The Impacts of Social Interaction on Literacy Learning

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The Impacts of Social Interaction on Literacy Learning

A Thesis

Presented to the College of Education

And

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Megan Donisch

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Introduction

As I make the transition toward becoming a practicing teacher I have taken notice of the importance of teaching literacy skills thoroughly and efficiently, in a way that engages students and is long lasting. As a part of my goal to put students first in my teaching, I plan to engage in research to find what works, and what doesn’t for my students. I began to notice as I worked in multiple settings that many students were not given opportunities to interact in several contexts when reading. Other schools were providing students with these opportunities, and I wanted to investigate the benefits of including discussion-based learning during literacy time.

Seeley-Flint (2008) argues that, “When we interact with others, we build upon their words, shaping them for our own purposes.” By working on literacy with others we are able to see how words are used, and then repurpose those words to create new ideas. Reading is naturally dependent upon social interaction with others who speak, read, and write the same language. Nearly every human being is born with the potential to communicate. If a child is put into the right conditions they will develop their speaking and listening skills. As teachers we must use the tools that students bring to the classroom with them, in this case the tool would be the natural ability to learn through speech and discussion.

I tend to follow the constructivist view of learning, which proposes that students build their knowledge with guidance instead of having it passed on to them by teachers. I design my lessons to follow this theory and I am in the process of exploring classroom instructional strategies that align with it as well. In order to follow this view in my teaching I need supportive evidence that it is a productive
and worthwhile practice. However, there is a push in some schools to take away a large portion of this time to interact, and replace it with rote practice of letters and sounds. I have seen the benefit of direct instruction and independent practice. However, the amount of time that we spend on this type of activity needs to be limited. Students must engage in varied activities in order to construct knowledge effectively. Before this study I would have frowned on activities such as worksheets where students write the same letter over and over again, or where they practice putting in commas, and even now I have a desire to find a more engaging way for students to do this practice. However, I now see the benefit and the necessity of this repetition. Students can learn the rules through experience, but they also need to practice them while it is fresh in their minds. If you use direct instruction to teach a student that a comma needs to be placed in a list with three or more items, they still need to practice doing it, or when the time comes when they need it in an authentic setting, they won’t remember to use it. Nevertheless, this practice time can be used sparingly, and students can be given more authentic writing time in which to practice these skills. Teachers should be developing interactive, socially constructed learning and using this repetition as a supplement to help students practice their skills. As important as practice is, these skills can still be learned best in an authentic scenario, where students see a fellow writer or reader modeling the skill.

This thesis will show the importance of including social interaction in the classroom and how it can help students to develop their literacy skills. In my teaching, I intend to find a balance of direction instruction, practice and socially
based interaction that best serves students. After doing this research I see that this balance will be heavily weighted by the interactive aspects. So much of what effective teachers do puts children in contact with peers or teachers. They must observe others practicing the skills of literacy if they are to learn these skills.

**Context**

Within Butler University's College of Education, all pre-service elementary teacher candidates are required to complete two semesters of student teaching. This allowed me to have two vastly different settings in which to conduct my observations. For my first semester, I chose to student teach out of the country. Instead of teaching in the U.S., I chose a program that allowed me to teach in Tasmania, Australia. This classroom was comprised of 21 kindergarteners, and had one practicing teacher with one teacher's aide. The school was called Johnson Primary School¹ and it was located right outside of Launceston, Tasmania. My observations here were conducted between October 2013 and November 2013. The class contained 7 English language learners and two students with special needs. Schooling in this environment was very similar to what I have experienced in the past. One significant difference I saw was that this school chose not to use the alphabet song, and they never teach the letters in 'order.' Instead they choose letters to teach in order of frequency and ease of writing and phonemic recognition. This affected the way I taught because I could no longer use the alphabet song as a reference for students.

¹ All names have been changed to protect the subject's identities.
Another important aspect of my teaching in this placement was the importance of interaction and active learning. The students were up and moving often as they practiced their letters. We even took a trip to the supermarket to find letters in a real world context. Because of the age level of this group of kids, my time with them was highly focused on literacy learning. We practiced reading, writing, producing and listening to letters every day in several contexts. There was less emphasis on science and social studies, but we incorporated these topics as often as we could during literacy time.

My second semester of student teaching occurred in America. Between January 2014 and May 2014, I was placed in Harrisburg Elementary School with an ENL specialist. During my undergraduate course work I decided to minor in teaching English as a new language. In order to complete my course work I am required to work in one student teaching placement with an English as a New Language (ENL) specialist. My cooperating teacher and I worked with grades K, 1, 2, and 5 using both push-in and pull-out methods. This school is located just south of Indianapolis, Indiana. Most of the students have come to America from Spanish speaking countries. However, there are also several students who are Burmese refugees. In this study I only acquired consent for research from 2nd and 5th grade in order to better study how social interaction relates to literacy learning as children grow older.

When I began this placement in January, the students were preparing for two different tests. The first is the LAS links test, which is required for all students who are labeled as English Learners (EL). This test is comprised of four sections,
listening, speaking, reading and writing. It tests the English ability of the students. Because it values listening and speaking, it also values social interactions. The second test that the students were preparing for is the ISTEP test. This is the standardized test for students in Indiana. All students, 3rd grade and above are required to take it and it values content knowledge in reading, writing, science, and social studies.

During the week leading up to the ISTEP test teachers also feel pressured to teach test taking skills, such as how to write to a prompt. Writing becomes very un-authentic and students mainly get handed prompts about topics they don’t enjoy writing about. During these weeks I did not collect much data because the students were mostly engaged in independent work or direct instruction.

