Kidwatching

Documenting Children’s Literacy Development

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To the thousands of children

and many hundreds of teachers

who taught us the power of kidwatching.
We wish to thank the teachers and writers who contributed to the kid-watching and print awareness guides at the University of Arizona—Bess Altwerger, Ann (Marek) Anderson, Lois (Bird) Bridges, Jane Disinger, Nancy Earle, Kenneth Goodman, Wendy (Hood) Goodman, Don Howard, Debra Jacobson, Mary Kitagawa, Carol Woodley, John Woodley, Jackie Wortman, Robert Wortman—and all the other whole language teachers who continue to inform our thinking.
Preface

I am the teacher who is committed to discovering what each of my students knows, cares about, and can do.

I am the teacher who wants to understand each of my student’s ways of constructing and expressing knowledge.

I am the teacher who helps my students connect what they are learning to what they already know.

I am the teacher who respects the language and culture my students learn at home, and who supports the expansion of this knowledge at school.

I am the teacher who knows that there are multiple paths to literacy, and who teaches along each child’s path.

I am the teacher who is committed to social justice and to understanding literacy as a sociocultural practice.

I am the teacher who believes that each child can teach me about teaching, language, and learning.

I am the teacher who believes in the interconnectedness of language, learning, and life.

I am the teacher who supports children in writing I can! on their wings.

I am a kidwatcher.
Kidwatching: Documenting Children’s Literacy Development is a guidebook for preschool, kindergarten, and primary teachers and paraprofessionals wishing to develop and refine their kidwatching (literacy evaluation) practices, and for anyone interested in developing new understandings about how children think and learn. The primary goals of kidwatching are to support and gain insight into children’s learning by (1) intensely observing and documenting what they know and can do; (2) documenting their ways of constructing and expressing knowledge; and (3) planning curriculum and instruction that are tailored to individual strengths and needs. This book will help you learn to kidwatch and, specifically, to develop your knowledge about how children come to know literacy.

In Chapter 1, we answer the question “What is kidwatching?” and provide a description of the tools, techniques, and processes kidwatchers use as they observe and interact with children. Chapters 2 through 7 address particular areas to kidwatch: sociocultural knowledge and experience; print awareness; books and book handling; talk; oral reading and miscues; and writing. Each chapter provides a description of how kidwatching enhances teaching and learning; guidelines and suggestions for kidwatching; and practical tools and resources for documentation and analysis. Rather than a set of directions, you will find a set of potentials to choose from, shape, and adapt to meet your specific needs and interests. Kidwatching looks different from person to person; classroom to classroom; and year to year because each group of children is unique, each educator is unique, and teachers are continually developing and refining their practices.

Whether you are a paraprofessional, teacher, or teacher researcher, it is likely that your interest in kidwatching stems from a desire to enhance your teaching and improve student learning. Kidwatching helps you with this by guiding you through the following:

- learning about children in terms of their identities, experiences, interests, attitudes, family language and literacy practices, and familial and cultural backgrounds
- documenting what individual students know and can do
- using what you learn about individual children and general patterns of development to plan curriculum and instruction
- assessing how the class is doing in terms of meeting curricular goals (whether established at the individual, classroom, state, or national level); reflecting on whether the classroom instruction, materials, physical environment, and social environment provide a variety of ways to meet these goals, in keeping with what is known about child development
- involving students and families in the evaluation process
As you engage in kidwatching, you will find that you are revaluing children. To revalue is to notice and build on what learners can do, and to help them value and reflect on the knowledge they have (K. Goodman 1996b). Value is at the heart of words such as evaluation and revalue. Rather than viewing some children as “low” or “behind” or “lacking in skills,” kidwatching teachers view all children as creative, capable learners—on their way to “achieving control over the conventions of language—always ‘in process,’ always moving forward . . .” (Flurkey 1997, 219). When observing through a kidwatching lens, beginning kidwatchers are always amazed by the intellectual curiosity and learning ingenuity of their students. They learn that while every child needs support in some areas, every child also has strengths.

Each chapter promotes revaluing by suggesting ways to partner with children to document and reflect on their knowledge. The documentation is used to highlight and discuss with children their strengths, interests, and approaches to learning; help them identify their productive (and nonproductive) reading, writing, and learning strategies; and determine next steps in teaching and learning. Such processes provide important information for parents, future teachers, and permanent school records. Thus, in kidwatchers’ classrooms, children are empowered to evaluate and revalue themselves.

