Remembering Critical Lessons in Early Literacy Research: A Transactional Perspective

Given the current political climate, it is crucial that we return to what we know about the literacy learning of young children.

As current governmental agendas severely narrow the ways in which early literacy development is defined and described (i.e., No Child Left Behind in the US, the National Literacy Strategy in the UK, among many), it is critical to remember what we’ve learned during the past several decades of research about how young children come to be literate members of society. In this article, we synthesize critical lessons from this research to share a transactional view of early literacy development. Whether a precise linguistic development, a sweeping sociological phenomenon, or a political influence, critical lessons are selections from the complex research literature that describe and interpret how young children become readers and writers.

TRANSACTIONAL THEORY

The fundamental ideas of a transactional theory are defined by the work of John Dewey and Louise Rosenblatt and further informed by Kenneth Goodman’s language development and L. S. Vygotsky’s learning theories. Dewey (1938) says that, “An experience is always what it is because of a transaction
taking place between an individual and what, at the time constitutes his environment" (p. 43). Rosenblatt (1976) adds that transaction is a poem—"the interrelationship between the knower and what is to be known" (p. 27). A transactional view of reading and writing means that we see literacy as a meaning construction process, and that within a given literacy event, both the text and the reader/author are changed.

Goodman, Smith, Meredith, and Goodman (1987) say that in language development, "[t]here is an almost explosive force from within the children that propels them to express themselves, and at the same time there is a strong need to communicate that pushes the direction of growth and development toward the family and community. The language is generated by the child, but it is changed in transactions with others by their responses" (p. 34). As young literacy learners transact with written texts during reading and composing, the same dynamic tension exists between their personal constructions of literacy inventions and social conventions. Much of our research is directed toward understanding how the tension between invention and convention is embedded in each child's literacy.

Vygotskian (1978) theory strengthens the transactional base of critical early literacy lessons because Vygotsky says learning begins long before school, meaning all school learning must be viewed as a continuation of a previous learning history. A critical feature of Vygotsky's view of learning as it affects transactional theory is that learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that operate only when children are interacting with people in their environments and in cooperation with their peers. Learning creates a "zone of proximal development" that permits teachers to identify how to create conditions that mediate development. From our point of view, adults, peers (not only more capable peers), and cultural tools like texts can all serve as effective mediators.

**INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**

We share three sets of critical lessons in this article, organized according to the methodological lenses interpretive researchers use to design and carry out early literacy studies (see Figure 1). "Interpretive fieldwork research involves being unusually thorough and reflective in noticing and describing everyday events in the field setting, and in attempting to identify the significance of actions in the events from the various points of view of the actors themselves" (Erickson, 1986, p. 121). One lens is a close examination of individual children's early reading and writing development designed as case studies and qualitative clinical studies. The second is classroom process studies that analyze children's engagement in activities like writing and reading workshop, reading response engagements, and literature discussion groups. The third is ethnographic studies in homes, communities, and schools in which researchers come to understand a

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**Figure 1. Three sets of critical early literacy lessons**
research site as a culture, from the members’ perspectives. The focus in all these stances is on children’s active construction of knowledge and the social processes children participate in as they come to know literacy as a cultural tool and as a system of meaning making.

In each section that follows, an example from our own research demonstrates the interpretive lens of the set and introduces critical lessons from related research. The studies described were selected because they demonstrate young children’s developing knowledge and contribute to the credibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of interpretive research in that they seek to illuminate early literacy development as it occurs in the context of daily life.

**Critical Lessons from Case Study and Clinical Qualitative Studies: Literacy Is Individual**

Sarah, at 4 years, 10 months of age, wrote the get well card in Figure 2 to her friend Johnny when he had his tonsils removed (Martens, 1996). Sarah considers that she “already knows how to read” in that she reads and rereads favorite books (by integrating her previous knowledge of the plot, cues in the illustrations, and the story language she remembers), she writes invitation lists for her party, and she reads environmental print on cereal boxes at home and Stop signs in the community.

