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An exploration of kindergarten children's multiliterate practices in their homes

Margaret Turner
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AN EXPLORATION OF KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN'S MULTILITERATE PRACTICES IN THEIR HOMES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the
award of the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

from

University of Wollongong

by

Margaret Turner

Master of Education (Wollongong)

Faculty of Education

2009

Certification

I, Margaret Turner, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Signed:

Margaret Turner

Date:

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to future generations of young literacy learners, their families and their teachers.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a long journey that has impacted not only on my own life but also on the lives of others who have travelled the journey with me. I would like to acknowledge the support of the following people.

To my long-suffering and loving family who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself; my husband Stuart and adult children Simon, Natasha and Ryan. Thankyou! Sanity will, hopefully, return to our future journey together.

To my friends and colleagues, many of whom have never known me in my pre-thesis life. Yes, I do exist as a separate entity in this world without my thesis. And to my three principal colleagues Michelle, Narelle and Marella who agreed for this inquiry to be conducted in their schools, and who have waited so long for the findings. Coffee afternoons and chats along the way have helped to sustain me. To my current staff who has never known that I have other interests in my life because our school and my thesis have consumed me. A special thankyou to my executive staff Sonya, Julie and Jo who have most successfully managed our school during my several short absences when I was working on my thesis.

To the case study families and your beautiful children – Alice, Adam, Alexandra, Winton and Jacob. Thankyou for the warm welcome you extended to me, and for allowing me to become a part of your lives for many months. Your enthusiasm was greatly appreciated.

To my two supervisors, Jan Turbill and Pauline Harris. No, this thesis would not have been possible without you. For all your time, your wise counsel, your understanding, your knowledge, wisdom and friendship. I could not have travelled the journey without your support all along the way. And also to my editor Sam, whose expertise in proof reading and editing has been invaluable.

This thesis has now been written, that journey has come to a close; the journey of learning, though, will continue in my own life and in the lives of all who have travelled with me. However, as some of our paths will now take different directions, thankyou for travelling with me thus far, for each of you has supported me when I stumbled, picked me up when I fell down and offered encouragement when it was needed.

Abstract

Children who enter kindergarten bring to the school environment, a wide range of abilities in literacy. Prior literacy experiences in the home and the wider community have been shown to contribute towards these wide ranging abilities and, consequently, future success in literacy at school.

Our society today, though, is changing rapidly. Our task, therefore, as educators is to prepare our children to function in a future civilization created by the biggest leap in technology since the Industrial Revolution two centuries ago. We have entered a time when advances in technology are having an important effect on literacy development. The literacy needs and demands of a changing society must be addressed in school when children are very young.

This inquiry was an exploration at three Sydney metropolitan schools of kindergarten children's multiliterate practices in their homes. The inquiry endeavoured to establish the relationship between these practices and the socioeconomic backgrounds and gender of these children. It also endeavoured to establish the relationship between the kindergarten children's practices and skills with the expectations of policy and curriculum documents in the first year at school of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (DET).

The following research questions guided this inquiry:

- *What are the multiliterate practices in the homes of kindergarten children at three Sydney metropolitan schools?*
 - *What is the relationship between these multiliterate practices and socioeconomic background?*
 - *What is the relationship between these multiliterate practices and gender?*
- *How do the multiliterate practices and skills of these kindergarten children relate to the expectations, in the first year at school, of current policy and curriculum of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (DET)?*

The inquiry was qualitative in nature and employed mixed methodologies of ethnographic techniques, case study and narrative inquiry.

There were three phases in this inquiry; the initial phase that involved surveying 123 kindergarten parents in three schools; the immersion phase that involved observing five case study children in their homes as they engaged in a range of literacy practices including print and paper-based literacies and techno-literacies, and the analysis of the NSW DET documents relevant to literacy learning in the first year at school.

It was found that while socioeconomic background and gender differences existed, all kindergarten children experienced a wide range of multiliterate practices in their homes that comprised print and paper-based literacies and techno-literacies. It was also found that parents held different views about the role that techno-literacies played in learning to read and write and these views seemed to mirror those of early years teachers, namely that print and paper-based skills were more highly valued for young emergent readers and writers.

