The Resources Available at Home in Windhoek Urban Settings in Namibia And Their Implications for Early Literacy Learning at School

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Abstract

The study explores data of a larger ethnographic-style research that followed three children in Windhoek urban pre-and primary schools and at home in Namibia to examine their early encounters with literacy and the implications of these encounters for their later development as readers and writers in schools, at home and in their communities. As parents and older siblings occupy home as a social space, they engage each other in literacy events, during which literacy learning is encouraged as a culturally valued activity. This paper presents a 'slice' of that larger study that followed three pre-and primary school home literacy encounters over a period of one year, focusing on the primary school phase. The writer suggests that the reading and writing practices of literacy are only one part of what children are learning at home in order to be literate. Home creates other literacy practices that cut across reading, writing and other forms of semiotic forms of communication. I want to suggest that Namibia endorse the sociocultural approach to literacy learning by way of a paradigm shift in order to create room for other literacy practices outside of school, in homes and in communities, to become recognized and made legitimate as they already are broadening what counts as literacy.

Introduction

What was considered as important during this study was the social practices that goes into the construction, uses and meanings of literacy in context (Street, 1993). The in-depth study that I take a 'slice' from, which was a small-scale ethnographic-style inquiry, aimed to enhance our understanding of how children begin to learn to read and write by answering the question: What counts as literacy and how is it supported during pre-and primary school learning? I was particularly interested in finding out how the literacy practices and events at home, at preschool and at primary school in Windhoek urban settings provide the resources or 'capital' necessary for literacy learning. This paper focusses on the resources that home literacy practices offer for literacy learning during the primary school phase. My research children, Ruben, Tuvii, and Matthias, live in the Windhoek urban area and came from Dorado Park, Katutura and Rocky Crest areas respectively. They started their preschool proficient in their home language and having participated in various literacy practices in their local communities. They were engaged in literacy learning at home and in school during the preschool phase. They joined the primary school phase each with their own ways of making meaning, with individual linguistic, social, economic and cultural capital. They had already encountered diverse multi-literacies at home and in school during their preschool year on which they continue to build further literacy learning. I argue that the influence of family members and caregivers does not cease as the child enters primary school. As a social practice, parents and other family members continue to be involved in literacy activities from which their children benefit.

Conceptual premises

Following on the socio-cultural perspective, which attempts to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices, influential ethnographic researchers in socio-linguistics and anthropology changed the way many researchers and educators commonly think about early childhood literacy. In this study, I have identified home or family and community literacies in line with Heath (1983), Prinsloo and Breier (1996) and Prinsloo (2013) as:

> The teaching and learning of literacy skills in locally available literacies (which might include schooled literacy) to become competent and knowledgeable in their use in cultural contexts. Children learn what is important within the cultural communities in which they operate through interactions, guidance and participation with more experienced members of those cultures. It is by being socialized into and participating in such different literacy activities that individuals in communities acquire different literacies even if they do not carry the same cultural capital as schooled literacy.

The roots of literacy (Goodman, 1986) occur in individuals as they explore cultural tools (e.g. reading/writing) with the assistance of other companions in their communities. Barton (2007), for example, points out that children learn the particular language and literacy practices of their community. Children from mainstream homes and those from minority communities, even those from homes without print literacy, have different ways of making meaning that resonates from the particular literacy practices that they are involved in in their community. The big question is: Are children at home being prepared for the schools' ways of knowing and are home practices being acknowledged in schools even if there is a mismatch between home and school practices? There is thus a need to consider the language and literacy practices that children come to school with, even when they are not the versions the school uses. Since home is a primary socializing setting for young children, the reading and writing which occur in this setting would provide insight into the orientations to literacy with which the children come to start school (Teale, 1986; Barnitz, 1994; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003).