The Origins of Kidwatching

Kidwatching has been around for as long as the teaching profession, but the 1930s gave rise to a particularly innovative child-study movement that led to its eventual expansion and refinement. Many educators by the 1930s had begun to carefully observe children, reflecting extensively on their oral and written language use. Although these educators did not refer to themselves as kidwatchers, they were kidwatching—using children’s demonstrated strengths and needs to inform curriculum and instruction.

Yetta’s work from the 1970s and ’80s served to popularize the concept of kidwatching by giving it definition and helping teachers and researchers learn to use it to structure and enhance their work. As her work with kidwatching and kidwatchers has evolved over the past thirty years, so too has the concept (see Y. Goodman 1996a, 1996b; Martens 1997; O’Keefe 1996; Owocki 1999; Whitmore and Goodman 1995).

Before We Begin: A Thought About Standardized Testing

Many parents, educators, and administrators are currently dismayed by the heightened national emphasis on standardized testing. First, pressure to do well on standardized tests often changes how and what we teach. Because standardized tests focus on low-level skills, simple...
facts, and demonstrations of skills in isolation, many teachers feel pressured to focus their instruction in these areas. Second, although “good” test results are valued by many, standardized tests do not serve instructional purposes. They do not help teachers plan meaningful learning experiences because they cannot reveal the competencies that children demonstrate in familiar, everyday home and school settings. Many young children are easily distracted during testing situations, have anxiety about the process, do not easily follow verbally mediated test directions, and have no experience with testlike activities (Hills 1999; Meisels 1995; Salinger 1998). Third, many students’ language and cultural experiences differ vastly from those specific kinds that would help them do well on tests. Any time a state or country full of children is held up to a single model of success, we risk losing our focus on supporting all children. Finally, tests reveal little about children’s approaches to learning and ways of constructing knowledge.

Kidwatching offers a solution. It provides a framework for engaging in systematic, yet very personalized, data collection in all areas of literacy. High-quality kidwatching gives you the information you need to teach effectively, to work with child study teams, and to share detailed, concrete information with families and administrators. Students benefit from your in-depth understandings of their knowledge and ways of knowing, and parents prefer the rich assessment information over scores from multiple-choice tests (Neill 2000).

Kidwatching can also be used to strengthen school reform. The classroom-based assessments provide more helpful profiles of individual students than standardized tests, and can be used to construct schoolwide systems of assessment that actually support student learning (Neill 2000). Groups of teachers, administrators, and family members working together can use kidwatching techniques, along with knowledge about their particular students, contexts, and communities, to develop a common set of principles and evaluation practices that are in tune with local needs and interests. “Students come from many cultures and languages. Instruction and assessment should connect to the local and the culturally particular and not presume uniformity of experience, culture, language, and ways of knowing” (Neill 2000, 138). Focusing on practices that place children in the safe nest of hands formed by teachers and families helps assessment maintain its ideal function—to support student learning.

Reproducibles, found full-size in the appendix, are shown in smaller versions in the text.
“Mona, do you want to stir the bubbles?” Mona stirs as her grandmother reads aloud a bubble recipe, adding one ingredient at a time. “We’re cooking bubbles,” Mona says with satisfaction. Later, using a wand to blow and catch bubbles, she shouts, “I caught-ed one! I caught-ed a bubble!” Her older sister responds: “You caught one? How did you do that?”

Children are language learners by virtue of being born into human society. They construct knowledge about language as they use it to engage with the people and objects in their environments and to make sense of their surroundings (Halliday 1975). Mona’s example, and others in this chapter, illustrates that expansion of oral language and extension of learning happen simultaneously within the highly contextualized settings of early childhood worlds. It is under the influence of their own daily talk and actions, as well as the responses of their family and community, that children expand and fine-tune both their linguistic and their conceptual knowledge. Most language development scholars and researchers agree that children control most features of the grammar of their mother tongue by the time they come to kindergarten.
Why Talk?

Kidwatchers are interested in children’s oral language for two major reasons. First, they know that it is the primary symbol system through which children learn about the world. As we will see, children use talk to facilitate their own thinking and learning in all subject areas, and to jointly construct meaning and knowledge with others. Second, kidwatchers value children’s talk because it is a window into their knowledge and thinking. Observing and documenting children’s talk reveals their knowledge of language functions and forms, their interactional competencies, and what they know about the world around them. The more teachers listen to children talk, the more they see how talk works hand in hand with reading and writing to develop all aspects of language and thinking. As you document, keep in mind that talk in the classroom also involves listening. When we consider talk, we also consider the listening capabilities of children as they attend to their peers and the adults in the community. In this chapter we first explore the ways in which talk facilitates development. Then, we describe the ways in which kidwatchers document and evaluate children’s talk and listening, and use what they learn to sensitively support their development.

