“Look, Sarah, These Are Words!”

In my fieldnotes, Tommy is starting to take notice of words, poems, and books. Tommy was at an early stage of identifying himself as a reader and a writer; he was beginning to understand the relationship between the books we read every day, the words we wrote, the pictures he drew, and the potential of using those as a form of communication with significant others, such as his mother, myself, or Sarah, my intern. As Tommy began to pay more attention to the books and the words, he saw that they might have special meaning for him. When he told me he was going to “write a poem,” he was acting on an aesthetic response to a book of poetry we had read by aspiring to write his own poems. That desire presented a window through which he began to “see” the words that surrounded him and use those words for his own purposes.

As a teacher, I cling firmly to the belief that every student who walks into my classroom should be offered the opportunity to deeply engage in the subject matter of every discipline. In other words, I want each student I teach to begin acquiring the many different discourses that will make him or her successful in school, and in life. This is a multiple literacy, or multiliteracies, approach to schooling. Within this framework, the process of education from kindergarten straight through graduate school is one of working to master different discourses at increasing levels of complexity. For me, then, discourse acquisition is the lynchpin of schooling; it is the point at which real educational equity occurs. Acquiring discourse is more than learning the names and dates of events in history, or regurgitating the main themes in a short story. It is learning to walk, talk, write, think, and perhaps even dress, like a historian, a writer, a mathematician, an artist, or a scientist (Gee, 1996). The more ways of being you acquire, the more discourses you master, and the more easily you move through the different strata of society and the world.

Fieldnotes, January 4:
Tommy comes to me and says he’s “going to write a poem.” He gets a pencil and paper, sits at a table, writes a bit, then asks me how to spell the. I stand him up, take him over to the “doozer” list on the wall, and show him the word the. He returns to his paper, writes, then comes over to show me. On the page, I see he’s written, “Look at the bo.” He reads it, “Look at the bird,” and says, “I don’t know how to spell bird. We sound out the last letter, and he sits down to finish the word, adding a d. He folds the paper up and says, “I’m going to write more poems.” He walks over to the class library, takes out a copy of an Eyewitness book on mammals, and copies that word.

Shows me. I read it. “That’s like animals,” he says. We discuss what a mammal is. As I walk away, he takes out a book of poetry we recently read and copies that title. A bit later he asks me for an envelope to put the second paper in for his mother. He walks over to Sarah, shows her the paper and says, “Look, Sarah, these are words.”

As students like Tommy take on the role and point of view of a reader, mathematician, artist, writer, geographer, musician, actor, scientist, or poet, they also come in contact with the language, tools, texts, and forms of inquiry specific to that subject, what has been called the “tool kit” (Wertsch, 1991) of a discourse. This process of discourse appropriation occurs when productive contact with the “tool kit” fuels a deeper identification with the subject, thus increasing the student’s desire to master it, which in turn fuels the desire to have more contact, and so on.

Nemerov (1978) explains the process of discourse appropriation. “The
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