For the purposes of a clearer understanding of this study, I will define the terms, “literacy,” “social interaction,” and “direct instruction” as I used them in my research. Literacy is the ability to read and understand a piece of text as well as to write a piece of text. Literacy also includes all the skills that are required to achieve these abilities of reading and writing. Seely-Flint (2008) discusses the vast changes that have occurred in literacy outside of school in the recent years. She mentions that there are so many new modes of writing and reading, and with each new mode we create a new set of rules for communicating in that platform. For example writing a text message requires very different literacy skills than writing a short response question. Although these are very different forms of communication there are still some foundational skills that all students need to write both pieces of text. Some of the skills that were studied during this research were strategies for
decoding an unknown word, concepts of print, writing conventions, comprehension of a text, and phonological awareness.

Social interaction can be defined as any time students come in contact with another person’s ideas, written or oral, about their reading or writing. It does not include casual conversations about topics unrelated to literacy work. Instead it includes discussion in whole group, small group, or one-on-one. It can also include notes on a paper to help a student make corrections for their next writing piece, or an interaction with the social world around them that includes written text. Model texts are an example of social interaction. Students can read a piece of non-fiction and then use their learning from that model text to help them write their own non-fiction text. In order for a social interaction to be included as a part of my research it needed to be focused on the topic of study.

After identifying the different types of interactions listed above I decided to specify what those interactions entailed so I could study them more closely. I chose to give my own names and descriptions to each of these three interactions. The first is a person to person interaction. When students engage in a person to person interaction they are coming into contact with another person’s ideas. This could be a teacher, a peer or a parent. It could also be through discussion, or through written feedback. This interaction usually occurs within the student’s school or home context and allows for the student to respond in a conversational style.

The next type of interaction I identified is person to text. In this interaction students read a text and during their reading they engage in thought about a new skill they can attempt in their writing. These interactions occur authentically and
are a lot harder for teachers to notice. However, they are powerful and allow
students to come across powerful reading and writing skills naturally in their own
reading, and then attempt these skills later on in their learning.

Person to world is the final interaction I chose to include. In my teaching I
have seen opportunities for students to engage in literacy learning in their personal
world context. This means that throughout the time they are not at school, and are
not intentionally engaging in reading and writing work, they will find opportunities
to learn about reading and writing skills. This may occur at restaurants, at stores,
on the internet, or even while watching television.

Finally, “direct instruction” is the time in teaching when a teacher simply tells
students the information that is to be learned. Teachers sometimes directly deliver
information to students instead of allowing them to construct it themselves. During
direct instruction time, a teacher would speak directly to the students and
demonstrate the skill that she is teaching. Students can raise their hands and ask
questions, but most often this time is meant for students to listen while the teacher
teaches.

**Methodology**

My goal was to gain a better understanding of the impacts of social
interaction on literacy learning. In order to explore this topic I chose to observe
children in their daily literacy work to see what best helped them to learn. By
keeping children in their own classrooms and not removing them from their routine,
I allowed them to keep a stable schedule, which ensured that a change in location, learning sequence or peer interaction did not affect my research.

I began by distributing my consent form to the children and asking them to take them home to their parents to have them signed. After receiving the consent forms back I began to observe and record what I saw during literacy time. At times I would interact with students, listening to what they said and helping them to engage in a strategy that might help solve a tricky word, or discussing their comprehension of a story. These experiences helped me to understand the teacher’s role in social interaction and literacy. Other times I sat back and watched the students interact, which gave me a glimpse into how peers can help a fellow peer better understand a strategy or a text. I took field notes about my observations, as well as taking pictures of student work for further review at a later time.

Finally I looked at student work, especially pieces that had been teacher or peer reviewed and compared those draft pieces with the revised or edited versions of the work. This helped me to see how written work can be affected by social encounters such as peer editing discussions or teacher comments on a paper.

After beginning my research I made the choice to exclude the home literacy survey from my study. My research was meant to investigate the impact of social interaction on literacy learning, and without delving into the literate lives of children at home, I was still able to view their social interactions with peers, adults, and their real world contexts. I believed this extra survey would have complicated the issue of whether or not the classroom literacy interactions need to be social, or if students can have those interactions at home and do their practice at school. So, by
eliminating this part of my research I was able to solely study the impact of these interactions at school.

Literature Review

In order to start my research my thesis advisor recommended a few texts for me to read, and to supplement these readings I went in search of some relevant articles. As I began my research, the main works that impacted my understanding of my thesis question were *Writing Superheroes* and *The Social worlds of Children Learning to Write*, both by Anne Haas Dyson, and the articles, “Discussions in a Fourth Grade Classroom: Using Exploratory Talk to Promote Children’s Dialogic Identities,” by Reninger and Rehark, and “Community Dialogue: The Bridge between Individual and Society” by Wells. All four of these pieces aided in clarifying my understanding of my question and in helping me build a significant response.

As I read *Writing Superheroes* by Anne Haas Dyson (1997), I came across several instances where teachers were encouraging students to interact with and discuss a text, not only through general group discussion, but also through plays and writing about a story. This text exposes the power of discussion and its affect on a student’s engagement with and understanding of text. Dyson (1997) makes the point that student’s writing doesn’t contain meaning for them until someone else chooses to read it. As a piece is read students then see that people can react to and have opinions about their writing, just as they do with a piece of literature that they are reading. Dyson refers to this idea of response to reading and writing by
suggesting that literacy is dialogic, it has two sides, one communicator and one receiver, which demonstrates a social perspective on literacy.

