The indigenous child’s use of language in her home

Submitted to the

**21st International Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education Conference**

***Re-claiming the Indigenous Child, Family and Community; Pedagogies of Place***

Kenyatta University • November 3 - 7, 2013

Kenyatta University Conference Centre • Nairobi, Kenya

1. **Names, affiliations, addresses, and e-mail addresses of all presenters on a separate page for blind review**

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1. **Brief title, capturing the primary focus, concern, or topic of the session**

The indigenous child’s use of language in her home

1. **Brief rationale explicating the theoretical grounding of the session, and its relevance to the theme and interests of the conference**

What is language good for anyway? Why does the indigenous infant [an Anglicized word from Old French for ‘without speech’] attend to words of her native place, and their consequent ideas?

In a social constructivist model, the child uses tools of the mind to create reality. Among many facile tools at her beck and call, such as sensory integration, curiosity, grouping, and ordering, her phenomenal capacity for language outshines them all. For it is with language that the child creates all other tools. Indeed it is with language, the child creates her reality.

The typical child comes to us wired to connect. Surely this is biologic, evolutionary, a trait the survivors learned to pass along to their beautiful progeny. Or is it that Language is the very substance of being itself? Attachment aids in survival, food, security, and other essentials for sustaining life. But much more is going on here. The indigenous child connects with the unique people of her own place, with distinguishing dialect, socio-economic hierarchy, and genetics. These connections occur in powerful ways that tie the man the child will become to the early, primitive experiences of infancy, and her early language development.

The work of the child is to build relationships. Another view of this connectivity resides in the power of language to do things. The child connects to find tools with which to construct reality. Some language acquisition researchers propose that ‘all language is new machinery, made out of old parts’. This tool work puts the child in the center of constructivism, not a pawn or victim, or recipient of a teacher’s lessons.

Among the units of language acquired through responsive interaction, the child discovers phonemes. She babbles, and coos, she mimics and discovers that most of the 100+ sounds in her repertoire are not needed for whatever local dialect. My Texan granddaughters parse their phonemes down to about 44, and their California cousins recognize these sounds as if their own.

Next up, perhaps, the work of the morpheme reveals its power to the child. By adding an s to nouns in English, the one becomes many, or the verb remains single. The elegant script of Hangul, the written language of the Korean language, organically derives its organization of characters and syllables around the morpheme block, that smallest unit of meaning upon which language and writing are based.

But what of the pragmeme? Dell Hymes described the acquisition of communicative [pragmatic] competence as ‘knowing when to speak, and when not to, what to talk about, and with whom, when, where, and in what manner to interact.’ Students of the child’s acquisition of pragmatic competence can identify the environment, the classroom, the nature of responsive interaction with which the child constructs meaningful engagements. But the ‘what’ of pragmatic competence, isolating the transference of this unit of cultural ‘withitness’ evades us. We are much like the time warp between Gregor Mendel and Watson & Crick. In 1865, Mendel described the influence of parentage upon progeny with his explanation of over 20,000 experiments with peas. Eighty-eight years later, in a publication in the journal, *Nature*, James Watson and Francis Crick unzipped the double helix to reveal the [then thought] smallest units of DNA. We are in that time warp now concerning the transference of the pragmeme. We know that responsive interaction provides the human child with tools to become a member of her tribe, a native speaker of her dialect, a natural by virtue of her language; but how this happen remains zipped up. We know not the pragmeme; what is the smallest unit of pragmatic competence?

The responsive classroom looks for ways to multiply the languages for learning, scaffolds with which the child builds a space for herself in the world. The tools in the teacher’s facile hands – and breath – include naming, describing, questioning, wondering, and waiting. While each facet of language work amplifies the whole, like facets of a true-struck diamond, it is in strategic, expectant waiting that the teacher provides the learner with the strongest elements of language construction. The attentive, responsive caregiver watches the child, and follows her lead. The child’s initiative to acquire language outstrips any external motivation to teach her. The patient, observant participant with the young child makes space for the child’s entrance into the language milieu. The two create a Phatic Dyad, a dance of phenomenal, immeasurable consequences with which the child learns how to get along in the world of her partner.

What is language used for anyway? The indigenous child uses language to belong, to connect, and to create a reality within which to grow and prosper, as afforded her by her language partners.

1. **Indication of session type (e.g., interactive discussion; roundtable paper presentation; workshop; panel)**

30 minute individual interactive workshops

1. **Indication of provisions for involving audience participation, and format (overhead, PowerPoint, etc.)**

Brief handout, corresponding website for follow-up, audio clips of responsive interaction with young children constructing language

1. **100 word abstract for inclusion in the conference program**

What is language used for anyway? The indigenous child uses language to belong, to connect, and to create a reality within which to grow and prosper, as afforded her by her language partners. Examining how language use affects the indigenous child’s construction of her own language use potentially leads us to enriching her early language environment with language that liberates and empowers her construction of her [new] native tongue. This interactive workshop reviews research and practice on language acquisition environments in Texas, Solomon Islands, and in Cameron. What is language used for in your place?

(95 words)