A Medium for Thinking and Learning

Harry (age five) and Karla (age four) are writing and drawing together. Harry writes “M-O-M.”

**HARRY:** That spells *mom*, I think.

**KARLA:** If that’s the way you think you spell *mom*, then spell *mom*.

**HARRY:** You know what? I think that’s really how you spell *mom*. You know why? Because at kindergarten today we had to spell *mom*, and I think I remember how to spell *mom*. M-O-M. [then, pointing to each letter as if to confirm what he is saying] Mah . . . oh . . . mom.

Oral language is a medium through which children expand their concepts of the world, including their literacy concepts. Through language, children come face-to-face with their own ideas and, therefore, open them up to new levels of consideration. “Language enables the child to make his idea into a thing, an object, an entity that he can refine, consider, shape, and act on . . .” (Lindfors 1991, 9). For example, Harry has been taught to spell *mom* at kindergarten but uses oral language to reconstruct for himself how it is spelled and why it is spelled that way. By bringing his ideas to a talking place, he is able to shape and reflect on them and, therefore, to shape and expand his thinking.

According to Vygotsky (1978), oral language plays a central role in children’s internalization of all cultural knowledge and mental processes. Children learn as a result of interacting socially and transforming the language and actions of their social experiences into tools for independent thinking. Transformation is not akin to copying, mimicking, or imitating but instead involves a process of *internalization*, in which children select, reconstruct, and modify the communicative and problem-solving tools of their society to meet their own needs. To be a successful language user, Harry must modify and reconstruct the information he experiences socially (including information about spelling) to make it understandable and workable for him. His “mah . . . oh . . . mom” (like Mona’s “catched-ed” overgeneralization) is evidence that children are active sense makers, inventing their own ways of saying things as they are figuring out how language works.

Vygotsky believes that private speech (speech not directed at others, but often taking place in the presence of others) is a transitional medium for internalizing social experiences—a tool that helps children gradually develop control over complex concepts. Initially, “children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as their eyes and hands” (Vygotsky 1978, 26): as they spell, they make sounds aloud; as they compose, they provide oral narratives; as they listen to stories, they say what they are thinking; as
they encounter difficult text, they read aloud. “Sometimes speech becomes of such vital importance that, if not permitted to use it, young children cannot accomplish the given task” (26). Private speech is a tool for internalizing socially learned processes and transforming them into tools for independent thinking.

While all of children’s talk is of interest to kidwatchers, their questions and wonderings are particularly significant. Questions and wonderings are an ideal point at which new learning can take place. Consider the situation in which four-year-old Miguel asks, “How come cheese is not sticky, but it sticks to this [tortilla]?” At such a point, the child has searched for and initiated what he wants to know, and placed himself in a position to use talk to revise his growing theory of the world (Lindfors 1991). An adult who takes initiative at the point of a question or wondering is likely to find a child in his or her zone of proximal development—the place where personal curiosity is aroused and meaningful learning can take place. But, let us rush to say that input from another person is not always needed in order for learning to occur. As important as the social environment is, sometimes when children question and wonder, just the act of thinking—personal inquiry—results in changing conceptions (Oakes and Lipton 1999). We do not teach children all that they know. As active thinkers and language users, they are always learning by sorting out the tensions between social conventions and their own inventions; always trying to make sense of the world and making many discoveries and connections through their own mental processes.

**A Medium for Jointly Constructing Knowledge**

**ANGIE:** I just wrote B-E-A-I-G-I-E-W-E.
**KARLA:** I know what you wrote. This is your name—this . . . Is this your name?
**ANGIE:** No.
**KARLA:** What is—um, it is your name, but it’s not—but you’re not—pretending—it’s not—

**ANGIE:** No, it’s not my name! I know. It’s A-N-G-I-E.
**KARLA:** Oh yeah. But some of those are in your name, right?
**ANGIE:** Yeah, like A, G, I, G, E, right?
**KARLA:** Yeah, and then this E [pointing].

So far, we have placed our focus on the role of language in supporting individual children’s processes of constructing knowledge. Another important matter to consider is the role that language plays in supporting children in jointly, or collaboratively, constructing knowledge. Classroom literacy events are often characterized by children formulating and testing ideas and hypotheses socially—a process that is highly facilitative of their development. For example, talking with Angie gives Karla the opportunity to sort out the notion that there is a difference between unordered (random) letters being used to spell a word and letters that are purposefully ordered. To this point, Karla has not yet incorporated this understanding into her writing. Angie benefits from the exchange, too. As she listens to clarify what Karla knows, she gains experience with taking the perspective of another person. The talk in this event is a tool for these children to bring their implicit understandings and personal knowledge to a meeting place where they can construct new understandings together.

