

YOUNG CHILDREN'S TABLE TALK WITH PEERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

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As Mechling (2000) noted, mealtime is both a biological necessity and a social activity. Mealtime has been acknowledged as a context and setting in which children can acquire language competencies and skills. During mealtime, young children have the opportunity to interact socially with both adults and peers. For example, Cote (2001) compared the mealtime experiences of preschool children in two different classroom settings. She found that the structure of mealtimes was related to children's language learning opportunities. She compared language use during mealtimes to other times of the day and introduced strategies to help encourage children's discourse during mealtime events. Other studies such as those by Snow and Beals (2006) have explored mealtime events as they relate to children's language competencies and skills.

The relationship between mealtime and language development has also been investigated cross-culturally. For example, Majorano, Cigala, and Corsano (2009) explored teacher-child and peer to peer speech in Italian nursery schools. They found that children were linguistically active during mealtime compared to other times in their routine such as free play. In fact, they found that children produced longer utterances and more complex speech during mealtime. Thus the nature and context of this activity helped shaped children's language skills, development, and competencies. Others cross-cultural comparisons on children's conversations include Tulviste et al's (2010) work on Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish children's peer discourse. They focused more upon the types of speech children use and how culture guides peer conversations.

Employing participant observation, Stone (1992) analyzed preschoolers' spontaneous conversation that takes place in the classroom. Using categories such as content, structure, and form, he found that children typically utilize three forms of narrative. In the classroom context, the greatest number of narratives were produced during lunchtime and directed toward teachers. He found that preschoolers, similar to adults discuss events that happen outside of the classroom and also use a "show and tell approach" (375). In his sample, children's narratives focused upon personal experiences, family and friends, and dreams or movies. He concluded that adults and children should share mealtime as the child searches for a responsive partner.

Many previous studies on children's conversations have focused upon adult to child rather than child to child speech. As Blum-Kulka and Snow (2004) noted, few studies have systemically explored peer to peer conversation outside of the play context. Exceptional studies that have investigated the content of young children's peer to peer conversations during non-play contexts include works by O'Neill et al. (2009) and Holmes (2011). O'Neill et al. (2009) investigated the content of young children's speech in peer conversations. They video recorded the conversations of a class of preschool children during snack time, twice a week for

approximately 500 speech episodes. Raw linguistic material was coded for speech initiations, person reference, semantic content, time, and location. They found boys were slightly more verbally active than girls, conversations were primarily dyadic, most topics involved people, jokes were infrequent, food was a topic in only a small percentage of conversations, and children produced more comments than questions. They concluded that preschoolers are working on a theory of mind through their social and linguistic interactions with peers.

Other studies have focused upon the social nature of children's speech. For example, Hamo and Blum-Kulka (2007) explored the purpose and function of language in Israeli preschoolers' peer interactions. In their view, discourse is a unique linguistic, social, and cultural phenomenon. In their work, they acknowledged the daily moment by moment social construction of peer culture in addition to the collaborative creation of discourse as it relates to individual development. Their focus was twofold; talk as activity and the use of conversation as a medium to help children develop social ability. In a related work, Krytzis and Green (1997) used a Vygotskian lens to examine the relationship between the social construction of children's narratives and peer relationships. Using subsamples of preschool and middle school children, they suggested that children's discourse serve as a medium through which children socially construct. There are peer culture, identity, and friend relationships

Rather than linguistically analyzing children's speech, another approach to understand children's language use has addressed preschool children's understanding of conversational structure. The sociolinguist William Corsaro (1986; 1990; 1997) has extensively studied how young children use language and discourse to communicate their social status and understand their position within their peer groups. In the interpretist view, children use language to both collaboratively construct and understand their social worlds.

Krytzis (2004) presents a review of this approach and its focus upon how children utilize language to both create and reflect their social worlds and relationships. One issue that surfaces is the concern children, even young children, have with power in their peer groups. In this case, children's ability to establish and maintain relationships with peers is reflected in their ability to use communication effectively to create and maintain social order. This can be accomplished by teasing, manipulating adult categories, and controlling conversations. This is the essence of peer talk (see also Karrebæk 2011; Krytzis, Ross and Koymen 2010).

