Education 435
Individual Field Experience Paper

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Introduction

A positive environment at home, which fosters literacy development, is vital for a child’s success in school. Likewise, a supporting and enriching classroom environment is fundamental for further developing a student’s literacy skills. To ensure that both environments continue to promote healthy learning and literacy development, we as teachers need to recognize students’ prior experiences and knowledge, in order to bridge the gap between home and school. We not only need to partner with parents, but also with families to ultimately help support a child’s literacy development. “By listening to parents and children, we [as teachers] begin to conceptualize the strengths of families and the potential of children” (Compton-Lilly, 2009, p. 457). As I look forward to my future teaching career, I am curious to discover the most effective methods that can be used by teachers to bridge this gap between home and school. In this paper, I will seek to demonstrate several methods that teachers use to recognize the role of family and community literacy in students.

Research Question

The following research question will be explored in this report: What methods do teachers use to recognize the role of family and community literacy in students and are they effective?

We, as a working group, decided to make this our research question, because we wanted to further explore how teachers accommodate and recognize students’ literacy learning at home and in the community. To me, this is an extension of our working group’s discussions. As a group, we discussed how teachers need to rethink their false assumptions about family and community literacy practices, and should “make it a rule to assume that there are more literacy practices and educational experiences occurring [at home and in the community] than [we] realize” (Compton-Lilly, 2009, p. 456). In addition, Victoria Purcell-Gates (1996) discussed, “home literacy assumes a major role in the success of children in school literacy” (p. 409). We, as a group, agree with Purcell-Gates and
recognize the importance home literacy practices have on students’ academic success. In order to bridge the gap between home and school, it is essential for teachers to recognize the role of family and community literacy in students, along with being able to accommodate the students appropriately.

**Data Collection**

The data analyzed for the purposes of this paper was collected during observation of two separate schools in the south Calgary area for one week each. The first school observed, was an elementary school of approximately 560 students in kindergarten to grade four. The second school observed, was a combined school of approximately 860 students in kindergarten to grade nine. These schools will be referred to herein as “The Elementary School” and “The Combined School”, respectively. There were several types of ethnographic data collected from both schools, as seen in the Data Table below. All personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

**Similarities**

Both school boards had a mission to build good communication with parents and families. At both schools observed, the age demographic of the parents was fairly young (30-35), and the families at these schools were in the upper to mid-income socio-economic range. Both schools were newly built – The Elementary School was built 5 years ago and The Combined School was built only 3 years ago. Among the students, there were many who were educationally coded or had IPPs (individualized program plans). The Elementary School had 87 students who were coded and The Combined School had over 100 students who were coded. Among these codes, less than a third of the students had severe codes, another third of the students were coded with ADHD, and the final third of students had miscellaneous codes. At both schools, students’ artwork and projects flooded the hallways and lots were hung from the ceilings (Data Table). The two schools both were heavily technologically structured and had a wide range of technology usage such as having Smart boards in every class, iMac computers around the school, and iPad and MacBook computer carts for teachers.
to sign out for students to use. As summarized in both of the schools’ vision statements, the two schools were both LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) schools, where they aimed to promote environmental education through student engagement and initiative (Data Table). As such, many of the classrooms at both schools were setup as Reggio Emilia environments, where there was natural colours, natural lighting, plant and animal life around the classroom (Data Table).

**Differences**

At The Elementary School, their vision was to build a peaceful community among the entire school, by having the students do lots of group work with others and occasional individual work. In contrast, the vision at The Combined School was to develop leadership skills in individuals with an even split of group work and individual work. Students at The Combined School were encouraged to work in groups and take a leader role in the classroom (sometimes an older grade would mentor/lead a younger grade), along with working individually to develop their skills and independence. There was a heavy emphasis on developing literacy skills through Daily 5 at The Elementary School, with little focus on other core subjects; whereas at The Combined School, there was not a heavy emphasis on Daily 5, but rather focused on all of the core subject areas. The Elementary School strived to attain a borderless classroom philosophy, where everywhere in the school was a learning space, and students were encouraged to find their best learning space around the school; where in contrast, The Combined School encouraged to find their best learning space only in and around the classroom.