It was also found that assessment of kindergarten children on entry to school did not recognise young children's techno-literacy skills in their out-of-school worlds and while curriculum documents included an extensive range of techno-literacy experiences and expectations of learning by the end of the first year at school, schools needed to do more in providing teaching and learning programs that valued young children's multiliterate experiences.

Glossary

This glossary includes the terms that are used in this inquiry.

CVC words

CVC means consonant – vowel - consonant. Words containing a consonant, then a vowel and then another consonant are the easiest words for the emergent reader to decode eg. mum, dad, big, dog, cat, not, fun.

Decode

Sounding out the letters, either one by one, as double sounds, or as chunks of letters, to read unknown words.

Emergent literacy

The term ‘emergent literacy’ has a narrow but important focus. This inquiry adopts views by Teale and Sulzby (1986) and Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998). Teale and Sulzby (1986, pxx) argue that,

We use *emergent* to suggest that development is taking place, and that there is something new emerging in the child that had not “been” there before. Growth in writing and reading comes from within the child and as a result of environmental stimulation.

Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998, p848) further argue that emergent literacy is used to:

Denote the idea that the acquisition of literacy is conceptualised as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in the life of a child, rather than an all or none phenomenon that begins when children start school. This conceptualisation departs from other perspectives on reading acquisition in suggesting that there is no clear demarcation between reading and pre-reading.

This perspective embraces literacy behaviours in the preschool period as legitimate aspects of literacy. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) further argue that an emergent literacy approach involves understanding that reading, writing and oral language develop concurrently and interdependently as a result of children’s exposure to

interactions in social contexts in which literacy is a component, and in the absence of formal instruction (McLachlin 2007).

Grapheme

The smallest unit of writing. A letter or combination of letters that corresponds to or represents phonemes, eg. the 'f' in *frog*, the 'ph' in *phone*, the 'gh' in *cough*.

Graphological information

Visual information about words and texts in print, eg. punctuation, letter sequences.

Grammatical/syntactical information

Information about language structure in comprehending a text, eg. sentence structure, text organisation and word order.

High-frequency words

Words that occur often when reading. They may include words easily sounded out and sight words. They are often related to general knowledge/experience.

Home readers

In the large majority of primary schools in New South Wales, students in Kindergarten to Year 2 classes take home 'home readers' on either a weekly or nightly basis. Home readers are levelled texts (see levelled texts in glossary) that are given to students to take home to practise reading at home to family and friends. The home readers are then taken back to school to be read to the teacher or parent helpers. The children move up a level of reader when they display an appropriate accuracy rate and understanding of the text at the given level.

Kindergarten

Means the first year of schooling in a primary school and does not relate to preschool.

Letter-sound relationship

The association between a sound in English and a letter/letter pattern in words. This assists in word recognition when reading.

Levelled texts

Throughout Kindergarten to Year 2 classes in primary schools in New South Wales (and for specific students in classes beyond Year 2 if they are not reading independently), texts for home reading are levelled from Level 1-30 (PM Benchmark Kit 1999, Appendix J). Level 1 is the beginning level and Level 30 is considered to be at an independent reading level. These texts are organised in classrooms in book boxes labelled with the text level. In recent years, many texts have already been levelled, at the appropriate level, by the book companies while other texts need to be levelled by teachers after they have been purchased.

Literacy

Encompasses talking, listening, reading and writing.

Multiliteracies

The term multiliteracies includes electronic literacies, techno-literacies, digital literacies, visual literacies and print and paper-based literacies.

Onset/rime

The separate sounds in a word, ie. the beginning part of the word (onset) and the rest of the word (rime), eg. *b-ark*.

Print and paper-based literacy materials

These include:

- all books;
- letters/postcards;
- magazines;
- newspapers;
- comics;
- TV programs;
- advertisements;
- instructions for games and building equipment; and,
- signs in the community.

Parent

Also includes primary caregiver.