Each classroom literacy event is an opportunity for children to construct knowledge together—to articulate and share information about their hypotheses and ideas, to see how others respond to them, and to see how others approach literacy-related tasks. Children’s ordinary conversations and talking-through procedures teach them to recount and reinterpret events, to display their abilities, to share the process of how they do things, and to encounter and understand the logic behind different points of view—processes that are essential for ultimate success in reading and writing (Graves 1989). Harry’s, Angie’s, and Karla’s talk experiences illustrate that “children benefit from learning.
situations that allow them to explore and to experience in their own ways the symbolic and social medium they are learning” (Dyson 1989, 271).

**Interactions with Children**

Kidwatchers take quite seriously their role in facilitating children’s talk. Skillful kidwatchers learn to listen to children’s language and to use it as a platform for supporting their thinking. Kidlistening is integral to kidwatching. Rather than focusing on language instruction separately from social interactions, kidwatchers focus on helping children expand their uses of language as a tool for thought and action. The following sections describe some of the typical talk strategies teachers use to simultaneously support children’s linguistic and conceptual growth, to ensure that one mutually builds on and nourishes the other.

**Let Children Do the Talking**

As Hannah is reading a short story to her teacher, she pauses to reflect on her thinking:

**HANNAH:** I can read the word *because*, but I can’t remember how to spell it.

**TEACHER:** Yeah. Hmm. Why do you think that is?

**HANNAH:** Maybe because when I look at it—it’s already there, and so, like, I just have to—all I have to do is remember what it looks like. But when I have to spell it, I have to think of all the letters, all by myself.

The best way to simultaneously support children’s language and conceptual growth is to encourage their talk. As we have seen, talk is a valuable tool for thinking, learning, and jointly constructing knowledge. In the example, Hannah is the talker, with the teacher playing a supporting role. As such, it is the child’s questions and thoughts that drive the interaction. Unafraid to let children take the lead in classroom learning, kidwatchers genuinely listen to their talk and thoughtfully respond to their ideas. Through listening and responding, they learn what children know, what’s hard for them, and what’s easy, enabling themselves to sensitively build on children’s conceptualizations.

If you reread Hannah’s example and Karla’s example in the previous section, you will notice that their talk is exploratory—characterized by a hesitant, fragmented verbal construction and reconstruction of ideas (Barnes 1993). Karla seems uncertain of what she wants to say and how to say it, and almost sounds as if she is thinking aloud. Hannah seems forced by her language to clarify for herself what she is thinking. “The struggle to communicate with someone who only half understands can contribute to the clarification of the speaker’s own thinking... students’ own efforts to express their understandings are a major means of enhancing learning” (Barnes 1993, 344). Often, when children struggle with language, teachers supply the tough expressions for them. Yet, “the struggle itself is important for both the child’s thinking and for his languaging. If we can hold our tongues, we do the child a service. There is no surer way for him to become the master of idea than to render it expressible” (Lindfors 1991, 268).

**Jointly Negotiate Concepts**

At recess, Evan is playing with a small toy, but when his fingers become too cold, he brings it inside to his teacher, Christian Bush.

**EVAN:** [opening and closing his hands] My hands were too cold to play with it. Now, they’re evaporating.

**CHRISTIAN:** [taking one of his cold hands between her warm hands] Let’s see...what other word could describe what you are feeling—because, remember what evaporation means?

**EVAN:** [looks up for a moment, as if thinking] Oh yeah. [thinks some more] Vibrating. They’re vibrating.

**CHRISTIAN:** Vibrating. Frostbit. Thawing.

Another way to support children’s linguistic and conceptual development is to jointly negotiate concepts with them. Joint negotiation is characterized by meaningful
activity in which the teacher and child work together toward a goal or solution, with the teacher using language that is just beyond what the child might use independently. Teachers “speak at the level where . . . children can comprehend them and [they] move ahead with remarkable sensitivity to [the] child’s progress” (Bruner 1983, 39). Such communications help children learn how to extend their language into new contexts and settings. Joint negotiation makes sense because it occurs within children’s zones of proximal development. Teachers follow and lead at the same time, listening to children and inspiring uses of language that are just beyond what they might use on their own.

Encourage Reflection
Christian is teaching her students how to write a script.

CHRISTIAN: Now, tell us what a script is, Max—and I’m asking Max because he’s already had experience with this.

MAX: It’s a piece of paper where you write down what you’re going to do in the puppet show. Because, if you don’t write it down, you’re going to mess up and you have to start over and over again.

CHRISTIAN: Max, do you remember when you wrote down what each person was going to say? Why was that important?