Heath (1982, 1983) points out that there is a need for ethnographic research to provide descriptions of the ways different social groups 'take' knowledge from their environment in order for the school to know the genres of language-use that their learners come to school with and not to close an eye to the genres of language-use which their cultures could not provide, but to work out modalities to bridge such gaps. Gee (1998) points out that it is also the case that some children come to school having engaged in varieties of reading, writing, or speaking that do not 'fit' or 'resonate with' the school. The school usually misses this fact and sees only absence of experience. Other children come to school having had little exposure or no exposure or early initiation into reading and writing, and therefore cannot make good progress but fall behind their peers, often getting labelled as having learning difficulties. Gee (1998, p. 10) cautions that 'teachers should not let their students so routinize design that they are simply "colonized" by the social practice they are acquiring and cannot transform and innovate design features for their own personal, social, and political purpose'.

In an ethnographic study of early childhood literacy, Dyson (1993, p. 4) defines literacy as a 'social action by which children use print to represent their ideas and to interact with other people'. She points out that children from diverse backgrounds for whom literacy was not emphasized at home bring diverse experiences to symbol-producing – talking, drawing, playing, storytelling, and for some, some kind of experience with print, all of which are resources with which both teachers and children can build new possibilities in literacy learning.

Prinsloo and Breier (1996) and Prinsloo (2013) points out that there are other literacies characterized as cultural resources which are not the same as school literacy, but which are in use, such as drawings, letter-writing, games, photography, visual formats, digital materials, keeping a diary, music, computer, play and drama, folklore, vernacular literacies, cultural resources, workers' literacies, local and social literacies. It is by being socialized into and participating in such different literacy activities that individuals in communities acquire different literacies, even if they do not carry the same cultural capital as schooled literacy. In his study of the emergent literacy practices of children in their out-of-school peer in play Khayelitsha, Cape Town, Prinsloo (2004) urges teachers to allow children to draw on their resources and experiences outside school, and to use other media besides talk and print, including drawings and dramatic play, as they learn how the written media works, and what social possibilities it allows, for example, for fulfilling the requirements of the official curriculum, for representing their imagined worlds, and for connecting with friends as well as with family. He urges that the classroom should become a space for an 'expanded activity', where hybridity and diversity are viewed as important cultural resources in children's

development, where the activity system is extended and the activity itself reorganized, resulting in new opportunities for learning.

Finally, I draw on Kress's theoretical approach to argue that children are creative users not only of print and spoken language, but also of visual formats, including oral and digital materials. The broader question I ask in the context of Kress's work is whether the literacies being taught at schools are relevant to the lives that learners are leading and will have to lead in this globalized world that demands flexibility, multimodality and multi-literacies. This study draws on this approach to find out, to borrow Kress's phrase, 'what is to hand' at home (Kress, 1997).

Research methodology

This study, which focuses on three children's early literacy, used an ethnographic approach in a restricted and focused way similar to that suggested by Barton (2013), or in a kind of a 'micro-ethnography' way. I collected comprehensive narrative and visual data for each of the three selected children over the course of one-year period to gain insights into what counts as literacy in home and school contexts. The approaches used to gather the research data consisted of direct field observations, taking of pictures, document analysis, and videotaping of literacy sessions. At home, the role that the parents or other caregivers and siblings of the three focal children played during home literacy practices was studied in order to document how literacy learning happened at home. Thus, the theoretical and methodological focus of this study was shaped by debates in the field of Early Childhood Literacy studies (Hall, Larson & Marsh, 2003).

The Research Settings

In this article, I focus on data collected from three homes situated in Dorado Park, Katutura and Rocky Crest suburbs in Windhoek. Homes in these three suburbs of Windhoek are differently resourced in terms literacy learning materials. I will focus on literacy learning as it takes place in home or in family settings during the primary school phase.

The first child is a boy called Ruben, he lived in Dorado Park. During home literacy learning, the more advanced siblings in the family and his parents served as resource persons. They focused on using literacy resources coming from school, like individual words, lists of words, worksheets and individual sentences. This home also had digital technologies as part of family life. Ruben's family life literacies included literacy for accessing or displaying information using the computer as well as literacy for skills development.