In *The Social Worlds of Children Learning to Write*, Anne Haas Dyson (1993) wrote with a similar theme. However it also included the importance of attending to children’s socially diverse backgrounds. Students come from many different contexts and Dyson points out that the experiences students bring will affect how they interact with each other and with their reading and writing. Some students have extensive interaction with text throughout the day, while others may only read during their time at school. These students need strong models to show them how to engage with literacy. Again Dyson makes the argument that text is dialogic, and only has meaning because we can assume that someone wrote it and that another person will read and interpret it. She also touches on the idea that students fit themselves into their social worlds based on how others react and respond to their created texts, both oral and written. These interactions that others have with a student created text can affect how students view themselves and their ability to read and write.

Exploratory talk is one concept that I had not had any interaction with during my undergraduate studies in the Butler University College of Education. We place a strong value on encouraging discussion in the classroom. However, we have not specifically discussed the idea of exploratory talk. Upon looking into exploratory talk I found it to be a strongly guided way of sharing and exploring others’ ideas about a topic. I chose to read the article, “Discussion in a Fourth-Grade Classroom: Using Exploratory Talk to Promote Children’s Dialogic Identities” because not only
did it include that idea of text being dialogic, but it also gave me some more insight into the power of exploratory talk. This article focuses on the way to guide exploratory talk as a teacher, and how the structure of this method benefits students. Reninger and Rehark (2009) display one teacher’s “ground rules” of exploratory talk and share how these rules help keep students focused on one topic, and how the rules help guide the discussion so that it is consistently beneficial. They acknowledge that some teachers have trouble when encouraging students to stay on topic, but that exploratory talk inherently guides a discussion and ensures that students stay on topic. Such discussion empowers students to feel responsible for their own learning and to be engaged in a discussion that requires more from them than simply answering the teacher’s questions.

The final article that greatly impacted my thinking was “Community Dialogue: The Bridge between Individual and Society” by Gordon Wells (2009). This article focused on the power of making students members of a classroom community and how this affected their future interactions with the world. Wells (2009) discussed the relationships involved in a classroom, and how developing these relationships gives power to the interactions that occur within a classroom. He often discusses the work of Halliday, who puts strong emphasis on the importance of language and language development (as cited in Wells 2009). Wells (2009) believes that without language and discourse we do not imbue our own lives with meaning and we do not see ourselves as members of a community. Together students can build knowledge through their past experiences and their interactions with other’s experiences. Wells emphasizes the knowledge that is gained when
students with varying levels of experience come together to solve problems in a classroom community where they feel their experience and their ideas are both valued and are of use to the development of the class.

All four of these works, combined with others dealing in the same topics have helped me to refine and shift my beliefs about literacy learning, and it’s ties to social interaction. One thing these texts had in common is that they all showed the importance of social interaction on meaning making, but they did not specify the affects it would have on learning specific skills. I began to wonder how students were expected to learn skills such as decoding words, and where to put commas. I had grown up with worksheets that helped me practice these reading skills that every student needs to learn. However, I soon realized that when using social interaction as an instructional technique, there isn’t very much direct instruction needed on these skills. Students simply acquire them while engaging in reading and writing activities. They see models from teachers, and texts, and then attempt to use those skills in their own work. Cambourne (1995) discusses the importance of approximations in oral language learning. Children need to attempt language in order to learn how to adjust their attempts to match a parent or guardian’s model. We do not give direct instruction when helping children acquire language, and this avenue of learning could have powerful applications for literacy learning.

Towards the end of my research I was still struggling to really make sense of my findings and to come up with a conclusion about my data. In order to guide me through this process my advisor also gave me an article by Brian Cambourne (1995) entitled, “Toward an educationally relevant theory of literacy learning: Twenty
years of inquiry." This article really helped me to piece together how we can apply our knowledge of successful learning to how we teach literacy. Cambourne (1995) uses what he learned about oral language acquisition as his primary example of a successful learning endeavor. He lists the 'conditions' as the basis for how we learn to talk.

Cambourne's conditions for oral language acquisition (1995, pg 185-186)

1. **Immersion:** The opportunity to work inside a situation that consistently requires a child to work in that language.
2. **Demonstration:** The opportunity to see and hear the language used accurately.
3. **Engagement:** When the child actively takes part in and pays attention to the demonstrations and the environment.
4. **Expectations:** Adults around the child assume the child will learn the language.
5. **Responsibility:** The child has choice about when and how they use the language and they are responsible for creative production.
6. **Approximations:** These are the attempts at using the language, which, whether correct or incorrect, are accepted by the adults in the child's life.
7. **Employment:** This refers to the opportunities the child has to practice the language.
8. **Response:** How the adults respond to the child's approximations helps them to evaluate and change their interactions with the language.

When all of these conditions are combined, Cambourne (1995) believes that success in language can and does occur. Children need to have freedom to make mistakes in their use of language, because as they practice and listen to what others say, they can then learn the culturally accepted way of speaking. All of Cambourne's above conditions, except for the conditions responsibility and employment, highly stress social interaction. This connection helped to clarify how his theory displays the benefits of social interaction on literacy learning.

As I read about Cambourne's theory of oral language learning, I made connections to language acquisition theory and the fundamental elements of the
Reggio Emilia philosophy. Language acquisition theory states that second language learners cannot simply be taught language. Students must engage with natural opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing their target language. I also connected with the principles of Reggio Emilia philosophy, which is an idea that came out of a small town in Italy. This town decided to rebuild their school systems based on the idea that children have individual interests that need to be fostered. The students have opportunities to investigate their interests and they pick up the skills needed in order to do so. Learning is an ongoing process that involves working with others in a community, and sharing ideas with peers and adults. All three theories contain the belief that children need to be provided opportunities to attempt what they have learned in authentic contexts within a supportive environment that engages them in the topic.