Prior literacy experiences

Includes all literacy experiences prior to entry into Kindergarten, and encompass activities in the home, at child-minding centres or pre-school, and in the wider community eg. outings to parks, libraries, church or Sunday school, the beach or pool, restaurants, birthday parties and/or any family activity or activity with friends.

Phoneme

The smallest unit of sound.

Phonemic/phonological awareness

The ability to attend to and segment the sound stream into 'chunks' of sound, eg. phonemes, syllables, onset/rime.

Reading

Shared reading – occurs when the teacher or proficient reader reads aloud to a group or whole class. Students may be grouped so that they can see the text and the teacher can model reading strategies, read for enjoyment, or highlight particular features of a text.

Guided reading – occurs when a student reads a text at between 90% and 95% accuracy with teacher guidance to develop reading strategies.

Independent reading – occurs when a student reads a text with 95% or more accuracy without assistance.

Semantic information

The understanding developed and drawn from when comprehending a text, eg. recognising word sets (antonyms, words related to topic), predicting and following the topic of the text, following groups of words in a logical sequence, looking at layout and features.

Sight word

In the early years at school 'sight words' are those words that cannot be easily sounded out eg. school, home, little, friend, teacher. Children need to learn to read these words automatically by 'sight' and without sounding out the letters. They are common words that need to be memorised to enable reading success.

Syllable

A unit of sound within a word, eg. *won-der-ful*.

Techno-literacy materials

These include:

- TV;
- DVD/videos;
- CDs/tapes;
- talking books on CD or tape;
- computers
- computer programs;
- internet;
- email;
- multimedia CD-ROMs;
- digital camera;
- video camera;
- portable game machines eg. Gameboy;
- TV game machines eg. Sony PlayStation, Microsoft XBox;
- PDA (personal digital assistant);
- MP3 players (music players); and,
- communication equipment (mobile and home phones).

Text

Any written, spoken, nonverbal, visual or auditory communication involving language. It will include picture books, novels, conversation, plays, computer graphics and advertisements.

List of Figures

- 3.1: The research design
- 3.2: Relationship among multiple methodologies as used in this study
- 3.3: The research cycle in ethnography
- 3.4: Stages of data analysis
- 4.1: Multiliteracies
- 6.1: Alice's writing with both upper and lower-case letters
- 6.2: Sentence written by Alice
- 6.3: Alice's picture of a garden with love hearts, flowers, grass and a tree and a picture of herself and me, standing side by side
- 6.4: A model of Alice's learning journey at home in the first year at school
- 6.5: Adam's typing on the computer with picture inserts
- 6.6: A model of Adam's learning journey at home in the first year at school
- 6.7: Alexandra's writing
- 6.8: A model of Alexandra's learning journey at home in the first year at school
- 6.9: A model of Winton's learning journey at home in the first year at school
- 6.10: Jacob's writing on the computer and the inserting of an astronaut
- 6.11: A model of Jacob's learning journey at home in the first year at school
- 8.1: Ideal situation for developing a highly literate citizen in 21st century
- 8.2: Current situation in NSW schools on entry to school
- 8.3: Focus of *Best Start: Kindergarten assessment*

List of Graphs

- 5.1: Average number of weekly storybook readings per child by schools
- 5.2: Average number of weekly storybook readings by schools and gender
- 5.3: Average number of weekly storybook readings per child by gender
- 5.4: Reading activities by schools and type of activity
- 5.5: Reading activities by schools and gender
- 5.6: Reading activities by type of activity and gender
- 5.7: Children's reading initiatives by schools and type of initiative
- 5.8: Children's reading initiatives by schools and gender
- 5.9: Children's reading initiatives by gender
- 5.10: Children's library visits by schools
- 5.11: Children's library visits by schools and gender
- 5.12: Children's library visits by gender
- 5.13: Children's other reading activities by schools
- 5.14: Children's other reading activities by schools and gender
- 5.15: Children's other reading activities by gender
- 5.16: Children's writing activities by schools
- 5.17: Children's writing activities by schools and gender
- 5.18: Children's writing activities by gender
- 5.19: Australian Bureau of Statistics: Census 2001
- 5.20: Technology use by schools
- 5.21: Technology use by schools and gender
- 5.22: Technology use by type of activity and gender