Empirical studies on children's use of language to reflect their social status include Krytzis, Marx, and Wade's (2001) ethnographic work. They examined how preschoolers use language to mark social status and ranking in a friend group and found that children used specific control acts to regulate the behavior of others in the group. Powerful girls used mitigated pretend statements, whereas powerful boys employed unmitigated declaratives and direct commands. Researchers such as Anderson (1990) focused upon children's use of linguistic markers for power in pretend play. In the neighborhood setting, Goodwin (1990, 1993) explored African American children's strategies for establishing dominance hierarchies and alliances. She continued this line of inquiry (2007) by focusing

upon language as a medium through which young children mark their power. As Wolf (1996) suggested, child to child conversations may provide the context for critical language lessons, since the inequality and power differentials in adult to child speech are not present in peer speech interactions.

Finally, in her work with preschoolers, Holmes (2011) investigated the nature and content of peer conversations in a classroom context during lunchtime. She also explored how the activity of eating at school framed the children's conversation and play and the role of gender in guiding the conversations and play forms. Audio and written recordings of conversation using a time sampling unit of five minutes were employed. Simultaneous play and non-verbal behavior were also recorded. She found that children primarily conversed with peers and not with adults. Pervasive conversation topics were food, family, and daily events. Child to teacher speech frequently involved requests for assistance. Girls were more active verbally than boys in almost all instances except in asking the teacher questions. Boys played with their food, told jokes and engaged in taboo humor and language play more than the girls did.

The present work is aligned with the following viewpoints. First, children are regarded as active agents in their own socialization (Schwartzman 2001). Second, setting is acknowledged as guiding the behavior that occurs within it. In agreement with Mechling (2000), children's meal times are viewed as social contexts that frame the conversation and behavior that emerges in that setting and playing with food is a normative behavior for children. Third, peer conversations serve as a medium in which children create their own culture, manage their relationships, convey social status, and discuss what is culturally relevant to them. In short, children's peer conversations reflect children's everyday experiences in their micro and macro social worlds (Göncü 1999).

This project on children's mealtime conversations is framed within the socio-cultural perspective which emphasizes the social functions of children's discourse (Corsaro 1990; Hamo and Blum-Kulka 2002). This view focuses upon the interconnectedness between culture and behavior as it is reflected in children's conversational skills. Such interactions take place within a social context in which cultural norms and social relationships are constructed. This project focuses upon the role of children's conversations in providing a medium by which children convey and share commentary on their social world, relationships, status, everyday events, and the adult world. Of particular importance are conversation and language. One might expect preschool and kindergarten children's conversations to vary according to cognitive understanding and language competencies; popular children will control table talk; status will shift situationally; and girls and boys will engage in these acts in different ways.

Method

Participants

Participants included preschool children who attended a private, not for profit learning institution primarily for children 3-5 years of age with additional enrichment programs for older preschoolers. There were 70 children (31 boys,

39 girls). Ages ranged from 38-70 months with a mean age of 48.2 months. Children were primarily from middle income families of European American heritages. Parental /Guardian consent return rate was 78% (70/90). Some children attended school every day, some three days a week, and others two days a week. All children were eligible for the lunchtime program. An Institutional Review Board granted approval for this project and the director and caregivers granted additional consent. Children were treated according to the American Psychological Association's guidelines for ethical treatment of participants (American Psychological Association, 2002). Since the participants were minor children additional resources were consulted (Christensen and James 2008; Fraser 2004).

There were seven kindergarten children (two boys, five girls). The children attended a private, for profit learning center whose mission includes teaching educational as well as life skills while emphasizing all domains of development. Children who attended the center may be between 6 weeks and 12 years of age. The participants attended a full day kindergarten program, ranged in age from 5-6 ½ years, and were of diverse ethnic heritages. Parental consent return rate was 75%. All children were treated according to the American Psychological Association's (2002) guidelines for ethical treatment of human participants (See Greene and Hogan 2005 for information on conducting research with children). An Institutional Review Board, the cooperating preschool and learning center, and parents/guardians granted approval for this project.