The following is a table compiled of data and observations collected from both schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recollections of interviews and</td>
<td>• Informal conversations with grade 4, 6 teachers at both schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>conversations</td>
<td>• Frequent conversations with administration at both schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Informal interview with learning leader at The Combined School</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Informal conversations with grade 4, 6 students at both schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maps and diagrams</td>
<td>• School map of both schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Diagram of Learning (Discovery) Centers of both schools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Diagram of standard and Reggio Emilia setup of grade 3,4,7 classes at both schools</td>
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Field Notes

- Observations of student-student interaction before, during, and after class at both schools
- Observations of student-teacher interaction during class at both schools
- Notes taken from school tour given by school’s liaison at both schools
- Observations of students doing Daily 5 literacy practices at both schools
- Observations of students working on project collaboratively, blogging, digital sharing at both schools
- Notes taken about Digital Sharing at PD day of The Combined School
- Observations of students in learning centers with behavioural problems, ESL/ELL students, students who needed additional help on school work
- Hallway and classroom decorum observations at both schools

Assignment Examples and Other Artifacts

- School profile, vision statement, and motto for both schools
- Social Studies projects of grade 4 class
- Parent weekly updates from teachers

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After careful observational research and data collected at both schools, a number of common themes presented themselves. In this section of the paper, I will comment on three separate themes, provide supporting evidence from my field research, and finally supplement this research with relevant literature.

Theme #1: Due to the nature of both schools being LEED schools, classroom blogging for students, staff, and parents became very prominent.

In her study, Compton-Lilly (2009) discusses that computers can extend past amusement to ultimately act as a powerful literacy tool for students’ success. (p. 454). Students at both The Elementary School and The Combined School commonly used the school computers to collaboratively work on projects, share documents digitally with others, along with blogging on the class websites or discussion boards (Data Table).

Daily blogging was one very prominent method that was used by teachers at both schools to recognize family and community literacy. In order to promote their LEED school philosophies, both schools strived to build an environmentally friendly (green) school environment, by limiting the printing and copying of assignments for students. An obvious advantage of using online blogs was
that teachers were able to eliminate printing off copious amounts of paper assignments for students, by posting assignments, weekly updates, and announcements to both students and parents on the class website. Not only did this give students more accessibility in terms of assignments, but it ultimately allowed parents to be more involved in conversation with teachers, be engaged with student’s learning at home, and be able to track their student’s progress more efficiently. After several informal conversations with grade 4 and 6 teachers (Data Table), I learned that blogging in the classroom and at home served as a powerful tool to connect with parents (and families) and provides teachers another strategy to recognize the differences in each family’s literacy practices. In conversation, these teachers discussed that for parents, it is especially valuable to regularly connect with teachers (i.e. through blogging) and to be aware of their student’s academic progress throughout the year. However, a question that can be posed is, how do teachers accommodate for the rare family who does not have a computer or internet access? I suspect that for those students and families, teachers would provide paper copies of assignments, along with providing other means of communicating. After observing and talking with teachers about online blogging, I believe (for the majority of the student/family population) this method can be a very effective strategy to bridge the gap between home and school.

Theme #2: Teachers need to recognize the importance of partnering with families and accommodating the curriculum appropriately for ESL students.