At first glance, Sarah’s note may appear to be random letters. It is, however, invented thoughtfully and deliberately, based on Sarah’s experiences and understandings of literacy at the time, and it demonstrates that Sarah is a knowledgeable reader and writer before she begins kindergarten. For example, Sarah makes several letter choices based on how she articulates sounds. She begins Johnny’s name with <d> because in both sounds /dj/ and /d/, the tip of the tongue is positioned at the upper gums. She represents /f/ in feel with <v> because /f/ and /v/ are both fricatives. In addition, Sarah knows how to write her name in all upper case letters and that get well cards have a particular function and form (she begins with “Dear Johnny” and closes with her name and “I love you”).

Children assume agency for their learning and from birth are actively constructing knowledge about literacy; therefore, no two children’s paths to literacy look the same. Case study and clinical qualitative researchers let the children be their linguistic informants (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Their in-depth observations of children’s transactions with reading and writing across settings reveal that literacy is a highly individual process.

**Critical Lesson: Children Simultaneously Develop as Readers, Writers, and Meaning Makers from Birth**

By the 1980s, researchers were discovering that children, even those “at risk,” are engaged in reading and writing at the same time that they are involved in speaking and listening, and that literacy development begins long before formal instruction occurs in school (Clay, 1975; Goodman, Altwerger, & Marek, 1981). These insights are confirmed by longitudinal case studies of children, including studies by parent researchers whose “enlightened subjectivity” (Bissex, 1980, p. vi) provides information other researchers studying these same children could not replicate. For Bissex’s son Paul, reading, writing, and oral language develop in coordination and support each other, and for Doake’s (1988) son Raja, literacy development begins at 6 hours of age when he is read to for the first time. Baghban’s (1984) daughter Giti observes writing events until 17 months when she grabs pens and paper to write herself. At 24 months, Giti reads environmental print and by 34 months she distinguishes between drawing and writing, writes from left to right and top to bottom, and writes her name independently. Non-parent researchers Soderbergh (1977) and Taylor (1991) and grandparents Campbell (1999) and Whitehead (2002) confirm that songs, story reading, and rhymes support young children from their earliest days as active and purposeful readers and writers in the family context.
Other researchers ask children to complete literacy tasks in a clinical setting. Most notably, Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) interviewed middle- and lower-class Argentinian children ages 4–6 to understand the children's knowledge and thought processes over the course of a year. They discover that the children (who would begin formal schooling in first grade) have definite concepts and hypotheses about literacy prior to instruction. The researchers conclude that making meaning from written text is one of the first steps in literacy development, rather than one of the last steps. They state, “It is absurd to imagine that four- or five-year-old children growing up in an urban environment that displays print everywhere (on toys, on billboards and road signs, on their clothes, on TV) do not develop any ideas about this cultural object until they find themselves sitting in front of a teacher” (p. 12).

**Critical Lesson:**

**Children Personally Invent Written Language**

With the realization that children have a lot of literacy knowledge long before they participate in formal instruction comes questions about how children develop their understandings about written language. Goodman, Altwerger, and Marek (1989), as well as Matlin (1984), Romero (1983), and Long, Manning, Martin, Williams, and Wolfson, (1982) document that children in varied economic, language, and cultural populations are aware that written language makes sense and seek to discover how it makes sense. Chinese children generate hypotheses about when and how to use different characters and usually produce forms close to the conventional formations of the Chinese characters (Lee, 1990). Marie, a 3-year-old growing up in Quebec, capably invents recognizable forms for her native English and the French print of her community (Whitmore & Goodman, 1995). Noa, a 7-year-old, simultaneously invents literacy in English, Spanish, and Hebrew (Schwarzer, 2001). Similarly, Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) note that 3–6-year-olds’ questions (i.e., “What does this say?”) indicate they know written marks signify meaning. Children believe, for example, that for a text to be readable, it needs a sufficient number of varied characters. While children’s hypotheses do not necessarily follow societal conventions, they demonstrate that children expect written language to be organized in a systematic manner, and they continue to work to figure out how (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Tolchinsky, 2003).