**Analysis of Student Work and Observations**

As I observed students and the work that they produced I came to find that social interaction could take many different forms. There are so many opportunities for students to gain social feedback and growth for their ideas, and most teachers give students many of these opportunities every day. By providing students with an opportunity to read a book, write a response, and share their response with a classmate, teachers enable students to interact with a model text which refines their idea of what “successful writing” looks like, as well as share their own writing with a peer who can give feedback about ways to better their work. During my student teaching in Tasmania, I took note of my cooperating teacher’s choice to give
feedback on students’ writing journals. One student wrote a sentence about going to a show, she wrote, “i em a the sow.” Her teacher gave her a piece of positive feedback, which was that she put spaces between her words. Her suggestion for what to improve the next time was to make the first letter of the sentence a capital letter. The next page of this child’s book had the following sentence, “I sowr raebow lolei pops.” The child clearly understood the suggestion to make her first letter a capital and made the change in her writing. This interaction greatly encouraged this student to make an improvement, and without the teacher’s social intervention, the student might not have gotten the opportunity to practice using capitals at the beginning of a sentence.

This scenario also displays Cambourne’s (1995) condition of ‘response’ from a teacher. It also displays a student to teacher interaction. The student attempted the skill and the teacher provided the student with feedback about her attempt.
Feedback like this is important because it, "serve(s) the purpose of sharing information about the language and the degree of control that the learner has over it at any one time" (Cambourne, 1995, p. 186). By providing children with responses we are helping them see what they can or cannot do when writing.

Another powerful interaction in this same classroom was our trip to the supermarket. We decided to take the students on a letter hunt to find the letters we had been learning in a real world context. At the supermarket I saw several encounters of students interacting with the social world in order to develop their literacy skills. This student to world interaction shows the power of allowing students to naturally find literacy concepts in their daily lives. Students would find packaging and look at which letters were located on the item. They would also decode the words on the packaging because they were able to use the sounds they knew, along with their background knowledge about items at a grocery store. Not only did they interact with their social world, they also interacted with each other. One student said aloud, "I am looking for bread, it starts with 'B'" (field notes). Another student heard her and together they went to look for the bread. This short exchange shows an example of a student to student interaction, which means these students were not only interacting socially with their world, but also with each other in this real world context.

Students finding letters on supermarket objects
The previous two scenarios gave examples of all three types of social interaction supporting student learning. The first student interacts with her teacher's feedback on her writing. She responds to this feedback by demonstrating the skill in her next piece. This shows the benefit of the interaction and the impact that it has on a student's understanding of literacy. The interaction is small, but when it is reinforced through a positive feedback sheet, and then practiced again by the student, it will make a lasting change in her work. In the second interaction the students are working in a real world context that they encounter every day. Students used letters we practiced in class in order to find items they needed at the supermarket. The students even worked together and used their peer to peer interactions to share knowledge and find items together. This powerful scene shows that through discussion based learning students can build off of each other’s prior knowledge, using what others know to help them understand new concepts as well.

In my second student teaching placement, at Harrisburg elementary in Indianapolis, Indiana, I was placed with an ENL specialist who worked with grades K, 1, 2, and 5. I had the opportunity to work with students who were not only learning to read, but also learning the English language. Social interaction is especially beneficial for these students because language is a socially constructed concept, as we see in Cambourne's research (1995). Without people to talk to or listen to, there is no point in using language. One important interaction that I witnessed early on was when I provided students with an activity in which they walked around and read different scenarios that I had written about them in the
classroom. After reading they had to choose what theme they thought best fit their scenario. Some students decided to work in partners (I had given them the option of working alone or in partners). I walked over to find two boys struggling with the word, “decided.” I listened first, and heard them both trying to stretch the word out, the following is our interaction:

Student 1: “de-dec-do-does”
Student 2 (simultaneously): “do-de-des”
Student 1: “Doesn’t! Does it say doesn’t?”
Teacher: “Would that make sense there?”
Student 2: “No, what does it say?”
Teacher: “Try stretching the word out”
Student 1: “I think we should skip it and come back to it”
Student 2: “Yeah, maybe we can get it without that word”

Through their interactions together, the students decided on a strategy that would work for them and then employed that strategy in order to continue with the work. This peer-peer interaction allowed the boys to not only continue reading, but it also helped student 2 learn how to engage in another strategy besides stretching a word out.

As I continued to read and study the interactions that students had, I began to notice the amount of time that teachers had younger students doing repetitive, non-interactive work, such as practicing letters in their notebooks, filling out grammar worksheets, and doing writing prompts. These activities had minimal interaction with peers or teachers. At first I questioned their necessity, but soon enough I began to see how important it is for students to simply repeat some of these skills several times in order to practice and obtain them. One fifth grader that I have worked with has trouble with orientation when it comes to the letters p, b, q, and d. He still struggles to figure out which way these letters go. There is not much
that we can do to help them with this task besides make him practice writing and looking at which way they go. This practice is not inherently social, and although we can correct him, he still needs the repetition of seeing the correct way several times. Specific skills such as these just need to be taught to students at this level in order to help them better express themselves in all other aspects of reading and writing. The letter orientation gets in the way of delivering this student's message in writing, and he can still learn other skills socially while we directly deliver this instruction to him.