Design and Procedure

This project utilized a qualitative design, a naturalistic observation approach, and the technique employed was written and audio recordings of children's conversations in the natural setting of the classroom during lunchtime.

In the preschool, raw material was gathered between spring 2009 and fall 2010. The children were visited three days a week for 25 weeks. Lunchtime lasted for approximately one hour per visit. Total observation time was approximately 75 hours. The author and her four research assistants were naturalistic observers in the classroom. They neither initiated conversations nor engaged the children in interactions. Within several weeks the children acclimated to the researchers' presence, although sometimes the children invited them into their conversation or asked them for assistance with their lunch. The latter requests included opening a lunch box, pouring a drink, or inserting straws into juice boxes. The kindergarten fieldwork period took place between fall 2007 and spring 2008.

The following procedure was maintained in the preschool field site. After the children had selected their seats for lunch, the researchers filled in a seating chart. They then graphically noted the individual children for whom they had permission to record. Initially, teachers provided the children's names for the seating chart to ensure accuracy. Even after the researchers learned the children's names, teachers were consulted when the researchers were uncertain about a child's identity. After the seating charts were completed, the researchers positioned themselves on different sides of the tables so they could record independently the children's conversations from different vantage points. Each researcher had a notebook and pen with which to record the children's speech. Conversations were also

audio- recorded to verify the quality and accuracy of the written notes. On some occasions, the volume of the children's voices during lunchtime was so loud that the researchers had to rely exclusively on written field notes.

The researchers selected tables for recording conversations based upon which table had the greatest number of children for whom consent was granted. Order of observation and recording proceeded from most to least number of children for whom consent was granted. On some occasions when children were silent at a table, researchers moved on to the next table. In the preschool, table compositions changed with every lunch time in part because attendance was voluntary and different children attended preschool on different days of the week.

To begin recording conversations, the researchers synchronized their start time and each began recording the children's conversations at the designated tables. Each table was time sampled for five minutes since lunchtime lasted approximately 30 minutes. When the 5 minute period had elapsed, the researchers moved on to the next table. All of the children's speech was recorded as well as any accompanying play and non-verbal behavior. Children who were seated at the table for whom consent was not granted were simply marked with an X in the field notes. Several trial sessions were accomplished prior to the start of the project. The researchers then compared field notes to determine discrepancies and gaps in the recorded material. After ten trials, the researchers were able to achieve 88% compatibility. Undecipherable words and phrases were discussed immediately after the recording session in a quiet room of the preschool.

The author was the only observer in the kindergarten field site. She adhered to the same procedures as those used in the preschool classroom.

Coding

The author trained the four research assistants to code the children's speech. First, all the researchers independently transcribed their recorded material. Next, these transcriptions were compared across all researchers to verify their accuracy. Once the accuracy of the transcriptions was verified, sample text was selected for training the researchers how to content code the material. A sample category was selected and each researcher worked independently coding randomly selected material from the children's actual conversations. Additional categories were added and all coders worked independently on the selected material. First, text was highlighted in different colors each color corresponding to a different category label. Then coders exchanged the highlighted material to discuss any discrepancies. Next, phrases that could be subsumed into a larger category were extracted. These were also checked for accuracy. When a discrepancy arose it was discussed at that time. After ten trials, no discrepancies arose and the actual coding began.

The coding procedure was performed following guidelines that appear in the methodological literature (e.g., Bernard 2006; Côté, Salmela, and Russell 1995) and utilized by the author in an earlier study (Holmes 2011). First, verbatim phrases were extracted from the children's conversations. Next, phrases that contained a particular person, idea or thought were grouped together. These phrases were used to form higher order categories. For example, if children spoke about a

family member, pet, or an event these were incorporated into the cultural domains of family and life events. If children conversed about a food item such as when two children were conversing about their lunch, these events were subsumed into the higher order category, Food. Next, transcribed text was highlighted using different colors to designate larger cultural domains. Color coding larger domains helped the coders compare material and efficiently locate raw material and examples for larger cultural categories.