The term “invent” is commonly used by spelling researchers who view spelling as part of writing development, not a prerequisite. Linguist Read (1971) discovered that children’s invented spellings are logical and sensible as they construct knowledge. In fact, the distinctions made in preschoolers’ spellings more closely resemble the distinctions linguists make than the distinctions used in the conventional writing system. Children draw upon a broad range of phonetic and morphological knowledge that informs their spellings (Wilde, 1991). They form hypotheses about the linguistic rules that govern letter combinations and try out patterns (Bissex, 1980). As their experience and knowledge increase, children revise their spellings to more closely approximate conventional English spellings (Hughes & Searle, 1997).

Children do not wait for formal instruction before they read and write. In fact, Piaget (1970) cautions, “Each time one prematurely teaches a child something he could have discovered for himself, that child is kept from inventing it and consequently from understanding it completely” (p. 715).

**Critical Lesson:**

**Children Refine Their Written Language through Experience**

As children test, refine, and gradually move their reading and writing inventions within the boundaries of societal conventions, they learn to use the multiple strategies involved in reading and writing processes more proficiently. Martens (1996) shows how Sarah’s learning is propelled by her inquiries and grounded in her perceptions of reading and writing from her experiences. At times when Sarah realizes that her literacy inventions do not match the conventions around her, she becomes overwhelmed by how much she doesn’t know and is reluctant to read and write. Things “fall apart” for her until she integrates what she is learning with what she knows. Rather than regressions in her learning, these are times of growth in which Sarah’s literacy inventions move closer to societal conventions. Martens states, “Quite contrary to being linear, the [literacy learning] process . . . is cyclical, allowing for zigs and zags, revisiting, and rethinking” (p. 93). Miscue analysis studies reveal that readers of all ages, backgrounds, and proficiencies integrate the semantic-pragmatic, syntactic, and
graphophonic language cueing systems with reading strategies (sampling, inferring, predicting, confirming/disconfirming, correcting) to construct meaning (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996). What distinguishes proficient from less proficient readers is not the process itself, but how well readers orchestrate it (Goodman, 1994). Readers become more proficient while reading authentic texts for real purposes, supported by more experienced readers when necessary. Miscue research describes children learning to read in first (Matlin, 1984; Flurkey, 1995) and second (Crowell, 1995) languages using cues and strategies without being specifically taught. Recent studies that examine readers’ eye movements while reading, in addition to analyzing miscues, supports reading as a sociopsycholinguistic process (Paulson & Freeman, 2003). In one study, six first-grade children’s eye movements indicate they make decisions about where useful information is located in the text: characters and objects in the illustrations and content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) in the print (Duckett 2003).

Research also documents the writing process that writers refine as they gain experience. Children learn simultaneously to form letters, to spell words, to write phrases, and to form complete messages (Goodman & Wilde, 1992; Graves, 1982, 1983; King & Rentel, 1983; Sowers, 1985; Sulzby, 1985). Their active composing typically focuses on multidimensional processes more so than products (Calkins, 1983), and they self-monitor and experiment with varied forms and content as they compose (Avery, 1987; Clay, 1975). For example, Rosa, age 6, uses different, appropriate conventions (e.g., abbreviations) when composing via e-mail vs. handwritten forms (Wollman-Bonilla, 2003). Case studies and clinical qualitative studies provide close-up views of the variations in children’s personal language histories. From these lessons, we learn that literacy is not handed down to children but that they uniquely construct and refine their literacy through active interpretation and purposeful sense-making.

**CRITICAL LESSONS FROM CLASSROOM PROCESS STUDIES: LITERACY IS SOCIAL**

Harry and Aster are playing as waiters in the dramatic play area. Their teacher, Curt, orders crab.

Harry: *I wonder how you really spell crab.*

Aster: *How do you?*

Harry: *Um, I can’t really remember.*

Aster: *But, you could sound it out.*

Harry utters several of the sounds in the word crab while writing the letters K-R-R-B-A. Aster repeats the sounds, and also writes the letters.