MAX: Because if you don’t write it out, people won’t know what to say and they will talk at the same time.

A third way of supporting children’s linguistic and conceptual development is to encourage reflective dialogue. The goal is to raise issues and pose questions that help children to reflect on what they know, and to relate new concepts and ideas to those they have developed already. In teaching scriptwriting, for example, Christian does not simply tell her students what to do. Instead, letting Max take the lead, she helps them analyze the format of a script and think about why its particular form is important. Christian understands that children learn not through doing only, but through reflecting on doing (Adelman 1992). If she wants them to internalize the concepts she is teaching, they need to reflect on why and how they work. To encourage reflection, Christian typically asks children questions about what they know, how they know, how they learned it, and why things work the way they do. Asking such questions not only prompts children to visit, revisit, reflect on, and share their thinking processes, it also shows them that these thinking processes are important.

Provide Substantive Responses
Which column contains the substantive responses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I liked your demonstration.</td>
<td>What kind of practice did it take to get ready for this demonstration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You listened well today.</td>
<td>You seemed very interested today. What caught your interest?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your pictures are great.</td>
<td>Your pictures helped me enjoy your story. How did you think to include the little anchor?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another way to simultaneously support children’s linguistic and conceptual development is to provide substantive responses to their demonstrations of knowledge. Clearly, the responses given in column B are more substantive than those in column A. They point to a particular strength or competency, rather than being general in nature or focused on praising the child, and they prompt children to talk and think further. In addition to a specific focus on children’s actions, the teacher’s language focuses on their thinking. Kidwatchers attempt feedback that is primarily substantive because it keeps student language going and fosters its further development. Substantive responses show children that teachers are aware of their developing competencies, acquaint children with the descriptive terms
used by adults, help them reflect back on the work they have done, and, overall, serve to keep their language going.

**A Rich Talk Environment**

If we want children’s language to come to life in the classroom, we have to provide a rich environment for learning. Christian is a first-grade teacher who has arranged to do just that. Enter her classroom at almost any time of day, and you are likely to notice that it is a lively place for inquiry, collaboration, thinking, teaching, sharing, laughing, and learning. The children’s talk tells it all:

“Pee pi po pum. Who’s that walking on my bridge? I’m going to eat you up.”

“How do you spell *bite*?”
“B-I-T.”
“How do you spell *are*?”

“That’s the easiest word in the world! R!”

“Cheetahs can run 70 miles an hour. Miles. M-I-L-S.”
“No, Max, it’s M-I-L-Z.”
“Z! Don’t just think that Z makes the same kind of S.”

“Once when I was little I had to stay in a hospital and I had the ‘monia. And I was like three months—five months old and they had to put me in a crib and . . .”

Observing Christian’s students at work and play, it is easy to see that they are simultaneously making discoveries about language and the world. In such an environment, knowledge about one feeds knowledge about the other, and mutually, they spiral toward higher planes.

What is Christian’s role in arranging such an environment? First, in collaboration with
her students, she enacts a curriculum that inspires their interests. Using district and state materials as general guidelines, she lets children’s questions, wonderings, and knowledge determine the specifics of what they will do. If Christian were to do all the deciding, the curriculum would belong to her, and the children would need to do little talking, thinking, and learning. As it stands, they want to share their knowledge and use language to question, inquire, and think.

Second, Christian ensures that her students find a variety of reasons to use language to explore curricular concepts. Depending on the conceptual goal (let’s say it’s to compare their community and region with others), she may encourage them to tell stories, retell events, report information, request information, explain how to do something, plan an event, or pose a problem. As the functional need to use language arises, Christian teaches elements of form. On myriad occasions, she demonstrates the language that learners use to organize and inquire about the world. For example, when the children expressed an interest in performing puppet shows, she taught them how scripts are organized. When groups needed a way to efficiently share what they were learning, she showed them how to use a chart to organize information. When they wanted to tell others about stories they had read, she demonstrated the use of story webs. When they were collecting information about families, she taught them how to conduct an interview. The quality and range of opportunities children have to use oral language significantly affect their progress and development as talkers, listeners, and learners (Barr et al. 1999).

Third, the physical environment in Christian’s classroom promotes socialization. The furniture is arranged to support whole-group meetings (a large rug with a stool), small-group work (a class library, work centers, tables, beanbag chairs, pillows, and empty floor space), and pairs working together (plenty of inviting nooks and crannies, and a computer with two chairs). Depending on the children’s needs, they quickly find appropriate spaces in which to work together.