The second child is a girl, Tuvii who lived in Katutura. At home, Tuvii's mother continued to support her with literacy learning. She mainly used worksheets and word lists that came from school and a storybook during their home literacy activities. Literacy learning served the purpose of skills development by participating in homework-related activities, as well as for establishing and maintaining relationships, by reading a storybook with her.

The third child is a boy Matthias' lived in Rocky Crest suburb. His home literacy practices included literacy for establishing or maintaining relationships, for pleasure and self-expression, and for skills development (see Cairney, 2003). His home had genres such as newspapers, alphabet letters, children's books, worksheets, puzzles, computers and cellphones as literacy resources. Matthias' home literacy learning activities included tracing activities and writing, as well as showing his experiences with technology. The more advanced siblings served as resource persons at home. They focused on using literacy resources coming from school, like individual words, lists of words, worksheets and individual sentences. He had parents as resource persons at home and participated with them in literacy learning activities, school-related as well as for leisure.

Results

As the research children came from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, there was a variation in the amount and type of literacy resources available in each home. Such varied home literacy resources and their practices across and within families will shape and influence the children's early literacy learning in their home settings. The diverse literacies that children participate in and observe within their families play a significant part in their literacy development. When analyzing the data, Rogoff's (1990, 1995) cultural apprenticeship model of learning, a sociocultural approach that involves observation of sociocultural activity such as literacy development, was used. Rogoff (1995) advances three planes of analysis for interpreting and evaluating learning. These are apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation. Rogoff points out that these plains are mutually constituting, interdependent, inseparable but distinguishable and identifying them individually enables

particular aspects of a learning process to become the focus of analysis at different times, but with the others necessarily remaining in the background of the analysis. The apprenticeship model of pedagogy in opposition to the traditional view grounds literacy learning within settings with the basic unit of analysis being that of an event. The traditional view separates the person and the social context, by studying the individual's possession or acquisition or lack of skills in a rather decontextualized manner.

I will now present three examples of literacy events in which the three research children participated during home literacy practices during the primary school phase, in order to show that some literacy-related resources are learned and developed in the home context.

Example 1: Ruben's home literacy experiences

During home literacy learning, the more advanced siblings in the family served as resource persons. The extract that I will draw from here used literacy resources which came from school, like individual words, lists of words, worksheets and individual sentences that his siblings used to support his literacy learning in this case.

(Ruben's brother and sister interaction during a writing practice event at home).
[Ruben = R; Sister = S; Brother = B]

    48 **B:** Showing him words to look at.
    49 **R:** No! I know all those words,
    50 **B/R:** Spelling/dictation commenced:
       1.   volt
       2.   when
       3.   buns
       4.   look
       5.   deep
       6.   jug
       7.   cat
       8.   stop
    51 **B:** When marking look, the last <u>k</u> in look did not stand well and gave a half mark.
    52 **R:** Objecting and calling on his sister (S): Ek het 'n <u>k</u> by look geskryf dan maak hy 'n half-merk. Ek het 'n l-u-u-k. [I wrote a <u>k</u> at look but he gives half a mark, sounding all letters written].
    53 **B:** Kyk hy het k nie mooi geskryf nie. [He didn't write a proper <u>k</u>].
    54 **R:** Jy maak ook so! [You do the same].
    55 **S:** Nog steeds het hy 'n k gemaak. Hy is nog bietjie klein, hy leer nog hoe om sy letters te skryf. [He still made a <u>k</u>. He is young, he is still learning to form letters].
    56 **R:** Scoring 9.5/10.