Sometimes a child's conversation might contain criteria for more than one category. For example, John and Joe were involved in a conversation that contained multiple topics. They shared stories about their siblings and the food in their lunchboxes. Utterances that contained different people, ideas, or thoughts were coded for every response, placed into their respective higher order categories, and counted separately. This coding procedure has been employed in other studies that utilize semi-structured interviewing and open ended questioning (Dupuis, Bloom, and Loughead 2006; Holmes 2005; Holmes 2011). Category frequencies were tallied to yield percentages of behavior. Speech responses were used rather than conversational units given the pervasive occurrence of transduction reasoning (Piaget 1952).

Results

In this section the nature and content of the children's conversations with both peers and teachers are presented. All raw material was coded, analyzed, and tallied for descriptive statistics and is presented by sex of child and the conversational partner.

In Table 1, the content and frequency of the children's conversations to peers and teachers are presented (see Table 1). This group of children, both boys and girls, spent the majority of their lunchtime speaking with peers. The nature of these linguistic acts focused upon food and making general declarative statements. These accounted respectively for 36.0% and 39.4% of all peer conversations. By contrast, children spent only 10.9% of their time engaged in conversation with their teachers.

Gender differences surfaced with respect to both the nature and the content of the children's speech to peers and teachers. One major pattern that emerged was that girls were responsible for most of the conversation during lunchtime. Second, only a few major cultural domains or higher order categories were uncovered from the children's conversations. Food was a major topic of conversation for these children. However, girls spent more than twice as much time (68.6%) on this topic than boys (31.1%). Similarly, girls made approximately twice as many declarative statements (60.1%) than boys (39.9%) and interjected daily events in their conversations. Girls accounted for 75% of these instances. In addition, girls (86%) spoke about their families much more at lunchtime than boys did. As a group girls approached and spoke with their teachers more (76.7%) to their teachers than boys did (23.3%).

Table 1: Frequencies for Topical Categories during Mealtime

Categories	Sex of Children		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Peer Discourse			
Talk about food	75	165	240
General declarative statements	105	158	263
Talk about daily events	6	18	24
Talk about play or games	7	10	17
Talk about family	7	43	50
Child to Teacher Discourse			
Talk with the teacher	17	56	73
Peer Play			
Play with food	10	11	21

There were two categories in which boys and girls participated equally. One was related to speech content; the other was behavior that accompanied speech and eating. For example, boys (41.2%) and girls (58.8%) gave almost equal attention to games and things related to play in their conversations and in this sample both boys (47.6%) and girls (52.4%) played with their food. Worthy of mention is the category Family and the nature of the children's conversations. Interestingly, pets were the topic of conversation more so than either siblings or parents. In the latter subcategory, only mothers were mentioned in conversation. Not one child included his or her father in conversations on the topic of family.

Examples of Child Speech to Teacher

Both preschooler and kindergartener speech interactions with their teachers were similar. Most were phrased in the form of questions either for assistance or information. For example, one preschooler, Michele, asked her teacher, "Can you open this [a snack container]." Similarly, Jeff, a kindergartener, asked his teacher, "Is Tia coming today?" His classmate, Linda, asked her teacher for another helping, "Miss Lynn, Can I have more spaghetti please?"

Declaratives also appeared in the children's speech to their teachers but with less frequency than questions. For example, on separate occasions two different preschooler girls announced to their teacher, "Kristin has tic tacs!" and "I ate my sandwich." Kindergarten children used more declarative speech to their teachers and asked them fewer questions than preschool children did. One major difference was the length of the utterance. Kindergarteners tended to use longer sentences than most preschoolers, often by several words.