Fourth, Christian believes that a sense of safe community is essential if learning is to occur to its fullest potential. In order for the social environment to promote talk, children must find themselves in a community that is welcoming of many language possibilities. Children, regardless of language or dialects spoken, regardless of conceptual understandings, and regardless of facility with language, are encouraged to take the risks associated with using talk to try out new ideas and to build knowledge together. Christian helps her students feel safe by fostering a classroom culture in which all children are seen as competent to read, write, and talk. From day one, she responds to children claiming they “can’t” with, “Well, show me what you can do, so I can help you grow,” or “Could you pretend to [write or read]? That will give us a place to begin.” Children who are hesitant to talk are helped to develop strategies for group participation: “Tell us what you drew.” “If you can’t read what you wrote, then tell us about it.” When a child says something that is treated as “out of whack” by other children, Christian responds with, “Wait. Everyone sees things differently. Let’s listen so we can see in a new way.” Throughout the year, she makes a point to help students understand that language and literacy develop over time; children do not write or draw or talk like adults, nor does she expect them to do so. Christian’s focus is on developing a classroom culture in which learners take risks with language and actively, sensitively listen to what others have to say.

Finally, with Christian’s help, her students have learned that there are twenty-nine experts in the classroom, each with unique and important knowledge. Children as well as adults have funds of knowledge that enrich the classroom community. For example, Evan and Cayla know how to spell lots of hard words and can read almost any print in the classroom; Max and Mark know how to organize a script and put together a puppet show; Kiara knows how to fix the classroom pencil...
sharpener, and is even good at unclogging the tiny ones brought from home; Jake knows lots about insects, and for that matter, knows lots about just about everything. In a classroom full of experts, where children have a say in what they learn and how they learn, language and concepts are inextricably linked and grow in new directions together.

### Guidelines for Observation and Documentation

There is no question that talk has a tremendous impact on what and how children learn. If we want to develop appropriate educational experiences for children, we must listen to them talk. Observations of children’s talk in a variety of settings help teachers develop insight into their language and conceptual growth and evaluate the ways in which the talk environment promotes or detracts from learning. Teachers document talk primarily through anecdotal records, field notes, and audiotapes. Depending on the teacher’s purpose, brief quotes are documented on sticky notes or clipboards (accessible around the room) and longer stretches of talk are recorded and then transcribed or listened to at a later time. The following sections comprise a framework to consider when evaluating talk and the talk environment. The items for evaluation focus on observing children (1) as they talk and listen in different situations and settings; (2) as they explore different language functions and forms; (3) as they demonstrate different interactional competencies; and (4) as they demonstrate language and conceptual knowledge about various aspects of the world. The items should not be viewed as absolutes but should be altered and carefully selected to suit your evaluation purposes.

### Observing Talk in Different Contexts

Kidwatchers observe children as they talk and listen in different situations and settings to identify the learning contexts in which they seem most comfortable, and those in which they need most support. Figure 5–1 lists some important groupings and kinds of talk/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whole Class</th>
<th>Individual Child: ______________________________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Talk</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One-to-One with Adult</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One-to-One with Peers</strong> (record peer names)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Chosen Peer Group</strong> (list names)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher-Chosen Peer Group</strong> (needs-based; children who seldom talk in groups; children who talk often; etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small Instructional Group</strong> (observe across changes in subject matter)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whole Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Play Settings</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproducible, see p. 109

**FIGURE 5–1** Talk Contexts

listening to consider. You may use this as an anecdotal note-taking form on a case-by-case basis with any child who seems to be struggling in the talk environment, or as a tool for evaluating the overall quality of talk in your classroom. Either way, make a plan to observe four or five instances of each category on the form, and then develop a set of questions or use questions such as those listed in the first two sections of Figure 5–2 to focus your analysis.

### Observing Language Functions and Forms

Another important lens for evaluating talk is in terms of the functions it serves in facilitating communication and learning. Functions refer to the reasons or purposes for using language, such as to report information or express
The goals in evaluating children’s functional uses of language are to ensure that (1) classroom talk serves as a tool for children to construct and express knowledge in a variety of ways, and (2) children’s language learning constantly reaches out to meet new challenges. Figure 5–3 lists some specific language functions that foster classroom learning. One way to use Figure 5–3 is as a quick check to ensure that your classroom provides opportunities for children to construct and express knowledge in a variety of ways. We suggest that you use the list to make your own chart of the functions that are most important in your classroom. Another way to use Figure 5–3 is as a tool to document the knowledge and growth of each child, or of particular children who may need extra support in the areas listed.