Along with practicing conventions and the act of reading, students also need to practice comprehending and making meaning in a text. With my fifth graders I worked in book clubs, during which we would read a book, and come together twice a week to discuss it. Most of my students are not at the point where they are able to discuss a book with each other without teacher guidance. I usually offer questions to the group and they answer them, sometimes by looking back in the book. I often encourage them to use their book, and we go back as a group, to read what happened in the text. One day, while reading *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) with my students we had a moment of pure, student led discussion. The following is an excerpt from our conversation.

T: “So, do you think the curse was real?”
R: “Yeah, it’s real cause...”
J: “Because he went to prison”
R: “He and his grandfather were the same because he carried Zero up and then it rained.”
J: “I don’t think it was a curse.”
T: “Well if it wasn’t a curse then do you think it was all just a coincidence?”
A: “Yeah, it all just happened”
J: “Its just like... Stanley was just determined (destined) to go to camp and find the treasure. It was just supposed to happen.”
R: “No, I think it was a curse and its fantasy.”
J: “I don’t believe in curses.”
A: “So it’s realistic fiction.”
T: “Well a curse would mean its fantasy, but no curse would mean it is realistic fiction. So the genre really depends on whether or not you believe the author meant to make it a curse.”

This conversation only lasted about a minute, but the students were communicating instead of responding to questions. They had taken over authority for the discussion and I was no longer the only person responding to their thoughts. This group normally doesn’t ask very many questions or respond to each other’s ideas, however, their conversation naturally flowed during this discussion. Not only were they looking at both sides of the situation, they were patiently waiting for others to answer and building off of their peer’s analyses. Once one student mentioned the genre, the students who were taking the other side of the argument also built their genre choice into their argument. This shows how student to student interaction can help all learners engage with concepts they might not have thought to use before. The one student who brought in the genre argument made it possible for all students to think about this topic. I complimented my students on this discussion and took the time to talk with them about how the discussion looked when they were in charge of it and I stepped out to let them discuss. They now have a model for how it looks and feels to discuss in an authentic way and they can use this model in the future for more similar discussions.

One example of a student-text interaction was a student named Julia. Julia was a second grader who wrote a short non-fiction piece about lions. She had included the onomatopoeia “grrrr” in her text and I was curious where she learned that idea. I decided to ask her and she responded, “There was this lion king book, I
saw it in there.” Her response shows that students pick up strategies simply from reading and seeing them modeled in texts. She had not been taught the concept of onomatopoeia, but she was still able to use it in her writing because she had exposure to a text that used it.

Another way that I have seen social interaction be beneficial is when students are learning vocabulary. As I taught in an English as a Second Language [ESL] position, many of my students had relatively small English vocabularies. Whenever they are reading and they come across a word they do not know, it is not prudent for them to check a dictionary. Not only would they not understand how to read the definition, but they also would spend half of their time looking for words. So, in order to help them learn the vocabulary they need, we must help them create a schema for the words. In order to help them with directional words I spent a few minutes having them interact with a chair. I would tell them “put your hand over the chair,” and they would all follow along as I demonstrated. This interaction helped them to learn how the words sounded and helped them to connect the word to a real life example of the definition. They also were able to connect the word to an action they can see and do, which makes the word itself more memorable. After acting out the words, I would write the words down to connect how it looks to how it sounds. Without a teacher there to demonstrate and help them through the process of learning these vocabulary words they would not have as high of a comprehension level on the texts they read.
Findings

Through the readings and research that I did inside of the classrooms, I have created a strong understanding about the usefulness and importance of social interaction and its implications for literacy learning. In today's education systems, it is often recognized that social interaction is a strong way to engage students in the work they are doing. However, the power that social interaction between readers and writers, students and teachers, or even between students and their peers, can have on learning literacy is not often acknowledged in schools. Social interaction is not the only factor that determines whether students will learn literacy. However, when students learn literacy skills, and engage in reading and writing, they should have their instruction strongly weighted towards instructional strategies that incorporate social interaction.

Even adults still have skills to learn from discussing with peers. I participated in a book club once and the other members of the group began to discuss the introduction of the book. During high school I had always skipped over that section because I anticipated starting the story, and my teachers had never corrected this behavior. By sitting in and seeing how much my fellow group members had gleaned from this section of the book, I realized that I should be including this piece of text in my reading. By engaging with others and discussing the reading of a text I had learned a valuable lesson about how to be an effective reader. These learning moments happen to our students too, they can make more meaning out of literacy by discussing together than we can ever expect them to make on their own.
This need for discussion connects to a need for modeling. Discussions are a form of modeling because students see someone using a skill and they can learn how to apply that skill to their own work. Without feedback or strong models, students will never improve their writing because they won’t be aware that something isn’t working in their writing.

One student that I worked with struggled to write his letters in a way that was readable; even he struggled to read his own words. This student gave me a chance to explore the idea of dialogic communication in writing, because I needed to give him motivation to write his letters well. At first he wasn’t concerned with the accuracy of them, but once I spoke with him about the necessity of consistent letter shapes in order for others to understand what you write, he was willing to practice. By explaining to him that text should have meaning, and that his text will be misunderstood if he doesn’t make his words readable, he began to see value in his written language. His penmanship didn’t change over night, he still resisted taking the time to write legibly. However, whenever I reminded him of our conversation, he sighed and took more time to make his letters clearer. By instilling in this child the understanding that we write in order to send a message, and that his message needs to be understandable, he began to put more value into the words he wrote. Even though he still didn’t like taking his time, he was more patient in his writing so that I could read what he wrote each day. He wanted his message to be understood and so he was willing to take the time to make it possible for me to socially connect with his work. The social foundation of literacy was motivating for him, as it is for most students.
Bakhtin (as cited in Dyson, 1993), a philosopher who focuses on the ways that language and literacy are social processes, discusses how stories naturally place children into new relationships.

