

# A Child Language Expert Talks About The Literacy Gap And The '6 Cs' Of Learning

Paul Jablow 27 February 2015

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek is a psychology professor at Temple University, where she is also the Stanley and Debra Lefkowitz Faculty Fellow and director of Temple's Infant & Child Laboratory. Hirsh-Pasek said research showing that children in poverty usually hear far fewer words than their better-off counterparts is important. But she said this issue has been viewed too simplistically. Quality counts just as much as quantity, she said. The *Notebook* interviewed Hirsh-Pasek about early literacy and the challenges facing children who are learning to read.

**You've talked about high-quality conversations as compared to low-quality conversations. Could you give an example?**

I'll cite this example from the Foundation for Child Development, called "Three mothers and an eggplant." They go into the supermarket and the child sees an eggplant. And she goes, "What's that?" And the first mom sees what the child is looking at and says, "You won't like

it," and moves on. Mom No. 2 says, "That's an eggplant. You won't like it," and moves on. But at least she labeled it. The third mother says, "That's an eggplant. Isn't that pretty? It's purple. It's a kind of vegetable. It might be fun to make something with eggplants."

The point is that when we notice what they're noticing, when we comment on it from the child's point of view, we're engaged with what's of interest to the child. When we're building on what they're saying, that adds a quality to their speech and continues their speech. And it builds vocabulary.

It's a conversational duet, like serve and return in tennis. It doesn't all have to be about words. It can be gestures. It can be the two of us looking at the same thing at the same time.

**Let's say the kid hasn't had this, for whatever reason. How much is lost? How much can we recover? Can they catch up in school?**

Truth be known, we don't know. Studies that have been done show that the gap gets wider and wider. [They also show] that the gap has been traced back to 7, 8, 9 months of age, when you start to see these huge differences in language and vocabulary.

Redressing that gap [earlier] is not just easier, it's doable. Many of us believe that we're not doing a good job, and the reason is that we're not starting early enough.

## **You've talked about the importance of play. Can we discuss that?**

Play is where you learn a lot of language, use a lot of language. Did you ever notice how much kids concentrate when they're at play? If we capture their attention and keep them on task longer, they'll learn more.

## **So teaching to the test doesn't help this?**

Of course not. It helps the child memorize, parrot back. Take vocabulary as an example. Many of us have studied for the SATs. I'd challenge any of us to take that vocab test today. We didn't learn those words. We memorized them for the test. Transferring what you know to a whole new problem is a different ball game.

I don't say memorization is a bad thing. You need it for things like the multiplication tables. You need to get some basic information. But that's not what learning is about.

We know children can't solve new problems as well if all they've done is memorize.

The United States is way behind in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tests. We're the memorizers. We're not the ones who know how to analyze a problem and apply it.

## **I'd always heard the Chinese are the memorizers.**

Actually, the Chinese have moved on. They hired the

Drucker Foundation and many others to do a complete revamp of their education system. We're going where the Chinese were. It's not the way it should be.

Education in 2015 isn't just about memorizing factoids. I talk about "The Six Cs" in my forthcoming book, *The Learning Illusion*.

## **What are they?**

- Collaboration: If you don't know how to work in teams, then you're going to be in trouble.
- Communication: The quality of communication builds on listening ... something we're really not good at.
- Content: You can't master the content if you don't know how to read and write and listen.
- Critical thinking: You can't have critical thinking if you don't have content, but if you only have content, it's like buying out Acme.
- Creative innovation: Putting things together in new ways.
- The Confidence to take on intellectual risks: A lot of the high-stakes testing we have done has beaten out of us the sense that we should stick to a problem and have grit. And it's beaten out of us that failure is a good thing. Failure is a great thing. No one ever became great without failing at least once.
- And in high-stakes testing, failure is the non-reward. We're teaching people to cheat.

## **What about kids who have those high-quality conversations and develop strong language skills but have difficulty reading?**

Any reading method I pull out of a hat will be great for 80 percent of the kids. Unfortunately, it's not the same 80 percent. We're always going to have some children who are going to fall through the cracks and need some remediation.

It's very much like medicine. You want to earmark where the problem is and go in and intervene.

## **And poverty makes it less likely that a child will be diagnosed or treated?**

Yes. And you'll have dual risks. More than one risk. If you look at the discussions about food, it's the same issue. We can talk about the value of having Whole Foods in a neighborhood. Do you know what Whole Foods costs?

Let's look at the realities people are living in. I'm not saying that if you have the quality conversations, everything will be great. I'm just saying it's a necessary ingredient.

***Paul Jablow is a regular freelance contributor to the Notebook.***