With every function comes a set of language forms, or structures that take their shape depending on the purpose and meaning of the language. For example, “Let’s pretend” and “Once upon a time” are forms conducive to creating imaginative worlds. “First . . . next . . . last . . .” and “Here’s how I do it . . .” are forms conducive to explaining how to do or make something. If children are exploring a variety of functions, rest assured that they are exploring a variety of forms. Just “create the

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**FIGURE 5–2 Questions for Evaluating Talk**

- **Questions for Documenting and Supporting Individual Children’s Growth**
  - How comfortable is the child speaking with the teacher, one other child, small groups? How does this change across contexts and subject matter?
  - How is the child using talk as a tool for learning and thinking? How does this change across contexts?
  - In what situations and settings does the child benefit most from language use?
  - If the child speaks two languages, how does language use vary across contexts and subject matter?

- **Questions for Evaluating the Talk Environment**
  - Which settings, situations, and experiences promote exploratory talk and which do not?
  - Who is doing most of the talk in various settings? How does this affect the quality of learning for all children?
  - Whose talk is valued/whose questions do we pursue as a class? What is the nature of these questions?
  - What evidence do I have that children who do not talk much are learning, listening intently, expanding their functional uses of language, and developing their interactional competencies?
  - In any given setting, how does talk relate to what children are reading and writing, and to other classroom learning experiences (Wells 1990)?
  - What questions do children ask? What do their questions indicate about their views of what is important? Who do they ask?

- **Questions for Teacher Self-Evaluation**
  - How do I jointly negotiate concepts with students? How do I encourage them to use language to reflect on their ideas and thinking? What is the nature of my questioning? What is the nature of my feedback?
  - What functions and interactional competencies do I value? What topics do I value? Is the classroom environment conducive to exploring a variety of functions and topics?
  - How do I support children in expanding their functions and interactional competencies?
  - How would I characterize my own talk in various situations and settings?
  - Have I learned to value new kinds of talk? Have I learned to value quiet listeners?
  - How do I support all of my students in using language to learn, including bilingual students?
"context and the rest will follow" (Short, Harste, and Burke 1996, 10).

When examining the functions listed in Figure 5–3, it is important to recognize that oral facility with each of these supports written facility. For example, children who learn to report information or explain how to do something have important knowledge for writing nonfiction text. Children who can tell a cohesive, logically sequenced story have important understandings for structuring a story in writing. Children who learn to freshly describe a feeling or sensory experience become successful poetry writers. At times, teachers act as scribes, to demonstrate how oral language changes as it is transformed to written forms.

Over time, teachers watch for children to expand and fine-tune their uses of language functions and forms. Figure 5–4 shows an adapted version of Figure 5–3, developed for observing individuals. Even if you just check off the items for individual children, or take brief notes, parents find conversations around such forms useful in understanding the kinds of language that are supportive of school learning. Also, parents may offer insights into children’s thinking and language uses that have not been visible to you in the school setting.

Observing Interactional Competencies
Along with monitoring children’s exploration of language functions and forms, kidwatchers
monitor their interactional competencies. Figure 5–5 lists a set of competencies that support children’s learning and interacting in a classroom setting. Because each child and each group is unique, it is a good idea to adapt the list to meet the needs of your particular students. As you develop your own form, you may wish to leave space to record anecdotes and examples. This will be particularly helpful if you plan to use it on a case-by-case basis with children who are struggling in the talk environment, or if you plan to share detailed information with parents.

In general, over the course of the year, kidwatchers document children’s interactional competencies to ensure that they are developing their capabilities to use language to learn, and that they are demonstrating empathy and careful attention to the feelings and views of others. They collaborate and conference often with children and parents as they document and reflect. Not only does this bring to light (for all of you) the competencies that are conducive to classroom learning, it also helps you in understanding the competencies children may be demonstrating at home but not in school. Locating instances of success outside of school helps you bring such instances into the classroom.

Observing Knowledge Demonstrated Through Talk

We have discussed ways of observing children’s functional uses of language, as well as their interactional competencies. We also believe it is important to observe and document the general knowledge children demonstrate through talk. As we have said all along, kidwatchers regularly ask:

1. What does the child know about language?
2. What evidence is there that development is taking place?
3. When a child produces unexpected or unconventional language, what does it tell about the child’s knowledge?

These questions may be extended into content areas. For example, as part of a class inquiry focused on insects, you might ask:

1. What scientific language does the child use to construct and express knowledge about insects?
2. What evidence is there that the child is demonstrating more sophisticated uses of language in the talk about insects?
3. When the child uses language about insects unconventionally, what does it tell about the child’s knowledge?

Learning any content involves learning the language needed to construct and express knowledge about that content. Talk is an ideal medium for monitoring children’s con-
ceptual and linguistic growth in all content areas.