After talking with the principal at The Elementary School, Ms. T, I discovered that if a child’s parents are ESL (English as a second language) then the child is automatically coded as ESL (Data Table). One of the reasons for this automatic coding of the students, is to ultimately provide additional support to both the student and families. At both schools, there was a great deal of support available for these students who were ESL or ELL (English language learners) (Data table), such as in the Learning Centers of the schools and in the classroom, where teachers would make accommodations to student’s learning.
In one grade four class, in particular, at The Combined School, there were roughly ten students who came from families where the parents did not speak or spoke very limited English, and as such were automatically coded as ESL students (similar to The Elementary School method). The teacher, Ms. B, told me (Data Table) that in order for students to effectively develop their literacy skills, it is critical for them (especially ESL students) to have a literacy-rich home environment where literacy is practiced (Carter-Smith, 2014). Furthermore, Ms. B encouraged parents to continue developing literacy skills in their first language at home, in order that the skills could be successfully transferred to learning the English language (Mui & Anderson, 2008). Ms. B often made modifications to the curriculum and assessment methods for these ELL or ESL students. Instead of having these specific students complete all of the questions on assignments, she would often ask those students individually which five questions they fully understood and those were the questions they had to complete. As an alternative to the standard report card, Ms. B would go through the learning strategies and outcomes of each student and determine which were successfully mastered and completed. These classroom methods described were very effectively used and compare significantly with the methods used by teachers in the learning and help centres at both schools. Ms. B (and teachers alike) recognized the importance of partnering with families to develop literacy at home. Furthermore, they effectively modified the curriculum and assessment methods for students to better reach success.

Theme #3: Schools need to give opportunity for students to learn the curriculum in practical ways.

To ensure students’ engagement and attention in the classroom, as a teacher it is important to teach the curriculum in ways where students see relevance and make connections to their prior knowledge and experiences.

In the same grade 4 class, as described in Theme #2, students were given social studies projects that focused on the students’ heritage and past experiences. These functional and practical
literacy projects allowed students to learn more about their culture, ancestry, and what traditions the family practiced. These students, similar to the students in Barbara Comber’s (2013) study, specifically played the role of an analyst, journalist, and interviewer by preparing oral and written reports, along with creating photographic records. These truly did serve as practical literacy projects!

The first project was called Google Art Logo project, where students were tasked to create a Google Logo that best represents the students’ heritage, along with writing a report on the research found. The second project was called a Museum Curator project, where “[Ms. B had her] students . . . bring in literacy artifacts from home to share with others [in the class]” (Mui & Anderson, 2008, p. 242). It was suggested that these literacy artifacts be one where it was passed down from generation to generation. In both of these social studies projects, the grade four students played the role of an interviewer, asking parents and relatives about what makes their heritage unique. Both of these projects I found very interesting and was an excellent approach to make the curriculum relevant and exciting for the students. In this classroom, I believe that assigning these projects was an effective method that Ms. B used to connect home and school literacy in a relevant and practical way.

**Implications and Recommendations**

While exploring my research question, I found a wealth of data at both schools that related well to my research question. My findings from my field experience notes and observations, have revealed the importance of partnering with parents and families to ensure the academic success of students. It is important to make sure that learning at home and school matches up and is consistent with each other, in order to avoid “chaos, confusion, and inefficiency for [the] students” (Doherty, 2011).

Prior to collecting and analyzing data from field experience, I never had anticipated the large number of methods used by teachers to recognize family and community literacy in students. I was also surprised to find out that both school boards had a mission to foster good communication with parents and families. I never knew that family and community literacy was such a priority for
schools. I wonder if the schools I visited were an exception, or if all schools strive to connect home and school together?

Based on my findings, I now have a better understanding of the implications of partnering with parents and families. I have several recommendations for the school boards, schools, and teachers. First, I would recommend continuing to think of effective methods to recognize family and community literacy in students. Next, I would suggest that the teachers continue to encourage families to develop literacy in their own language at home, to ensure that the skills learned would be transferrable. Lastly, I suggest finding new approaches that make learning the curriculum more practical, relatable, and relevant to the students’ lives and experiences.

My research question was most definitely the correct one to research in these two schools. I observed several effective methods that teachers use in the classroom to recognize family and community literacy in students. There were several reoccurring themes in my field data, and found it difficult to narrow it down to just three themes.

As I steadily move forward towards my long awaited teaching career, I look forward to discovering the most effective strategies and methods that I, as a teacher, can use to recognize the role family and community plays in the lives of students.
REFERENCES


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