Transfer of embedded symbolic information between home and school: a grounded theory of how young children develop idiosyncratic responses during the construction of literacy in the classroom

Adrienne Shane Huber

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TRANSFER OF EMBEDDED SYMBOLIC INFORMATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL:

A GROUNDED THEORY OF HOW YOUNG CHILDREN DEVELOP IDIOSYNCRATIC RESPONSES DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

ADRIENNE SHANE HUBER
BSc(Psych)(Hons) (Newcastle)

Faculty of Education 1995
Dedicated to:

Bert,
my person for all seasons

Suzanne and Michelle,
two of my best reasons for being

and

Brian,
"a person without equal"
in encouraging me in making connections
Acknowledgments

It goes almost without saying: This thesis has been a work of sustained and deep collaboration in the sense that many people have supported me during the time it has taken me to complete the study. It would not have happened without unfailing support from my family, my friends, my participants in the study, colleagues and my supervisor.

No research is possible without participants and my participants have been particularly generous and enduring for which I am eternally grateful. I do hope my representation of you in this thesis does you the justice you deserve. Thankyou.

Brian Cambourne provided me with optimal levels and combinations of support, advice, admonition and encouragement to allow me to make the connections I needed to make so I could say "I did it my way" and, I did it "his way", too, as he encouraged me to find a "sufficiently satisfying" way of presenting and sharing what I knew. Thankyou, Brian, I could not have done it without you!

Bert, Michelle and Suzanne, yes, I do still exist, and yes, I am coming home. Thankyou for your enduring unconditional love and support. I couldn't have done it without you, either!

My friends will now see a different me as I emerge from my thesis cocoon, my domicile for such a long time. I look forward to catching up before my next venture (well almost): I'm sure I can think of another project to keep me going into the Twenty First Century... A special thankyou to Maleeka Salih who unwittingly crossed my path at the eleventh hour providing much needed sane interludes at an insane time.

At a crisis point in my brief thesis writing career, Jan Turbill's invaluable audit of my work helped me to articulate my thesis and to keep me focused on what I was trying to achieve. Thanks Jan.

Bottom line support from Kylie Pickford, Lois Leitch and Debbie McGavin have filled many functional gaps among others! Thank you folks.
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ABSTRACT

This study describes how three young children use their knowledge of the world derived from their primary experiences in their family of origin and their school to develop idiosyncratic responses during the construction of literacy in the classroom. The connections between young children's experiences at home and how they construct literacy in the classroom has received much attention in recent years. However, most research has focused on literacy-specific behaviours. This study provides a shift in this focus. Insights are offered into how deep level (i.e., embedded symbolic) information is transferred between home and school. A futurologist's conceptual framework and a cross disciplinary theoretical base have been used to provide access to a broader range of discourses for the purposes of understanding issues raised by the research question: How do young children use their knowledge of the world derived from their primary experiences in their family of origin and their school to develop idiosyncratic responses during the construction of literacy in the classroom?

The term literacy has not yet been clearly defined. The issue of understanding the nature of and defining literacy for a Super-symbolic Information Age is discussed. For the purposes of this study literacy was defined as a transient, idiosyncratic Gestalt, which is a by product of constructions of meaning from symbolic and embedded symbolic information in textual data.

The primary aim of the study was to develop a grounded theory of acculturated meaning making in the development of idiosyncratic literacy practices. This was achieved through three sub aims: Describing one school's culture; describing three individual families' intergenerational family acculturation; and ascribing acculturated patterns of responses to the making of meaning in the classroom by three young children, during their first three years of school, when they construct literacy. Acculturation may be defined as the means by which beliefs, attitudes, values, patterns and practices are willingly and unwillingly, overtly and covertly, verbally and non-verbally, communicated, negotiated and mutated (i.e., altered) from one generation to another and within generations of a family, community and culture (Ref.: Kingson, Hirshorn, Cornman & Cabin, 1986; Guerin, Fay, Burden & Kautto, 1987; Guerin & Pendagast, 1976; Minuchin, 1974).
Longitudinal Case Study data were collected over three years. During this time three children, their families and one of their teachers from the one school participated. Parents completed a questionnaire about their intergenerational family acculturation (i.e., their beliefs, attitudes, values, patterns and practices over three or more generations). Additional questions addressed parents' own experiences as learners and their beliefs, attitudes, values and practices with regard to their child's language, literacy and learning. The teacher and the three children were observed and video taped in the classroom over a three year period (1991-1993). One parent of each child and the teacher participated in individual focus interviews. These interviews acted as member checks whereby interpretations of observations were assessed, corroborated, errors corrected and new information added.

The school culture was derived from document analysis and classroom observations.

Naturalistic Inquiry methods were used to collect data for three main data pools: Intergenerational family acculturation data; document analysis; data and classroom observation data. Each data pool was subsequently collapsed to produce other data pools and provide additional information about embedded symbolic knowledge (Ref: Wurman, 1989).

A process for analyzing embedded symbolic information was developed and described. This process was developed in response to predictions of futurologists such as Reich (1993), Toffler (1990) and Wurman (1989) and specifically, Toffler's (1990) notion of a Super-symbolic Information Age and embedded symbolism in which symbols "represent nothing more than other symbols inside the memories and thoughtware of people and computers" (Toffler, 1990:62). Accordingly, data pools were analyzed for embedded information, then embedded knowledge and lastly, embedded beliefs.

A grounded theory is presented of how young children use their knowledge of the world derived from their primary experiences in their family of origin and their school to develop idiosyncratic responses during the construction of literacy in the classroom. Young children come to school already knowing how to use their knowledge of the world to make meaning. They learn how to make meaning through intergenerational acculturation processes which are fundamental to all family units. Intergenerational family acculturation provides a ready meaning making template system. It is through this
meaning making template system that young children pattern their experiences and specifically, textual data, when constructing in the classroom. Intergenerational family acculturation appears to construct meaning at a deep level of embedded symbolic information. Implications of the results of this study are discussed, including implications for how we understand individual children's responses during the construction of literacy in the classroom; the role of contexts in the meaning making process; the intimate acculturation processes inherent in school culture and teaching and learning processes.