List of Tables

- 1.1: Overview of the relevant documents
- 2.1: Descriptors used by parents when comparing opposite sex sibling pairs
- 3.1: Orientations of an ethnographic approach
- 3.2: Distribution and return rate of questionnaires
- 3.3: Australian Bureau of Statistics: Census 2006
- 3.4: An overview of the case study children and their families
- 3.5: Transcript segment from 'Focused Interview with Child's Parents': Case Study 1
- 3.6: Transcript segment from 'Focused Technology Interview with Child': Case Study 2
- 3.7: Case Study Child 4 - Excerpt from Home Visit: 15 May 2005
- 3.8: Overview of the relevant documents
- 4.1: Overview of the relevant documents
- 4.2: Computer-based Technologies in the Primary KLAs 1997
- 4.3: English K-6 Syllabus 1998, pp20-26
- 4.4: English K-6 Syllabus 1998, pp28-34
- 4.5: English K-6 Syllabus 1998, pp36-46
- 4.6: English K-6 Syllabus 1998, pp50-51
- 4.7: English K-6 Syllabus 1998, p67
- 4.8: English K-6 Syllabus 1998, p79
- 4.9: Best Start: Kindergarten literacy assessments
- 5.1: Mean reading activities
- 5.2: Reading activities by schools and gender
- 5.3: Mean of children's reading initiatives
- 5.4: Children's reading initiatives by schools and gender
- 5.5: Children's library visits by schools and gender
- 5.6: Children's other reading activities by schools and gender
- 5.7: Children's writing activities by schools
- 5.8: Children's writing activities by schools and gender
- 5.9: Australian Bureau of Statistics: Census 2001
- 5.10: Technology use by schools
- 5.11: Technology use by schools and gender
- 5.12: Parent views on the value of technology in learning to read and write at School

- 5.13: Parent views on the value of technology in learning to read and write at School 2
- 5.14: Parent views on the value of technology in learning to read and write at School 3
- 6.1: An overview of the case study children and their families
- 6.2: Alice's reading of words, in isolation, from the computer
- 6.3: Alice's scores on the Johnson Word List, Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) and PM Benchmark Reading Level
- 6.4: An assessment of Alice's techno-literacy skills
- 6.5: Adam's scores on the Johnson Word List, Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) and PM Benchmark Reading Level
- 6.6: An assessment of Adam's techno-literacy skills
- 6.7: Alexandra's scores on the Johnson Word List, Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) and PM Benchmark Reading Level
- 6.8: An assessment of Alexandra's techno-literacy skills
- 6.9: Winton's scores on the Johnson Word List, Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) and PM Benchmark Reading Level
- 6.10: An assessment of Winton's techno-literacy skills
- 6.11: Jacob's care prior to school
- 6.12: Jacob's scores on the Johnson Word List, Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) and PM Benchmark Reading Level
- 6.13: An assessment of Jacob's techno-literacy skills
- 7.1: Best start: Kindergarten literacy assessments pp4-5
- 7.2: Case study children's print and paper-based literacy assessments
- 7.3: An assessment of the case study children's techno-literacy skills

Table of Contents

	Page
Certification	i
Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Glossary	vi
List of Figures	xi
List of Graphs	xii
List of Tables	xiii

Chapter One: The Story Begins 1

Purpose of the Inquiry	2
Statement of the Problem	2
Background of the Inquiry	4
Why is this Study Significant?	8
My Personal Story and its Conceptualisation of this Inquiry	9
Theoretical Orientation of the Study: A sociocultural view of literacy	13
Current Policy and Curriculum of the New South Wales (NSW)	
Department of Education and Training (DET)	15
• What is the Board of Studies NSW?	16
• Syllabuses	16
• Stages	17
• Outcomes	17
• Indicators	17
• The English K-6 Syllabus and Support Documents (BOS NSW 1998)	18
• Computer-based Technologies in the Primary KLAS (NSW DET 1997) ..	18
• Literacy and technology	18
• The changing nature of literacy	20
Methodological Orientation	21
• Locus of study	22
Thesis Overview: The story to come	23

