

Book Reviews

Meaningful Differences in Everyday Experience of Young American Children. Betty Hart & Todd Risley. Baltimore: H. Brookes, 1995. \$22.00. 268 pp.

True to its title, *Meaningful Differences* is a thought-provoking attempt to explain the impact of parenting and language experience on early childhood development. Hart and Risley report their experiences with families involved in their project, examine several aspects of their data, and illustrate their increased personal understanding of the families they painstakingly followed over the years.

Hart and Risley begin their study with the premise that language experience and ability affect cognitive performance and is therefore important in decisions concerning where and how to intervene with young children. The first chapter of *Meaningful Differences* focuses on factors that the authors hypothesize affect child performance. These factors include vocabulary growth as a culturally unbiased measure of accumulated experience and language use as a measure of language skill. Hart and Risley also define how each of these factors are routinely used in their intervention program.

The following two chapters describe the study's research methodology, the sample of 42 families from three socioeconomic levels (welfare, working class, professional), and similarities and differences in language style, parenting, and sociability. The authors are sensitive in their description of the families' needs and life situations. Hart and Risley carefully supplement descriptions of participants with qualifiers of how the families vary in resources and availability of experiences. This care is helpful to the reader, allowing a better understanding of how disparities in resources and interaction styles cause variability within and between participant classifications. This quality of description is maintained throughout the remaining chapters. The au-

thors offer plentiful specific examples of how concepts play out in "real life" among families in very different circumstances.

The discussion that takes place in the next three chapters expands on findings generated from years of monthly observations with individual families. Data ranged from parenting characteristics, quality of language, and experience with language and interaction. By chapter 7, *Meaningful Differences* arrives at the culmination of the accomplishments of the children participants at three years and beyond. Hart and Risley describe a group of children who are a joy to observe as they function competently, but with some marked differences.

This discussion leads the reader to wonder how variables such as language experience and language diversity affect young children in their school years. Fortunately for their readers, Hart and Risley, in conjunction with Dale Walker, PhD (University of Kansas), present a study using a subset of their original child participants who had just turned nine years old. These researchers were able to examine the relationships among early environmental factors such as child language and parenting experiences at age three, and cognitive functioning and performance at age nine.

Appropriately, *Meaningful Differences* concludes with a statement about the importance of the first three years of life. Hart and Risley emphasize the issue of cumulative experiences, how they build over the first three years, and how repeated experiences might have positive or negative impacts on children. Fortunately, *Meaningful Differences* does not leave readers hanging with an idyllic statement about the profound nature of learning and young children. Hart and Risley's last words include a plan for intervention for children at risk who may not receive the quantity or the quality of early parenting and language experience so necessary for later development. Their plan is interesting in that it estimates not only the necessary content of intervention but also the time needed for proper implementation. The authors present research as complex and detailed as the intervention and resources needed to implement change. Their diligence is a testament to a desire to find accurate explanations for later performance differences as they relate to the first three years of life, a time so critical to child development.

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