Harry: *Cra-buh . . . uh. And maybe an O at the end. Do you think so?*

Aster: *Yeah.*

Harry: *I don’t know.*

Curt: *What do you think it says?*

Harry: *Uh, crab.*

Curt: *Yes.*

Harry: *Ooh! Cool. Crab’s so easy. I didn’t know we could really write.*

Curt orders cake (K-A-K) and milk (M-O-K) next and Aster writes the order (see Figure 3). Harry and Aster’s example illustrates the value of watching and listening carefully to young children as they engage with written language during group play (Owocki, 1999). Their talk and the product they create reveal their knowledge about letters, letter–sound relationships, and the genre of a restaurant order. Their understanding about the function of print is evident when they take the list to the kitchen to “prepare” Curt’s order.

It is important to note that classroom process researchers are often preschool and elementary classroom teachers and/or collaborative researcher–teacher teams. Their work highlights groups of children engaged in authentic literacy events that reveal the highly complex nature of constructing meaning, and the social and cultural factors that permeate literacy events. These lessons exemplify Moll’s (1990) interpretation of the zone of proximal development “as a characteristic not solely of the child or of the teaching...
but of the child engaged in collaborative activity within specific social environments” (p. 11).

Critical Lesson: The Social Community Influences

Meaning Construction

Transactional research in classroom settings examines how meaning is elaborated when children’s interpretations are shared with a community of [writers and] readers, [and]

Classroom process studies demonstrate that young children exhibit an impressive amount of literacy knowledge in classrooms that are sociocultural systems.

different people’s interpretations enhance the potential for making meaning for all” (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, p. 16). Moll and Whitmore (1993) identify such occurrences as “collective zones of proximal development,” and Dyson (1993) describes children’s compositions of texts as compositions of their existence in multiple social worlds. Goodman and Wilde (1992), who documented young Tohono O’odham writers’ decisions and actions as they composed, argue that time, freedom to use classroom resources, and opportunities to interact are key ingredients for effective writing. Others find that when given the opportunity to write without assignments, children express themselves, self-monitor, and experiment with varied written forms and content (Graves, 1983; Edelsky, 1986)—even though individual “choice” never occurs apart from the confines of peer, teacher, and culture expectations (Lensmire, 1994). With their natural propensity to seek order in language, children consistently analyze, revise, test hypotheses, and try to figure out what will help them to communicate effectively. Studies of

the classroom as a distinctive context for early literacy growth reveal the power of language (Edelsky, 1986), friendships (Dyson, 1993), and popular culture (Dyson, 1997) in supporting children’s development as writers.

The social community of a classroom is important for readers, too. Discourse analysis of children’s responses to quality literature shows the presence of individual and collective zones of proximal development as young children “listen carefully and think critically and deeply with other group members” and “push the group to deeper understandings and investigations of life” (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, p. 195). Powerful books lead children to search for answers to their own powerful questions about history, war, culture, language, and other rich topics (Crawford & Hoopingarner, 1993; Whitmore & Crowell, 1994). In Paley’s (1997) kindergarten classroom, the book Frederick (Lionni, 1967) prompts exploration of deep themes of race, gender, and identity. Raising and resolving questions through social texts presents intellectual challenges as children connect new ideas to their personal knowledge of the world.

Critical Lesson: Children Construct and Represent Meaning through Multiple Symbol Systems

Leland and Harste (1994) suggest that sign systems, including art, music, mathematics, drama, and language are ways of knowing—"potentials by which all humans might mean" (p. 339)—that are often overlooked and untapped by school curricula. They say, “in order to be literate, learners need to be able to orchestrate a variety of sign systems to create texts appropriate to the contexts in which they find themselves” (p. 339). The notion of expanding literacy to include multiple sign systems is shared by the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Malaguzzi, 1998) and Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligence.

Children need opportunities to explore sign systems simultaneously. For example, for young writers, talk—both private and social—is a sign system that helps children shape and share the imagined worlds they only partially portray on paper (Dyson, 1997). Children as young as three use talk to rehearse for composing, to narrate what they are writing, to provide the play-by-play action of their drawings, and to clarify their intended meanings for others. Drawings are likely to contain more information than their written texts (Graves, 1983). Drawings supply information about characters, settings, and events, disambiguate text, and may elicit more responses because they are more accessible to peers than writing.