At home, learning to read and write was done through engagement in repetitive activities of reading and writing (copying), which was backed up by the use of the grapheme-phoneme match strategy. This extract demonstrates the complexity and the richness of the family support network that was available to Ruben at home (a brother and sister). This social exchange used mixed codes and crossing to support literacy learning at home. The aim of the writing activity was to learn the words taught at school and to write them correctly from memory (line 48). Line 49 shows that Ruben knew how to write all the words. His participation with others and his self-involvement in this social practice made him observe what others do; he became more familiar with other ways of writing, such as cursive writing. Writing properly and correctly was emphasized and became a bone of contention during the feedback stage after test-taking (line 53). Ruben seemed quite observant (line 52) and participated during the other sessions when his older siblings worked in their books. He argued that the way he wrote his k was similar to how his older brother also writes (line 54). The older sister's intervention helped to put Ruben at ease, and also called to order the brother who was assisting him with this literacy activity to be lenient and to consider as correct the resemblance to the target word (line 55). Through his active interactions and observations during literacy activities at home, Ruben learned the different ways to write letters, manuscript, cursive writing as well as keyboarding at home. His father remarked during one of the home visits that Ruben had since early age always been vigilant and observant when the other siblings who attended school were doing their work and at times even correcting them. Such a sociocultural analysis shows how individuals with the assistance from other members transform, as together they constitute and are constituted by sociocultural activity (Rogoff, 1995).

Example 2: Tuvii's home literacy experiences

In the extract below, Tuvii's mother took on varied interactive roles; she observed Tuvii as she read and copied words written at school, assisted with reading words she could not pronounce, sharing different parts of a writing task such as dictating to the child some words to write down, and providing help and information as required by the child. I maintain that Tuvii gained from her involvement with her mother through participatory appropriation in this sociocultural activity (Rogoff, 1995).

(The parent interacted with her child during a reading and writing activity at home).
[Researcher = H; Tuvii = T; Mother = M; ° ° = lower in volume than surrounding talk;
(xxx) = un-interpretable words or phrases/talk too obscure to transcribe]

1 **Resident lady:** Goeie middag! (Greeting H) [Good afternoon!]
2 **H:** Goeie middag.
3 **T:** (Read short sentences from school. Her mother was looking on. Her reading was not clearly audible due to environmental noise. Very slow word-for-word reading. However, the child could slowly say most of the words one by one).

°Pam has (had) a cat.
The cat is fat.
The fat cat is bad.
Bad fat cat sat in the jam.
In the bag went (assisted) bad fat cat.
Dad and Pam ran with (assisted) bad fat cat to the tap (assisted)°

(Writing: While mother was looking on).

4 **T:** (Name and surname written on top of the page. Writing from memory a few words that appeared in the reading passage):

1. Bad. fat. cat. **(**Each word had a full stop and all numbered as 1.).

5 **T:** Went to fetch the paper with words, after writing the first words.
6 **M:** (Mother, taking it (xxx): Skryf hier wat ek jou se, né [write here what I am telling you] and started dictating the words for her to write).
7 **M**: 2. Boy.
8 **T:** b is facing this side (left) or that side (right)?
9 **M:** Facing right.
10 **T:** (writing it correctly) boy.
11 **M:** girl.
12 **T:** Which side is it facing?
13 **M:** It's facing that side (left)..
14 **T:** girl (Writing it correctly)
15 **M:** mother.
16 **T:** ma.
17 **M:** How do you write 'the'?
18 **T:** mathe.
19 **M:** The last one?
20 **T:** mathen.
21 **M:** Correcting the **n** for a **r.**
22 **T:** (Erasing the **n** and writing **r)** mather (not noticing the spelling mistake, the activity continued).
23 **M:** Skryf **is** [Write **is**]
24 **T:** is
25 **M:** in
26 **T:** (xxx) …

Tuvii read the sentences she wrote down at school. Her mother assisted her with words she could not pronounce (text following line 3). After reading, Tuvii continued to write (line 4) words from memory. Her writing format

resembled that of the school lesson. She modeled the classroom-style of page organization, with name and surname on top of the page as if the activity was for submission to her teacher, and numbered the words she wrote. As the mother joined her (line 6) for the writing event, she read out the words from the school list which she had to spell. In lines 8 and 12 Tuvii was asking for assistance so as not to reverse the initial letter in the word to be written. This showed that she was aware that she still had a problem and reversed those letters. Not to make the mistake, she requested for assistance to write correctly. The last word of the activity was 'mother' (line 15), a sight word. She did not remember how to write it and she requested assistance from her mother. The assistance that was rendered resulted in an error when it was finally written. The mother did not cross-check the spelling, resulting in a spelling mistake (line 22). Tuvii was assisted to develop literacy skills for the school's ways of teaching. Such an achievement-oriented approach taken at home in support of literacy learning at school strengthened the child's ability to deal with reading and writing as taught at school.