“He described stories and other kinds of texts as situated within a complex of human relationships. When people speak or write, they position themselves within these relationships, responding to and anticipating a response from others; each text is ‘dialogic’” (Dyson, 1993, p. 6)

As I discussed the importance of sending your message in your writing with the student above, I was helping him understand that there is a purpose to writing. He is attempting to share his thoughts with someone who will read those thoughts. This idea of creating relationships in literacy is powerful for students. The second graders that I worked with had pen pals in Texas. The students got very excited to read their letters and respond to their friends at another school. As Bakhtin describes above, these students are in the process of placing themselves into relationships and they are anticipating a response from others, which gives them purpose in their writing.

Literacy, by nature, requires two parties: one to send a message, and one to receive that message. This dialogic state means that students must learn how to write with meaning and how to make meaning of someone else’s writing. Engaging in social interaction, allows for students to practice interpreting and writing for understanding. Acquisition of these two complicated skills takes time, and students need a model of how to appropriately engage with these skills.
Students in upper grades have seen their peers, and their professors make meaning from what they read in a text. Cambourne (2005) calls this idea ‘demonstrations’ in his article. Speaking about learning oral language he states that, “[demonstrations] are the raw data that must be used to tease out how language is structured” (Cambourne, 1995, p.185). Similarly to when I had my students practice directional vocabulary by putting their hand above, next to, (etc.) their chairs, students use demonstrations, or models, to see how experts employ reading and writing skills. They then use these models, and their own practice with discussing a text to allow them to create and support ideas they find in the text. I modeled what the vocabulary word looked like and how to write it, then the students practiced the word and read it in their text.

As I worked with students of all grades, I also began to see the importance of giving students time to read and write without asking them to practice a specific skill. When students have the opportunity to just sit and enjoy a text they often begin to incorporate previously taught skills into their authentic reading time. I watched countless students making text connections long after it was specifically taught. Giving students time to let these skills soak in will insure long-term use of these powerful reading tools, and provides more opportunities to make person to text connections.

Students need to build stamina for reading and writing as well as learn to recognize letter sounds and write sentences independently. As important as social interaction is we cannot build students who are dependent on teachers and other students for their spelling, writing and reading skills. Yes, we need to help them
learn and practice these strategies, and this act comes with inherent social work. However, they also need to have time to put these skills they are learning to use in an authentic context, such as writing their own story. Students cannot always have someone there to stretch out a word for them or to prompt them to make a sentence make sense. These are skills they need to practice on their own so that they eventually can comprehend a story without a teacher there. I have many fifth graders who ask me how to spell many of the words they try to write. I cannot always be there to help them spell, even in class I need to spread my time around to many students. These students need to learn how to find a word they need help spelling, or how to confidently stretch out sounds in a word. Once the skills are internalized, then they can begin working on the next step in their reading. We need to trust students enough to give them opportunities to write using these skills while creating a piece of writing about their interests.

In my fifth grade classroom at Harrisburg Elementary, I took on the task of teaching students how to take notes while reading. This is a skill they have not encountered before, and so I planned to start with strong modeling of myself taking notes. I also acknowledged that notes are something that a person takes to help themselves in the future, and so I would not be helping them as much later on in the process. They needed the tools such as examples of how to take effective notes, or a demonstration of what pieces of information are most important, however, they also needed time to practice on their own to see how they can take notes independently. While I wanted them to be able to do this task on their own, I also began to realize the benefits of bringing two students together to discuss their process as they
worked. Some students may struggle to obtain one concept, and another student can help guide them to understanding. For example, if I had broken them up into pairs and given them a text to practice note-taking, one student may have struggled with choosing the most important information, but with another student there to help them choose, the process may have become easier. By mixing students with varying understandings of the concepts, we are enabling them to discover meaning on their own.

As important as I realized independent practice and direct instruction are for student learning, socially based practice still takes precedence over these opportunities for independent work. When combined in a classroom these two ways of learning create a strong foundation for literacy understanding. Students need to learn and make meaning through conversation and real world experiences, but following this learning, they need to practice the material independently in order to internalize it.

**Future implications**

In our classrooms today, many teachers build their literacy time in a way that enables children to choose independent practice activities. Many teachers create stations that encourage students to read on their own and learn through technology. This is an important opportunity for kids, because reading takes a large amount of independent practice. However, students also need time to practice their literacy skills in a way that builds knowledge from others and makes meaning of the concepts. Students have so much knowledge and understanding that they can share
with each other, and sometimes the knowledge that comes from the teacher is not entirely comprehensible for students. We need to allow students to build their understandings of literacy together instead of expecting them to learn from solely their own experiences with text.

