can occur in any and all play centers. Those same writing materials brought into the centers for basic literacy skill development also can be used for inventive name play. Children also should have access to sticky notes so that they can name the buildings they make in the block center, create name tags as they pretend to work in a restaurant, and name and read aloud to the stuffed animals in the library center. The opportunity to name is endless and additional materials can only further the cause.

Third, teacher modeling offers tremendous potential for nudging young children into creative naming activities. Teachers can model and join in the name fun by making up inventive names for their own objects of interest as they engage in play with children (e.g., "My bear's name is Cuddle Wuddle. I call him that because he's soft and I like to hug him. What do you call your animal friend?"). Further encouragement can be found through read-alouds of books in which children engage and relate in naming of a favorite toy (e.g., *Fanny* [Hobbie, 2008]) or even a household pet (e.g., *Name That Dog!* [Archer & Buscema, 2010]). Models of illustrated characters (with their names prominently displayed) from children's fiction can be displayed in writing center walls, all working together to remind children of the tremendous potential involved in naming.

In conclusion, children's names and naming activities provide meaningful and interesting ways for teachers to engage children in opportunities for self-discovery, experimentation, and emergent literacy experiences. Moving beyond classroom routines or interactions that focus solely on the functional use of name work will allow children to be more intimately, meaningfully, and creatively involved in their own learning and development. In addition, because research suggests that effective literacy instruction involves engaging children in a variety of tasks that are child-centered and interesting (Bingham, Hall-Kenyon, & Culatta, 2010), exposing children to frequent and salient experiences with name work will increase their attention to and interest in names. This, in turn, will benefit their development of early literacy skills.

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