Chapter Two: Reviewing Past Stories 25

Introduction	26
Literacy Acquisition as a Socially Constructed Skill	27
Early Literacy Learning in the Home	30
The Relationship between Emergent Literacy Skills and Later School Success in Literacy	33
Early Literacy Learning and Adult-Child Shared Storybook Reading	36
Early Literacy Learning and Socioeconomic Background	40
Early Literacy Learning and Gender	44
Early Literacy Learning in an Electronically Mediated World	51
Summary	55

Chapter Three: Developing the Story 58

Introduction	59
Research Design	60
• Why qualitative research?	61
Research Methodologies of an Ethnographic Approach, Case Study and Narrative Inquiry	62
• An ethnographic approach	63
• Case study	67
• Narrative inquiry	69
Initial Phase – Survey using written questionnaires	71
• Site and participants	71
• Establishing socioeconomic background of the three schools	72
• Establishing gender	75
• Data collection procedures	75
○ Survey research	76
• Data analysis	79
Immersion Phase – Case studies using interviews, observations and assessments	80
• Participants	80
• Data collection procedures	81
○ Interviews	81
○ Observations	86
○ Assessments	89

▪ Johnson Word List	89
▪ Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) ..	89
▪ Reading Level on the PM Benchmark Kit	90
▪ Technology Capabilities	90
• Data analysis	90
• Stages of data analysis	93
○ Reading field texts, listening to, and transcribing audio-tapes and matching the above two sources of data together	94
○ Identifying themes across all of the case studies	94
○ Organising the data into themes and identifying categories	95
○ Constructing the children's individual narratives within the identified themes and categories	95
○ Interpreting the children's narratives in relation to previous findings from the literature	95
○ Searching for commonalities and differences in order to explicate the implications from the data	95
Mapping Phase: Document analysis	96
Limitations of the Inquiry	98
• Validity	98
• Participation and bias	100
• Sampling	101
• Trust	101
Ethical Considerations	101
• Participation and anonymity	102
○ Initial phase	102
○ Immersion phase	102
• Consent and confidentiality	103
• Consent withdrawal	103
Summary	103

Chapter Four: Documents ... and their Stories 104

Introduction	105
What is the Board of Studies NSW?	106
What is the NSW Department of Education and Training?	107
Syllabuses	108

History of the Development of the English Syllabus	109
The English K-6 Syllabus (BOS NSW 1998)	111
• Stages	111
• Outcomes	111
• Indicators	112
The Changing Nature of Literacy	112
The Teaching of Technology	116
Policy Statements	116
• Focus on Literacy	118
• Computer-based Technologies in the Primary KLAS	119
• English K-6 Syllabus	120
• Focus on Literacy: Writing	125
• Foundation Statements: Early Stage 1	126
• State Literacy Plan 2006-2008	127
• Our Young Learners: Giving them the best possible start	128
• BEST Start: Kindergarten assessment	129
Summary	132

Chapter Five: Understanding the Context of the School Stories.134

Initial Phase: Survey using Written Questionnaires	135
• Question 1 – Storybook reading	137
• Question 2 – Storybook reading related activities	140
• Question 3 – Children’s reading initiatives	144
• Question 4 – Library visits	149
• Question 5 – Children’s home library	153
• Question 6 – Beginning reading	153
• Question 7 – Children’s other reading activities	154
• Question 8 – Writing activities	158
• Question 9 – Writing materials	163
• Question 10 – Beginning writing	163
• Question 11 – Parent teaching	164
• Question 12 – Technology devices	164
• Question 13 – Technology experiences	165
• Question 14 – Parent views on the value of technology in learning to	