In order to apply my understandings from this study in the future I would begin using group book discussion time. This time would look similar to a book club and would attempt to enable students to have independent discussions. Most discussions in classrooms are very teacher controlled. According to Cazden and Beck (as cited in Reninger & Rehark, 2009) most discussions in school involve a discourse pattern such as, “t-c-t-c-t-c-t-c-t-c,” where ‘t’ stands for a teacher speaking, and ‘c’ stands for a child speaking. This speech pattern, “is known as recitation” (p. 268). This pattern only allows students to answer questions posed. It limits deep and divergent thinking, and creates a response to literature that assumes there is a right or wrong answer when reading. This limiting discourse needs to be replaced in all grades, including young beginning reading grades such as kindergarten, with a discourse pattern that resembles a discussion such as, “t-c-c-c-t-c-c-c-t-c-c-c-c-c.” This pattern only requires teacher interaction when the teacher has something to contribute to the discussion, or when students are falling off topic. Discussions should be freeform and allow thinking to build off of other’s thoughts. An example of this type of discussion can be seen in the transcript of my Holes (Sachar 1998) conversation with my fifth grade students. These boys made connections to genre, and discussed how genre is affected by the reader’s understanding of a text. They also learned to look at both sides of an argument and practiced arguing their side.
By involving children in these free-flowing discussions we enable them to think about and learn from the literature they read.

Another change I would make to the learning that I witnessed in classrooms would be to add writing and reading workshops. The structure of a workshop begins with a mini-lesson, which is a 7-10 minute direct instruction block during which the teacher shares a skill with students. She models the skill in a text and then invites the students to try the skill with her guidance. Next, students are able to try the skill on their own. Then, the students are asked to share what worked for them, and how they used the skill in their learning. Finally, they are able to edit their writing through discussion with peers and the teacher and they can publish their work to share in the school. These writing workshops are structured in a way that balances social learning with independent practice of skills. It also ensures that students are in the practice of consistently writing authentic and meaningful texts. Throughout this workshop time students have an opportunity to engage in interactions with teachers, fellow students, and their text, along with receiving direct instruction in a useful reading skill.

Writing prompts have their purpose, especially in the standardized testing culture that we live in, however, student's creative pursuits and writing by choice also need to be valued in the classroom and made available to learners. Authentic writing that comes from a student's interests and curiosities creates internal motivation to write. Internal motivation fosters a love of learning and a desire to continue writing. The discussion on page 20, when my 5th graders were reading Holes (Sachar 1998), shows an example of a discussion that might happen in a
reading workshop. These students are in the practice of reading and taking notes to understand a text. They even attempt to identify the genre, which shows they are using the skills we have been working on within our discussion time. Discussions such as these allow students to engage with skills they were taught during mini-lessons and use them in an authentic situation in order to better understand a book.

During my research, I began to notice that students of different ages seem to have different common interests as they interact with text. It is possible that this trend only occurred in my context. However, I would be interested in looking further into the following common interests that I noticed among my students. In my kindergarten room most students’ interactions with reading books or writing text dealt with the conventions of the writing. They wondered about how to spell words, or they asked about what a symbol meant in the text. In second grade, they often wondered why an author chose to write something a certain way. Many students pointed out decisions an author made, such as in the If you give a mouse a cookie series (Numeroff 1985), my students noticed that the text is circular and they always come back to the beginning idea. Students in the second grade years are still asking how to spell, but now they also have bigger ideas about what authors do with text and why they do it. In fifth grade my students had started to think even more about the message an author sends and why they chose to send that message. My students had begun to analyze theme in a story and they were starting to notice and respond to figurative language. There seems to be a set of topics that are naturally interesting to each grade as they begin to understand more about reading and writing. This makes me wonder, is there a developmentally appropriate time to
focus on each skill, or are we simply promoting certain skills at different times in our current system of education?

In my future positions in education I hope to share these findings with my colleagues and the parents of my students. By engaging in discussions about my fellow teacher's experiences I will be able to learn even more about how these types of strategies work for students. I also will have the opportunity to encourage others to examine the benefits of reading and writing workshop style teaching. I also hope to continue searching for best practice in literacy learning for students, in order to better serve the kids that I teach.
Bibliography


The Impact of social interactions on literacy learning in the general education classroom

Thesis Statement

For my honors thesis I plan to examine the impact of social interactions on literacy learning. I plan to observe and work with children in the elementary grades in order to explore how social interactions, such as the workshop teaching method, can positively affect student literacy learning. Many professionals in the field already recognize the importance of social construction of meaning.

Seeley-Flint in her book, Literate Lives, acknowledges that students are members of many groups in their lives and the interactions within these groups, such as making lists, calling family, sending thank you notes, etc., all help to build their personal understandings of literacy. She says, “Because they are members of these groups, children observe others engaged in a variety of literacy practices” (Seely-Flint 12). Simply through the action of being around others, children are able to observe and engage in social literacy practices, and this helps them to understand and try out those literacy practices later on. Seely-Flint goes on to say that, “Literacy practices do not exist in isolation. They are a part of social relationships and networks . . . Literacy is a socially and culturally situated practice” (12). Here she shows that when children write, they need someone to read their writing, and when they read they need someone to discuss the reading with them. Otherwise there is
no reason to do these things. Literacy itself relies on the social aspects of life, a statement that Karen Gallas echoes when she says, "The path to literacy is not a private introverted path. It requires interaction with and validation by a community of peers ... Literacy is a process of merging who we believe we are with what we show we can do." Here Gallas shows that without others to help build meaning, literacy becomes pointless, thus making social interaction a necessity for literacy learning.

Although so many experts in the field recognize that meaning needs to be socially constructed, currently in education there is a tendency to pull away from these practices. Many programs in schools right now encourage teaching to the test in order to gain support and money for their schools. The focus of learning is high test scores and with this pressure comes more traditional teaching methods. President Obama’s "race to the top" program encourages schools to achieve higher standards in order to get more money for the school. However, when teachers feel they need to achieve a specific test score they begin to worry that the kids don't know everything for the test and start to teach how to take tests, and the exact material the kids will need for that test. This is not an effective way to teach in order to share meaning, and we need to see that kids can learn deeply without teaching to the test.