**An Environment That Recognizes Difference**

Part of your growth as a kidwatcher will involve making continual efforts to learn about language differences that may be a result of children’s membership in varying language and cultural groups, and to clarify and analyze your understandings, attitudes, and perceptions about these differences. “As teachers of children from different cultural backgrounds, we need to understand that our particular language and literacy socialization in large part contributes to how we interpret and generate classroom activities. The more we learn about the diverse experiences and needs of our students, the better prepared we will be to question existing practices and create educationally and culturally appropriate activities for all of our students” (Faltis 1997, 27–28).

Kidwatchers make a conscious effort to deconstruct the implicit assumptions they may have developed, and to consider the role these assumptions play in creating conditions for learning. Following is a set of linguistic and cultural characteristics to consider as a starting point for reflection. Any of the items in the set may vary across individuals within your classroom community. Your task is to consider what these variations mean to you, and how they influence your interactions with children. Children demonstrate varying

- orientations toward public performance (feelings about speaking in front of a group; feelings about publicly demonstrating knowledge)
- patterns of turn taking (overlapping vs. clear-cut turns; ways of using pauses; perceptions of what constitutes an interruption; echoing)
- question/answer practices (levels of familiarity with being asked questions to which the adult already knows the answer, e.g., “What color is this?”)
- sensitivity to language variation (tendencies to switch from one language or dialect to another; views of “low-status” dialects; capacities for speaking languages other than English in the classroom)
- uses of gesture and eye contact to show attention, understanding, emotion, and interest
- views of adult and child roles (expectations in terms of how much talk the child does; how much talk the adult does; what the child has license to say)
- orientations toward competition and collaboration
- ways of giving and receiving help
- ways of telling and interpreting stories
- word choices for conveying meanings (“That’s dangerous” vs. “Get off that rail”)

If you are interested in further reading, our list draws from the work of Erickson (1986), Faltis (1997), Heath (1983), Lindfors (1991), McWhorter (2000), Phillips (1983), Ruiz (1991), Smitherman (1999), Taylor (1983), and Wolfram, Adger, and Christian (1998). Their work has helped us to understand the importance of teachers valuing language diversity as a resource (rather than seeing it as a problem) and working to make their classrooms a place for all children to use language to its fullest potential—for communicating, learning, and thinking.

**Student Self-Evaluation**

As with any aspect of knowledge, it is important that students learn to evaluate their own use of talk. As teachers work with children in this area, they discuss with them what they need to do to make their communication successful. Figure 5–6 provides a list of items to consider for student self-evaluation.
Conclusion: Using What You Learn

Before children enter school, most of their language is celebrated. Families, caregivers, neighbors, and peers are excited by young children’s attempts to communicate and seldom correct their grammar or phonology, but do respond to misconceptions about the world: “That’s a plane, not a birdie.” Intuitively they know that communication, rather than correctness, is the purpose of using language. Sometimes, however, when children move into schools, certain aspects of language learning are frowned upon and actually discouraged. Some children are not permitted to talk until their “work” is done; some are corrected each time they use language unconventionally. In some classrooms, the teacher does most of the talking. Some children learn very early that it is better to use language as little as possible in certain settings, notably—and regrettably—in the classroom.

Kidwatchers value talk. They know that embedded in a talk-filled classroom are the social supports that are central to the livelihood of the learning environment. Participating in talk helps children focus their thinking, make their implicit understandings more precise, and internalize cultural knowledge. It helps children articulate and refine their hypotheses and ideas, share information, and get feedback on their current knowledge and ways of knowing. In a classroom in which children have agency to talk and collaborate, they not only develop language, they develop their ability to use it as a tool for learning about the world.

FIGURE 5–6 Questions for Student Self-Evaluation

• When is it easiest for me to talk? What makes it easy?
• When is it easiest for me to listen? What makes it easy?
• When is it hard for me to talk/listen? What makes it hard? What can I do to change this?
• With whom do I like to talk?
• Who is a good talker in our classroom? What makes that person good? What makes me a good talker?
• Who is a good listener? What makes that person good? What makes me a good listener?
• What kinds of things do I like to talk about? How can I use this to support my learning?
• Why do people talk? Why is it important that we talk in our classroom?
• How does my talk and listening help my group/our class have good discussions? What do I say that isn’t helpful?
• How am I doing with sharing what I know or am learning with my classmates? With my teacher? With my family?

• Who is a good listener? What makes that person good? What makes me a good listener?
• What kinds of things do I like to talk about? How can I use this to support my learning?
• Why do people talk? Why is it important that we talk in our classroom?
• How does my talk and listening help my group/our class have good discussions? What do I say that isn’t helpful?
• How am I doing with sharing what I know or am learning with my classmates? With my teacher? With my family?
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