

Home Literacy Experiences and School Literacy Expectations

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Note: The research for this paper was approved by the Human Subjects Committee at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota in preparation for the author's doctoral dissertation. Permissions are on file for the publication of the graphics used for Figures 1 and 2. This paper was published after the author received the degree of Ph.D. and while the author was an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. The article appears in the 2003 Hawaii International Education

Research Questions

Do students with high home literacy backgrounds have higher levels of verbal and written story responses than do students with low home literacy backgrounds? Do students with high home literacy backgrounds have higher levels of reading in first grade than do students with low home literacy backgrounds? These questions are the focus of this qualitative study, which examines the influence of first graders' home literacy backgrounds on their classroom story responses and reading levels.

Related Research

Prior literacy research has shown that students with a mismatch between home literacy experiences and school literacy expectations are likely to have lower classroom performance (Au & Asam, 1996, Au & Carroll, 1997, Garcia and Pearson, 1990, Heath, 1983, Morrow, 1997, Neuman, 2001, Purcell-Gates, 1996, Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

In Shirley Brice Heath's land mark study of communities with different home literacy environments, the final analysis in Ways With Words (1983) tells educators to heed the notion that not all literacy experiences are celebrated in literacy curriculum manuals. Thus, educators must look with an equitable eye toward accommodating all literacy experiences which children bring to the school setting.

One program's approach to incorporating children's literacy experiences in authentic and meaningful ways in the classroom is a focus of research by Au & Asam (1996) and Au & Carroll (1997). These articles describe processes and results of the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii, which incorporated components relevant to children's cultural backgrounds into classroom literacy instruction. KEEP welcomed and used aspects of the children's home culture into literacy instruction in the classroom through peer directed small groups and a key feature called "talk story" which was part of the reading lessons. The initial results showed that the KEEP program children had mean scores at or above the 50th percentile on standardized tests in the area of reading.

Research by Garcia and Pearson (1990) further supports that a mismatch between literacy knowledge gained in the home and literacy expectations of the classroom does occur with great frequency. Garcia and Pearson synthesized over two decades of research in the area of low achieving readers. The majority of the studies summarized concluded that the gap between the students' knowledge and school expectations must be

filled with more appropriate knowledge in order for the students to become literate.

Low achieving students from home literacy backgrounds not matching the guidelines of the school and teachers were taught as though they had no knowledge of language. In fact, these students had a wealth of knowledge about language and needed the opportunity to integrate their perspective of language with the goals of the curriculum. Garcia and Pearson determined that students with specific oral and written language knowledge from the home environment often do not match the types of oral and

written language knowledge expected in the school environment. Their extensive research concluded that this mismatch results in the devaluing by schools and teachers of the many diverse experiences of students from a variety of home backgrounds.

Similar conclusions were reached in Denny Taylor's important five-year study of the Shay Avenue neighborhoods. Numerous discrepancies were observed between the uses of literacy in the home and in the school (1988). In a telling comparative chart, the literacy found in the homes in the Shay Avenue homes differed from the suburban homes studied previously by Taylor (1986) and from the three communities studied by Heath in 1983. Taylor found that the literacy was a tool for the residents to become more politically ware, advance their profession and complete the daily requirements of obtaining basic needs.

Although the community in Taylor's study had a high level of literacy activity, the types of literacy taking place in the home was not the same as that which was taking place in the schools. Taylor observed that the children were able to maintain the shift between home and school, yet there were many students who dropped out because their knowledge was not recognized and utilized in the classroom.

In a similar vein, a study by Purcell- Gates (1988) investigated her own son's literacy growth as a result of academic testing which predicted that her son would not be a successful reader or writer. The yearlong participant observation study included analysis of various test scores, which were found to have little or no relationship between her son's actual level of success in literacy activities.

Purpose of the Study

The relationship between home literacy experiences and school success has been researched with groups of students, with ethnic diversity in mind, and with as few as one student as in the previously cited studies. All of the studies cited have found that there can be mismatches between what is learned at home and what is expected in the classroom. The mismatches of school expectations with home experiences can lead to miscategorization of students in the school setting. The purpose of this study was to investigate further the notion of the relationship of home literacy experiences and school literacy expectations by specifically looking at children's story responses to a familiar children's book. This study used as a model Doiron &

Shapiro's 1988 study of the influence of home literacy background on preschool children's story responses.

The nature of first graders' responses to literature was at the center of the study, using Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and Galda's work (1980, 1982, 1983) as a foundation for selecting the focus. This focus was selected as such after nearly a decade of classroom teaching of first graders by the author of this study. The author of this article served as the principal participant observer and investigator for this study, in a manner similar to the process described in Van Manen (1990), and Bissex (1980). The process of the investigation focused on the relationship between home literacy experiences and at school responses as children in the investigator's classroom responded to the well-known trade book Corduroy by Don Freeman. The design of the study was similar to one conducted by Doiron and Shapiro (1988) which also investigated home literacy and preschool children's responses to a familiar story.

School Demographics

The K-5 elementary school used for this study drew from the attendance area of families living in a second tier suburb within 15 miles of a large urban area in the midwest. Children from two parent homes, single parent homes, blended families and foster families attended the school. Children attending the school represented a broad range of diverse family economic and educational levels. Less than one tenth of the parents had a four years or more of college education. Single family homes, multi-family homes, apartments and trailer homes were all living situations represented in the school population. The percentage of students eligible to participate in the reduced and free lunch and breakfast program at the school at 24% was higher than the district average of 18%.