The Topic of Food

For both preschoolers and kindergarteners, food was a major topic of conversation. Children asked questions about food, declared their gustatory likes and dislikes, traded and shared food, and described their food. Some interactions were simple rhetorical questions. For example, Mira, a preschool girl, asked her tablemate, "I don't like chicken. Do you want it?" Other speech interactions were simple declarative statements such as when Uma told Tess, "I have chocolate juice." Her tablemate, Alana declared to her table, "This is not good, I have a bagel. My mom put jelly on my bagel. My sister has a spoon."

Sometimes the conversation involved several preschool children at the table who participated.

- Michael: This French fry is big.
 Richard: Look at my Dorito.
 Jill: This is not a burrito, that's lemonade.
 Richard: It's a Capri Sun and I said Dorito. It's spicy nacho. It's so spicy.
 Trish: It's fruit punch.
 Richard: It's Capri Sun.
 Trish: No, it's lemonade.

Similarly:

- Christina: I don't want these.
 Hope: So don't eat them.
 Christina: Can I have fruit snacks?
 Hope: Those are sour.
 Ellen: What are (*points to fruit Holly*)?
 Adam: I have an ice pack to keep my food cold. Do you want this? (*to his sister*) I don't want my yogurt.

Interestingly, kindergarten children frequently stayed on topic when discussing food and rarely included or moved to another topic of conversation. For example, the following conversation illustrates the children's ability to contribute to a conversation while centering on the topic of food:

- Kevin: Drink your milk if you want to get strong.
 Kim: I don't like the soup.
 Kevin: Do you like chicken noodle?
 Kim to the teacher: I like those (*pears*)
 Julia to Amy: Can I have your green beans? I like green beans.
 Amy: I don't like cheese. I don't like this. Is this white cheese or yellow cheese?

On some occasions, conversations included more than one topic, such as this one that began with food. The following conversation was between two preschool

boys, one of whom began his conversation about food using the home context to initiate the dialogue:

- Brian: I don't have anything in my house to eat.
 Tim: You should have gotten McDonald's.
 Brian: I wanted Burger King for the Spiderman toy.

Preschooler conversations were typical of this age group and often included more transductive thinking and rapid movement from one topic to the next in a given speech event. For example, the following conversation began with a query about beverages and concluded with the children's pets.

- Taylor: What flavor is your juice?
 Steven: Strawberry.
 Oliver: But they have chocolate in them. I think my mom's going to take me to the beach.
 Taylor: The other day was hot.
 Steven: Yeah, I was burning myself.
 Taylor: I got two Star War ships.
 Steven: Yeah my dog's a girl. She's my sister.
 Oliver: When I first got my dog I was dressing her up in girls' clothes. One time my dog bit me on my side.

When the teacher was a participant in the conversation, her speech helped shaped the conversation.

- Todd to Rosie: We have a fish.
 Melissa to teacher and table mates:
 I have a pet that's a sandwich to me.
 Teacher to Melissa: What's its name?
 Melissa: Wingnut! I have a hamster.
 Teacher: Who named it?
 Melissa: Me! My mom calls me that, I named the hamster that. That's why. It's a guinea pig from a guinea pig pond. You could rent a hippo there.
 Teacher: Have you ever done that?
 Melissa: No, mommy won't let me. Hamsters are small and fat. I'm all done. This is my hamster.

Family

Family was a major topic of conversation that illustrated the importance of the children's ever increasing social worlds. Family members, events, and pets often were shared with table mates. In many cases, conversations began with either a declarative fact about family or a question about one's family. The following conversation is illustrative.

- Jenn: Enrique!
 Enrique: What?
 Jenn: One of my cousins has a real phone.
 Enrique: She's only 8.
 Maryanne: I have two brothers, one is seventeen and he has a girlfriend, a real phone, and an iPod.
 Michaela: I'm not allowed to have one.

Younger children's declaratives regarding family often contained instances of transductive thinking as in the following example:

- Teresa: My aunt cut my hair. I have a cheese bar! I love chocolate chips! I love chocolate chips! They're so yummy.

Some children made a public announcement at their table and depending on social status, the child's utterance might receive a response. For example, when Jimmy stated, "My sister's in the Girl scouts," the table ignored the statement and continued the conversation on the topic already on hand. Jimmy had lower social status than the children controlling the conversation at the time.