read and write	172
Interpretive Summary	178

Chapter Six: Understanding the Children's Stories 183

Introduction To Immersion Phase: Case study stories	184
Case Study No. 1: Alice	186
• Background information about Alice	186
• Environmental factors	188
○ The home	188
○ The people	190
○ Early learning experiences	191
• The child	195
○ Intrapersonal characteristics	195
○ Observations from home visits	198
○ Literacy learning	211
• Summary: Alice	213
Case Study No. 2 : Adam	218
• Background information about Adam	218
• Environmental factors	220
○ The home	220
○ The people	221
○ Early learning experiences	223
• The child	226
○ Intrapersonal characteristics	226
○ Observations from home visits	228
○ Literacy learning	237
• Summary: Adam	238
Case Study No. 3: Alexandra	242
• Background information about Alexandra	242
• Environmental factors	243
○ The home	243
○ The people	245
○ Early learning experiences	248
• The child	252
○ Intrapersonal characteristics	252

○ Observations from home visits	254
○ Literacy learning	262
• Summary: Alexandra	263
Case Study No. 4: Winton	267
• Background information about Winton	267
• Environmental factors	268
○ The home	268
○ The people	270
○ Early learning experiences	272
• The child	276
○ Intrapersonal characteristics	276
○ Observations from home visits	278
○ Literacy learning	286
• Summary: Winton	288
Case Study No. 5: Jacob	292
• Background information about Jacob	292
• Environmental factors	293
○ The home	293
○ The people	294
○ Early learning experiences	297
• The child	301
○ Intrapersonal characteristics	301
○ Observations from home visits	303
○ Literacy learning	312
• Summary: Jacob	313
 Chapter Seven: The Stories Merged	 318
Aims of the Study	319
Multiliterate Practices in the Homes of Kindergarten Children at Three Sydney Metropolitan Schools	320
• Introduction	320
• Print and paper-based literacies	321
○ Storybook reading	321
○ Storybook reading related activities	321
○ Children's reading initiatives	323

○ Children's other reading activities	323
○ Library visits and children's home libraries	324
○ Children's writing activities	324
• Techno-literacies	325
○ Children's technology use	325
• Interpretive summary	329
Relationship between the Kindergarten Children's Multiliterate Practices in their Homes and Socioeconomic Background	330
• Introduction	330
• Print and paper-based literacies	330
○ Storybook reading	330
○ Storybook reading related activities	331
○ Children's reading initiatives	332
○ Children's other reading activities	332
○ Library visits and children's home libraries	333
○ Children's writing activities	334
• Techno-literacies	334
○ Children's technology use	334
• Interpretive summary	335
Relationship between the Kindergarten Children's Multiliterate Practices in their Homes and Gender	337
• Introduction	337
• Print and paper-based literacies	337
○ Storybook reading	337
○ Storybook reading related activities	338
○ Children's reading initiatives	339
○ Children's other reading activities	340
○ Library visits and children's home libraries	340
○ Children's writing activities	340
• Techno-literacies	341
○ Children's technology use	341
• Interpretive summary	342
Relationship between the Multiliterate Practices and Skills of these Kindergarten Children and the Expectations, in the First Year at School, of Policy and Curriculum of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (DET)	345

• Introduction	345
• Best Start: Kindergarten assessment (NSW DET 2007)	345
• Case study children's print and paper-based literacy assessments	347
• Case study children's print and paper-based literacy skills	347
• Computer-based Technologies in the Primary KLAS (NSW DET 1997)	350
• Case study children's techno-literacy skills	352
• English K-6 Syllabus (2007)	354
• Interpretive summary	356

Chapter Eight: Future Stories 359

Introduction	360
Valuing Young Children's Multiliterate Learning on Entry to School	361
Implications	365
Postscript	368

Reference List..... 369

Appendices

Appendix A: Parent/Caregiver Questionnaire	390
Appendix B: Parent Information Sheet	397
Appendix C: Self-Nomination Form to participate in Case Studies	401
Appendix D: Information for school newsletters	403
Appendix E: Consent Form for Case Study Parents	405
Appendix F: Focused Parent Interview	408
Appendix G: Child Technology Interview	413
Appendix H: Johnson Word List	415
Appendix I: Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT)	417
Appendix J: PM Benchmark Assessment	423
Appendix K: Technology Assessment	426