My goal for this thesis is to explore the implications of workshop teaching and of allowing for student interaction and investigation. When we hold the needs of each individual child above the tests we will create more meaning focused, learning centered people. Through my research I will investigate the potential
benefits that social learning can bring in support of meaning construction for children in their literacy learning. If we want kids to really learn we need to allow them to work in ways that encourage them to discuss and work with others, as the workshop model does. This thesis may bring to light evidence that supports the workshop model and could potentially be used to defend its use in an elementary classroom setting by showing the benefits of social interactions on children in general education.

By proving these benefits exist I could create an argument for the social construction of meaning within classrooms. My thesis will explore the positive impacts of social interaction on literacy learning and create a strong foundation of evidence to support the use of workshop style teaching in elementary education classrooms.

Research Method

In order to explore my thesis I will be collecting student work samples and audio/visual recordings of the students interacting in social situations. These recordings will inform my analysis of the work samples by allowing me to glimpse the social interaction itself, while the work samples will show the impacts of those interactions. I will collect as many samples as I can from a wide range of students in order to ensure that the impacts of social interaction occur for the majority of students. My research will also be conducted on a wide range of ages and a diverse population of students, ranging from kindergarteners in Tasmania, to fourth grade English language learners in Indianapolis. This range will help to support or refute
the benefits of social interaction because if it is beneficial for the diverse population than it can be accepted as an important practice for all students.

I also hope to send children home with a disposable camera and have them take pictures of their literacy lives at home. This will help me to understand the context of literacy that they bring to the classroom with them. I will couple this activity with a short interview into how these children engage in literacy at home on a daily basis. Their literacy development may be in another language and this could have a completely different impact on their learning in school. By interviewing them I open up my own understanding of the literacy that they are familiar with and I can better understand their social literacy interactions outside of school, which undoubtedly have an impact on their in school literacy understandings.

The interviews will be conducted on children from inside of my student teaching classrooms, and their names will be removed from all work samples and audio recordings. A protocol for the interviews is attached to this proposal. This protocol will help me to understand the pictures that students have taken and will allow me to find out more about what literacy understandings and social interactions these students engage in on a daily basis outside of school. Social construction of meaning that occurs at home is valued just as highly as that which happens inside school in the workshop approach. It is understood that children are learners outside of school and so this understanding will be valued through the interview process.

The data collected for this thesis will be qualitative, but will also encompass a wide range of students. If the results show that this is an exemplary practice for
diverse student populations, and that the benefits are seen from both in class and at home social interactions, then the workshop method could prove to be a valuable teaching practice.

**Background**

In the College of education, we are told from day one that learning is a social process. As I moved through my years as a Butler education major this connection became more clear to me and I began to wonder how we can impact change on our students daily lives through the addition of more social learning opportunities. A lot of schools end up telling their children to be quiet and sit still, but I never thought that was what was best for me as a student, so I want to explore how it might be different for my children.

This past semester, one of the children in my class engaged me in an imaginative play scenario in which we were underwater divers. We were on a mission to rescue the whale sharks from the eels, and after we finished our mission he immediately shouted, “let’s write a story about this!” So many questions came to my mind after this experience, could he have done this without me there? Why did this particular situation spark an urge to write? How can I recreate these scenarios for other children? How did this ‘adventure’ affect his desire to read more about underwater animals? Did it affect his understanding of the world? I couldn’t help wondering what about our interaction made him want to write, and so in turn I wondered about the social aspects of his writing.
I have also observed workshop teaching in my classes at Butler, and I have seen the passion that students in a workshop have for their work and their learning. If I want to teach in this way I know I am going to have to be able to defend my practices to those who don’t believe they are necessary. This thesis will be a foundation for my defense that workshop teaching is beneficial for my students. I hope to share my findings with other teachers who want to teach in this way too, but feel pressured to shift back to more traditional practices that others impose on them.

Finally looking ahead I recognize that it will be a challenge to try to implement workshop teaching in any school environment that I enter, unless that school already has several teachers working the workshop approach. I want to have firm evidence that this practice is beneficial for my students in order to support my decision as their teacher. When there is strong evidence to back up my decision I know that any principal would listen and allow me to work the way I choose.

**Schedule**

11.1.13 -> All resources gathered and interviews/collection times scheduled.
11.22.13 -> Initial Research complete
12.6.13 -> Data Collection Complete
1.10.14 -> Analysis of Data Complete
2.1.14 -> First draft of thesis due.

April 2014 -> Present Thesis at the Butler Undergraduate Research Conference
March 2014 -> Penultimate thesis draft due
April 21st, 2014 -> Final thesis due
Bibliography

Works previously consulted:


Works to Consult:


Lee, C.D. *Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research: Constructing Meaning through Collaborative Inquiry*.


Interview Protocol:

1. Begin by handing the camera to the child and prompting with the following paragraph:
   a. Will you take this camera home and ask your parents if you can take photos of the places that you read and write in your home? You may also take photos of any words that you see in your house or when you go out with your parents. If your parents read and write you may ask to take a picture of the places and things that they read and write.

2. Collect cameras and develop the film. Label the pictures so the students only see their own photos.

3. Place the pictures on a table and allow the student to review what they took pictures of.

4. Ask the students the following questions
   a. Which pictures show you reading and writing?
   b. Do you read and write with anyone here?
   c. Which pictures show members of your family reading and writing?
   d. Do any members of your family ever help you to read and write?
   e. Where do you see writing in your daily life? Is there writing on t.v.? On the computer? In the store?