Kindergarten children's conversation regarding family paralleled the preschoolers' with less of an emphasis on pets, though they also were mentioned.

- Amy to Teacher: Do you have a mom?
 Jack: My brother's name is Alex.
 Amy to Jack: My sister and other sister. She's 18.
 Jack to Amy: How old is your brother?

Play with Food

Both preschool and kindergarten children played with their food. It served as a focal point of the conversation, to help the children pass time while they were eating, and it helped socially construct playful interactions.

Much of the play was transformational, and in assimilative fashion children substituted food for real life objects that they resembled either in form or function. For example, Michaela manipulated a banana like it was a telephone and shaped the peels like a slide, saying "Now I made a slide" while using the table. Maria transformed her circular ice pack into a food item: "Look at my ring today" as she put her finger through the hole of her ice pack. Kindergarten children were also creative with their food play, turning peas into necklaces and mashed potatoes into volcanoes.

Media Influence

As is common with children of this generation, these children were heavily invested in cultural experiences the media provided for them. This included movies, DVDs, computer games, and television. These experiences became fodder for their conversations. For example, the following conversation was generated from the Princess Diaries movie at an all girls table:

- Michaela: My favorite princess is Cinderella!
 Amy: I have all the Princess movies!
 Michaela: Which is your favorite? I like Cinderella. [*Gather around lunch bag pointing to*] "I like that one."

Similarly, at her all girls table Stephania stated, "I watched Hannah Montana and at the end Jackson was in the tub and the kitties were in the tub. You have twinkle toes. Are you three? I'm five." Conversational topics regarding media were often gender specific. For example, the following dialogue occurred at an all boys' table. Girls never discussed these TV and comic characters.

- David: I like Power Rangers.
 Noel: Is there a red one?
 David: Yes and a blue and red one like Spiderman.
 Noel: Are Spiderman power rangers?
 Jamie: There's a pink one.

Kindergarten children also integrated the media in their conversation though their understanding and memory, for the material was more detailed than preschoolers'. For example, the following conversation took place during one lunch and continued for the next few days as a topic. It was based upon the movie "Alvin and the Chipmunks." Jenn, a child with higher social status, controlled the conversation.

- Jenn: Chicky chicky wow wow and dances. [*Noel sings with her in a duet*].
 Jenn: Now was that a boy or a girl who did this? [*She is rotating her hips as she sings*].
 Amy adds: Alvin and the chipmunks did it like this in the movie. Then they threw something at the daddy.
 Julia: Then Alvin hid it behind his head like this and then he sang chicky wow wow.

Gender

Both the preschool and the kindergarten children used more linguistic markers for gender in their conversations and speech. The following is a typical example of preschooler speech that highlights gender as a social category.

- Michaela: We want to play with the boys.
 Amy: Yeah, the boys.
 Michaela: We do want to play.

Kindergarten children illustrated their understanding of gender identity, awareness, and gender as a social construct in the following speech events. Jack was the most popular boy in class and regularly controlled both the topic and the tempo of lunchtime conversations.

- Jack: You are a girl and I am a boy. I'm on your team and you're on my team.
- Jenn: I'm going on, the boys team that mean to chase us.
- Jack to table counting the table:
There's five girls and three boys.
- Bobby: Raise your hand if you are a girl.
- Amy: Raise your hand if you're a boy.
- Jack to Jenn: You need to get someone else on your side.
- Jenn and Wendy: No, she's on my side. I'm on the boy's side.

Friends

Both the preschool and kindergarten children were aware of the importance of friends as playmates. For example, these two preschoolers illustrate their conceptions of friends and their ability to categorize friends by setting.

- James: The other day I slept over my nana's house. Do you know Joseph?
- Nicky: No.
- James: He's my friend. I play with him at home.

The kindergarten children often discussed play dates at their table.