Movement and sound elaborate language, helping children express their ideas more thoroughly than they are able to do with talk, drawing, or text alone (Newkirk, 1989). A child may move a marker to “drive” a car around the paper or “play” a guitar by strumming a finger across a picture while vocalizing a sound (Neves & Reifel, 2002). The inventive use of sound and action strengthens the connection between the text and the child’s intended message. Transmediation of text into dramatic play “allows children to walk around in story settings . . . to touch, feel, and actually look at
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objects from the vantage points of book characters" (Rowe, 2000, p. 20). Medd & Whitmore (2000) find that when English Language Learners compose by drawing and selecting sound effects, before writing in any language, they “express their previous knowledge, construct new knowledge, and communicate regardless of their facility with English” (p. 49).

Dyson (1997) characterizes children’s literacy development as a resolving of tensions among symbol systems, or, as a differentiation between information conveyed through text and through social activity, talk, pictures, and actions. Kress (1997) describes children’s cognitive disposition as “one that sees the connections of all parts of the semiotic world” (p. 142) that are less accessible in the typically minimalist, segmented, and verbocentric lessons of school. For example, he says two- and three-dimensional objects and color carry young children’s meanings more effectively than language can.

Critical Lesson: Play Is a Particular Symbol System That Is Especially Relevant to Young Children’s Literacy Development

Play creates a text for expressing and constructing knowledge. Play is a particularly relevant symbol system in the transactional point of view because it creates its own zone of proximal development. According to Vygotsky (1978), in “play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 102). Play provides a safe testing ground that maintains the dynamic tension between invention and convention. Literacy-enriched dramatic play experiences provide children with opportunities to fine-tune and expand the aspects of written language that are currently significant for their development (Roskos & Christie, 2001; Hall 1987; Owocki, 1999; Schrader 1989) and to explore the literary stances needed to meet their communicative goals. In Owocki’s (1999) study, four-year-old Karla takes an effferent stance as she records specific information from a mother with a sick baby. On other occasions, she transacts more aesthetically, turning through the pages of concept books and writing stories and notes.

Children at play are most likely to demonstrate and develop their literacy knowledge when given access to familiar literacy objects that are reflective of their lives and cultures (Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Roskos, 1995). The set-up of the environment and the types of props that are included influence the amount of social interactions and time children spend playing together (Petarakos & Howe, 1996). When opportunities abound for playing, talking, and reasoning together, children share knowledge about written language (Vukelich, 1993), leading to more advanced ways of thinking (Piaget, 1962; Pontecorvo & Zucchermaglio, 1990).

Classroom process studies demonstrate that young children exhibit an impressive amount of literacy knowledge in classrooms that are sociocultural systems. In other words, critical lessons from classroom process studies reveal how literacy learning in school extends literacy development.

Critical Lessons from Household, Community and School Ethnographic Studies: Literacy Is a Cultural Practice

José and his Mexican immigrant parents regularly attend Escuela Familia, a family inquiry group that meets after school. They compose a collection of narratives that trace José’s annual journey between homes in Iowa City, Iowa, and El Paso, Texas, and his grandparents’ ranch in Mexico. José writes: Por destino de la vida, por cierto yo veo muy bueno me toco tener a Pap que trabaja para una Compania en el Estadode Iowa y por lo tanto tenemos que emigrar desde El Paso Texas cada ano para trabajar la estacion de calor en la Cuidad de Iowa City, Iowa. Por esto yo tengo la gran oportunidad de ir y regresar cada ano a estas dos ciudades que tanto amo. (José’s translation: By great fortune, I have a dad that works for a company in the state of Iowa that sends him to El Paso, Texas, each winter to work their station there. Because of that, I get the great opportunity to go back and forth each year between two cities that I love very much.)