Student Participants

Twelve students from three first grade classrooms were selected from the Home Literacy Questionnaires returned by 48 parents. The group of twelve first graders represented as diverse as possible group of students from the school demographics. From the 48 questionnaires, the group of twelve first grade students included equal number of girls and boys of varying academic levels and representation from both high and low ends of Home Literacy Questionnaire responses.

Procedures

Students, representing both high and low Home Literacy Questionnaire scores, were observed and video taped as they responded to the picture book Corduroy. Students' transcribed oral and written responses were scored with a trained observer to establish inter rater reliability. The students received scores from the Applebee Story Elements, the Fox Literary Devices, and the Sebesta et. al. Aesthetic Scale, and the school district's First Grade Writing Rubric. The Home Literacy Questionnaire scores were compared with these four

types of story responses and with students' classroom levels of oral fluency and reading comprehension.

Home Literacy Questionnaire

Home literacy experiences of the first graders in the study were measured by a parent questionnaire. The Home Literacy Questionnaire (Harty, 1998), consisted of obtaining parents' responses regarding the type and nature of oral language and written material which was a part of the home environment. Questions on the Home Literacy Questionnaire also included frequency and type of oral and written literacy exposure and experience which took place in the home. The responses from the Home Literacy Questionnaire were then compared with first graders' story responses and reading levels in a suburban school.

Story Response Instruments

The twelve students' verbal responses from the interview portion of the study were audio and video taped. Once the taped responses had been transcribed, the responses were then plotted on each of the checklists. Inclusions of any items from the Story Elements Checklist, Literary Device Checklist and Aesthetic Scale of Responses were noted on data coding sheets. The Story Element Checklist (Applebee, 1978, 1980) includes eighteen elements of a story, which might be included in a child's response to a story. This instrument was used in conjunction with the Fox Checklist of Literary Devices (Doiron & Shapiro, 1988) to code the children's inclusions of various expressions such as descriptive language or dialogue in their responses to the book Corduroy. Data coding procedures were similar to the format used in Rosko's taxonomy (1990). Both the Applebee and Fox instruments were similar to the school district curriculum guidelines for tracking students' responses in the area of reading comprehension in the basal series (Silver, Burdett-Ginn, 1993) used for reading instruction. The Aesthetic Scale of Responses (Monson, Sebesta, 1995) was used in this study to code children's responses in terms of reliving the experience, imagining the text or applying one's own experience to the book. While the school district did not use any tool for recognizing aesthetic responses, the school district did use a rubric for first grade writing which was used in this study when examining student written responses to the book Corduroy.

Results

The findings of this study suggest that students with high scores on the Home Literacy Questionnaire have higher mean scores in the areas of aesthetic response, written response, and classroom reading comprehension than do students with low scores on the Home Literacy Questionnaire. Students with high scores on the Home Literacy Questionnaire in this study did not have higher mean scores in the areas of

identifying story elements, using literary devices and classroom levels of oral fluency than do students with low scores on the Home Literacy Questionnaire. Several examples of students' oral and written responses to the book Corduroy follow.

Participant Examples

The student samples collected in this study show that some children had rich oral responses to the book Corduroy while others had rich written or drawn responses. The school district in this study used a rubric for validating written/drawn responses but did not have a similar instrument for assessing children's oral responses. As a result, when teacher assessments and report cards were sent home, the full depth of the child's comprehension of a story may not have been fully described for parents. For example, if the child had a rich oral response to a story, but did not have a written response which met the rubric's guidelines, the report card would reflect only the deficiencies of reading comprehension which were noted in terms of the written response and the rubric's standard.

As an example, "Jake's" oral response to Corduroy follows. Jake had the lowest home literacy score on the Home Literacy Questionnaire:

The student with the lowest home literacy score, Jake, answered, "He first climbed down off the shelf and he missed his button and he thought "I'm going to find a button tonight!" He climbed down off the shelf and got off the floor and went on the elevator and thought the place was a palace and he went on a mattress. He tried to pull a button off. He pulled and pulled and it came off and he fell down and it went down and went BOOM! The policeman heard the noise and came upstairs and said, "Who did this?" and he picked Corduroy up and carried him under his arm and put him back on the shelf." (Harty, 1998).

Jake's written response did not provide as much detail as his oral response, as is seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Jake



“Tony,” who had the highest Home Literacy Questionnaire score had the following oral retelling:
"He found his button." Tony's written sample, which provides much more detail and follows in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Tony



Translation: "I like when he found his butin (button). He pld (pulled) at it. pup (Pop!)"

Conclusions

The results of the study point to the general conclusion that those children's oral responses to stories in the classroom needed to be validated in a similar manner to the validation of written/drawn story responses. In response to this conclusion, a workshop for teachers and a Literacy Assessment Profile (Harty, 1999, 2000) were developed to help educators reflect and validate various forms of children's responses to stories during literacy instruction.

Further Research

Future research should seek to further investigate the important following question: Are students' home literacy experiences validated by classroom literacy expectations? Along the same lines as Block (2002), Dyson (1997), Neuman (2001), Palinscar & Klenk (1992), Snow (1986) and Hansen's classic 1969 study, the types of best practices for meeting elementary school children's developing literacy needs could be delineated along with specific processes for creating bridges between home and school literacy. Questions and findings in the area of minimizing the gap between home literacy experiences and school literacy expectations should be a continuing quest for teachers and researchers interested in authentic literacy activities and meaningful literacy instruction. Authenticity and relevancy are vital for our children to experience as a part of the literacy instruction in elementary classrooms of today and for the future.

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