- Talia to Jenn: I'm having a play party and Tom is going to invite you? Can you come to my house?
- Jack to Bobby: I'm still your friend and are you coming to my party?

Some preschool children drew attention to degrees of friendship when it came time to food sharing. This event was reserved only for one's best friend. For example,

- Carin to Jackie: Want a punch (fruit punch)?
- Nicola: He's my best friend.
- Jackie: You don't even know him.
- Nicola: Yes, I do. He's in my gym class.

Daily Events

The children's daily, everyday experiences were often the topic of conversation. In many instances, children both commented on and tried to process their everyday experiences. For example, Talia, a kindergartener, couldn't wait to tell her tablemates about her impending visit to the dentist.

- Talia: I have to go to the dentist. He is going to take pictures. He puts a little thing in and then he takes it out.

- Amy: If your tooth is wiggling, they take a picture.
- Talia: I need to take pictures.
- Steven to Talia: Pictures don't hurt I got a picture right here. My friend used to live across from me. She got a shot in her mouth.
- Talia to Amy and Jenn: You have to go to the dentist even if you don't have a cavity.

In families with siblings often children recounted for their table mates the arrival and/or birth of their new sibling. For example, Jenn to David: "My mom's tummy came apart when she had the baby and they had to put it back together. Next they do that for all moms."

Play with Language

Unexpectedly, kindergarten children enjoyed word play more than the preschool children did. Preschool children tended to sing nonsense syllables or meaningless words. Kindergarten children enjoyed using ordinary words in comical if not borderline taboo ways, hoping to get the attention of adults within earshot.

- Amy: Know what, my brother says "butt." It's a potty word. My other brother says the word too. I eats butt. Mine's a chicken butt, butt, butt.

Taboo Humor

Only the kindergarten children seemed to include taboo topics such as bathroom humor, parodies on etiquette, and things that grossed each other and adults out. The children seemed to take pleasure in these topics and did not seem deterred even if their teacher was within listening distance of their conversation. Jack, one of the most popular boys in class, often introduced the topic and controlled the flow of the conversation.

- Jack to his table: Raise your hand if you eat poop. All raise their hands.
- Jackie: I do like the brains (*be talking about the broccoli in the chicken soup*)
- David: Brains taste like worms. I ate all of mine. They taste like book racks.
- Jackie: Did you hear me? Listen, I am making farting sounds.
- Amy to Jenn: Everybody poops. Everybody eats. Everybody drinks. Everybody pees.

Discussion

The preschool and kindergarten children in this project found table talk to be a social and enjoyable activity. Mealtime conversation was widespread and began as soon as the children unwrapped their food and prepared for mealtime. Although much of the literature has focused upon adult involvement and participation in children's language development, these children primarily conversed with and preferred peer partners during mealtime, even when their teachers were present in the setting.

For example, Massey's (2004) and Dickinson et al.'s (2008) work reported that children were more talkative when an adult was present and seated with the children. Teachers in this project were always in the classroom and near the children, though they never sat with the children while they ate. Interestingly, the children actively engaged their peers in conversation throughout the lunch period and interacted with adults only when they needed assistance of some kind. This was true for both age groups. Girls were primarily responsible for child-initiated speech to their teacher and asked their teachers for assistance more than boys. Boys asked their teachers questions more so than girls.

This contrasts with Leman et al.'s (2005) findings where boys dominated their teacher's attention. This may be due in part to differences in age and contexts. Leman et al.'s work was with older children in collaborative learning groups. The present study involved younger children during mealtime. As a group, girls were more heavily invested in lunchtime conversation than boys and this may be partially explained by differential socialization processes in which girls are more likely to concentrate on the social aspects of their world (Maccoby 1998, 2007).

With respect to conversational topics, food was discussed more than any other topic followed by general declarative statements and family. As Mechling (2000) noted, the most discussed topic – food – was framed in part by the setting. Children also conversed about topics relevant to them such as their family and friends while including topics that are framed by the setting itself such as food. Interestingly, girls were responsible for more than half of conversations revolving around food and this may also be due in part to socialization differences where girls are more attuned to body image and what they eat than boys are (Maccoby 1998; 2007).