The narratives describe José’s two cities and events on the journey between them, two schools and teachers, and “unforgettable days” when his grandpa “passes down many stories” while they spend time at the ranch. The cover of José’s family’s book (see Figure 4) captures the warmth and beauty of José’s “dos mundos” (two worlds) and communicates much about his identity, culture, and life to his readers. José’s sense of audience provides him with reasons to write and guides his decisions about forms for writing. José’s identities as a Mexican immigrant who is bilingual and biliterate, working-class, male, a student, and a son position him in a larger social, cultural, and political context.

When the family’s book is published, it is catalogued and shelved in the school media center.

Ethnographic research characterizes literacy as a complex cultural practice that is a part of children’s iden-
tivities and everyday lives in and out of school. The next critical lessons begin with the premise that language is cultural and political (Wells, 1986; Gee, 2001) and considers relations of power as central to language and literacy events, particularly in school (Luke, 1991; McLaren, 2002). These critical lessons reveal that those in power determine what literacy and illiteracy are, whose literacy "counts," and when and why literacy is resisted by some learners.

**Critical Lesson: All Families Are Literate**

Anthropological studies published in the 1980s contributed what was then a groundbreaking realization that essentially all families and communities construct and express meaning through varied symbol systems. These symbol systems, including written language, may or may not fit mainstream expectations in school, but achieve functionality and intellectual purpose in families' daily lives. Ethnographies reveal images of real families in varied cultures using literacy for multiple and functional purposes and call deeply into question previous low expectations for children growing up in multiethnic, low SES communities. For example, in Tracton, a low-income, African American community, a mother named Willie Mae reads letters from the child welfare system to her neighbors, illustrating that literacy is a deeply social practice in her neighborhood (Heath, 1983). On Shay Avenue, where most of the African American residents' incomes are well below the poverty level, a father named Jerry compiles lists of books he has read and wants to buy, and a grandmother writes a moving autobiography explaining the circumstances of her life to generations that follow (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Such data break the myth that low-income African Americans are less literate than other groups.

When children from these literate households enter school, however, they usually confront an inauthentic literacy environment that is foreign to their experience as readers and writers. For instance, the discourse pattern in indigenous Hawaii, called talk story, contrasts with what is expected of speakers in classrooms (Au, 1980). Funds of knowledge exist in the working-class Latino neighborhoods of South Tucson (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and Bangladeshi families engage in a range of literacy practices (Blackledge, 2000), but these are not typically recognized at school. On the Warm Springs Indian Reservation (Phillips, 1983), when children confront such difference, they transform from socially engaged, capable communicators at home to less attentive, even disruptive, unsuccessful language users at school.

Studies that document "communities' ways of talking, knowing and expressing knowledge" (Heath, 1983, p. 343) suggest a view of family literacy that Auerbach (1989) refers to as social-contextual. We assume, from our transactional perspective, that literacy exists in students' homes, and families serve as resources for one another. Even more critical, we view literacy as a tool to address local political and social issues and a potential bridge between home and school. In fact, some ethnographers engage community members in action research that transforms their relationships with schools, literacy, and culture (McCarty, 2002). Teachers (Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999/2000), children (Eagan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998), and families (McCaleb, 1994; Whitmore & Norton-Bliesner, 2000) become research collaborators creating conditions for children's literacy experiences out of school to transform their literacy experiences in school.

**Critical Lesson: Identity Positions Are Part of Literacy Development**

When literacy is viewed as a cultural practice, literacy learners are seen as positioned in groups and in society by their existing cultural identities and as acquiring new cultural identities by participating in school. Children embody their cultural, racial, linguistic, class, labor, ideological, and gendered positions in their early literacy activities. Many must negotiate the culture of
the mainstream, dominant society in order to succeed in school. Toohey (2000) followed six English Language learners who are “seen to require normalising” (p. 93) during their kindergarten, first- and second-grade years. She concludes, “As central practices, schools evaluate and rank children and thus manufacture identities for them” (p. 124). She suggests that children have the most opportunities for appropriating classroom language when they “speak from desirable and powerful identity positions” (p. 124). She suggests that children have the most opportunities for appropriating classroom language when they “speak from desirable and powerful identity positions” (p. 124). Solsken (1993) also finds children as young as kindergartners have “a sense of themselves and others as participants in particular transactions involving written language” (p. 2), especially regarding their constructions of literacy as a “gender-linked activity.” Moll and Diaz (1987) reveal how the deficit assumptions teachers hold about Spanish readers lead them to define children according to their language identity rather than their reading ability. Martínez-Roldán (2003) and Parke, Dury, Kenner, and Robertson (2002) demonstrate how access to narrative and native language enables bilingual children’s academic and culturally-rich identities to shine.