These findings contrast with those O'Neill et al. (2009) reported. Several possible factors may explain the differences between their study and the present work. First, in O'Neill et al.'s work, conversations were mainly dyadic, adults were not present in their setting, the setting was a laboratory preschool, and children from Eastern European heritages were included in their sample. They also recorded conversations during snack time rather than lunchtime, seating was prescribed, and food was served buffet style. It is possible that the findings in the current study differ from O'Neill et al due in part to the differences in the setting, freely selected seating, differing meal time events, and the fact that children brought their lunches from home.

Family and daily events surfaced in the children's conversations in part because they were culturally relevant to them and part of their social world (Göncü, 1999).

Interestingly, children included their pets in family topics and when individuals were involved, mothers were the focal family member. None of the children mentioned their fathers in any family conversations. As expected, girls discussed these topics more than boys did. Interestingly, boys talked to each other more than girls and conversed more about family, play dates, and personal events than girls did. Jokes and teasing were rarely observed. This is supported by other empirical findings (Holmes 1992; Reifel 1986). As Mechling (2000) noted, mealtime frames the content of children's speech and their play behavior. Children frequently played with their food and appeared to enjoy doing so (Reifel 1986).

Gender differences also surfaced during play at lunchtime. Both boys and girls enjoyed playing with their food, and this supports Holmes' (1992) work where girls engaged in play with food along with the boys. As Mechling (2000) noted, children's play with food often takes place in the presence of peers and facilitates the use of food as a prop in pretend play. Holmes (1992; 2011) also found that play during mealtime also centered upon the food. Numerous examples in the literature support Mechling's (2000) and Bronner's (1995) utilization of food in this unique way in children's cultures (Holmes 1992; 2011).

Although there is an existing literature on the influence of gender on children's conversations (Leman 2002; Leman, Ahmed, and Ozarow 2005; Leman and Lam 2008), surprisingly few, if any studies have explored how gender influences the extent and content of children's conversations. For example, Leman et al. (2005) found that in mixed collaborative groups, boys capture their teacher's attention more than girls do. In line with Maccoby (1998; 2007), differential gender socialization should influence children's conversations in content, interaction style, and quantity. If one accepts the two cultures approach, girls in the United States generally are socialized to be more cooperative and attuned to social relationships than most boys are. In contrast, boys are socialized to be more competitive and dominant than most girls are (Leman et al. 2005).

Also of interest, findings from this study support those of Holmes (1992) in so far as boys were primarily responsible for the taboo humor and jokes and rhymes. It is possible that engaging in such acts helped boys established their social status in the classroom, whereas girls used conversation as the mechanism with which to solidify this social status. Boys may have played with food more than girls did; however, girls clearly talked about their food more than boys did.

One interesting difference between the preschoolers and kindergarten children was the occurrence of conversations that included taboo humor and bathroom etiquette. Although Guerra (1989) found preschoolers engaged in verbal swaggering – attempts to leave conversations in children's control – these preschooler children neither uttered declarative statements nor discussed any off color material during their lunch time. By contrast, kindergarten children seemed to take pleasure in trying to gross each other out or moving into fuzzy boundaries with taboo body humor such as farting.

There were some limitations and challenges to this study. First, the sample was homogeneous with respect to ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Second, in the preschool lunchtime attendance varied widely. Third, children freely chose their own seats, which often produced single-sex tables. Finally, there was no attempt

to control for the children's familiarity with one another. Thus, some conversations may have been influenced by the children's prior relationships.

Future research might pursue content and text analyses of young children's peer conversations. Such studies will help expand our knowledge about the cultural transmission of knowledge between children, the role of language in that process, and the role of children's peer conversations in helping them interpret and rebel against the adult world. Other studies might focus upon young children's talk as power with peers, given the importance of forming and maintaining friendships in children's lives. Finally, the inclusion of different settings and diverse cultures and the nature of same-age and cross-age conversations would also be interesting avenues to pursue.

NOTES

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