Critical Lesson: Cultural Tools Are Part of Literacy Development

From cross-cultural studies of early literacy, we learn that families organize and use literacy tools in ways that are uniquely suited to their cultural purposes. We see the necessity of examining “the form, function, and meaning of literacy events across culture, communities, or social groups” (Schieffelin & Cochrane-Smith, 1984, p. 22). We know that children use tools such as popular culture and narrative to situate themselves socially and textually and to mediate their environments. They adapt and improvise television and movie themes and characters to challenge boundaries of race, gender, and class (Dyson, 1997; Arthur, 2001). While viewing the movie **Swiss Family Robinson**, young children in a Hawaiian school notice and question media representations of race, gender, class, and colonialism, prompting Tobin (2000) to challenge the assumption that children passively absorb and accept stereotypical images that are sometimes present in popular culture.

Popular culture paired with new technologies has the potential as a cultural tool to transform the ways that children approach text. Luke (1999) suggests that “[h]yperlink environments demand ‘reading’ skills in diverse and laterally connected symbol systems which encourage the very critical and lateral thinking skills many educators have been promoting for the past decade” (p. 97). This vision of multimodal...

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**When Research Is Ignored**

When quality research about young children’s literacy lives is ignored, bracketed, or dismissed because of political agendas, teachers have one important place to turn—their own classrooms. Sustained systematic study of classrooms can gradually contribute to a much-needed change in political climate. Celebrations at the local level of students’ accomplishments can offset the mean spirited and negative representations of our work that often appear at the national level. When families are informed about what their children can do, their perceptions influence how they vote and respond to criticisms of education.

The following books suggest specific ways of studying classrooms, including ideas for publication. Publication is a broad term that includes family nights, curriculum nights, learning celebrations, newsletters, home visits, posters, and video and audio productions.


—Richard Meyer
competence expands the transactional view of literacy to include new media texts such as Pokemon cards and video games (Vasquez, 2003) as locations where identity, culture, literacy, and learning intersect.

A FINAL CRITICAL LESSON

We know that although children bring unique literacy histories from their specific communities, they all come to school with the same intellectual potential for literacy (Whitmore & Goodman, 1995). Children learn and develop literacy with relative ease in their natural communities. The critical lessons from case studies and qualitative clinical studies remind us that children find individual paths to literacy as they invent written language in social settings. The classroom process studies remind us that children who are members of process-oriented literacy classrooms are effective and influential literacy teachers for one another. The critical lessons from ethnographic studies remind us that no child can be viewed as independent of her sociocultural identity, political status, or linguistic heritage. Our transactional perspective on early literacy means children are socialized into versions of the world that are limited and expanded according to issues of power and access.

How does the transactional theory of early literacy development inform teaching? Teachers who work within the transactional frame are mediators who help children reach their individual academic literacy potentials at school while maintaining the richness of their sociocultural positions in their homes and communities.

Research that supports a transactional view of early literacy argues that children need to value and be valued for who they are and where they come from. They need to control their own literacy processes. They need time to read and write. Critical lessons in the transactional theory suggest that teachers provide classroom opportunities and reasons for children to invent written language and a social and cultural context that necessitates convention.

Our memory of what we know is threatened by the current political climate. We are distracted by mandates for artificial literacy instruction that marginalizes children due to their community discourses and knowledge. Children are increasingly expected to master a significant number of skills in isolation upon entry and throughout their public school experiences. The critical lessons in the transactional perspective offer a framework for ensuring that we capitalize on children’s intellectual, linguistic, and cultural knowledge to expand possibilities for their early literacy learning.

References


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