Through their participation in the literacy event, the participants gained from their involvement in this sociocultural activity. From a sociocultural approach, the focus is not on taking in information from the outside, storing it and retrieving it, but how people participate in this activity, changing their roles from being guided to becoming independent users of such skills in meaningful ways in real-life settings. As argued by Rogoff, Tuvii's active participation in the activity ensured that she gained facility in an activity, 'the process is the product'. Tuvii and her social partner (mother) are interdependent, 'their roles are active and dynamically changing, and the specific processes by which they communicate and share in decision-making are the substance of cognitive development' (Rogoff, 1995, p. 151).

Example 3: Matthias's home literacy experiences

The extract below presents one such an encounter in which modes such as images, sound and movement had entered the learner's everyday multimodal social and communicative worlds. Here Matthias engaged his father in a game for pleasure:

[Father = F; Matthias = M; (xxx) = un-interpretable words or phrases/talk too obscure to transcribe]

1 **F:** Good luck, Boikie!
2 **F:** Matthias, you crooked!
3 **M:** You didn't put the (xxx), Daddy!
4 **F:** You had to do it.
5 **Peers:** Three youngsters who were playing outside came indoors to peep at what Matthias was doing. Giggling!
6 **M/Peers:** Observing and looking on with a few remarks and questions in soft voices for Matthias (xxx). Matthias continued the game.
7 **One child:** Matthias, are you playing against your Dad?
8 **M:** Yes.
9 **M/Child:** (xxx)
10 **Child:** Matthias, are you not learning cursive?
11 **M:** What is cursive?
12 **M:** Continuing with game, self-talk as he plays.
13 **M:** You think you will take my castle? You can't! …

During this literacy activity, Matthias used technology to interact with his father as they played a game on the computer with each other. He thus had exposure to different technological landscapes of media texts as part of his family's social practice in the home. Matthias had a relationship with the screen which was yet another primary text within the home. The use of computer games at home served as a means to facilitate family functioning and strengthening family bonding. Such engagements also facilitate the development of spatial and problem-solving skills. In this apprenticeship, the newcomer to a community of practice advanced his skill and understanding by participating with his father. Their hands-on joined participation was preparing Matthias in computer literacy learning. Such participation is itself the process of appropriation (Rogoff, 1995: 151).

Reflections on Literacy Learning in Family Life

Children's involvement in these varied literacies speaks volumes about literacy learning at home being much more than paper-based code recognition. At home the children used various semiotic tools, including language, number systems, drawings, signs, hand-held devices, interactive computer games, and they were exposed to interactive

cartoons, movies, video games and music, all of which contributed to their literacy development. They were manipulating these technological tools as they made sense to them; they provided them with a sense of enjoyment and as a way of staying in touch with others in their communities. Cairney (2003) points out that families support literacy learning through joint activities, personal activities and ambient activities while they go about their everyday life. The availability of such a variety of sources suggests that children are exposed very early in their lives to various literacy resources.

The learners who participated in the study had access to various modern digital environments at home as 'placed resources', with local effect (Prinsloo, 2005, p. 88), and were able to manipulate computers, cellphones and other available technological devices, especially in their homes. New literacy practices became visible with their practical uses across contexts as part of the larger practices. With the 'social turn', new literacies and their literacy practices which were not necessarily recognized by schools came to receive emphasis. For example, Kress (1997, 2010) has shown how print literacy is intertwined with other modes, especially the visual mode, and how reading changes as society shifts from a reliance on the page to reading the screen. Prinsloo (2005 b) argues that while the old literacies were print-based and language-based, the new literacies are integrating the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of interactive human communication with screen-based and networked electronic systems. Such texts, when used in their varieties by school teachers, would make aspects of reading, writing and oral presentation more meaningful to the learners. Dyson (1993, p. 6) argues that children from diverse cultural backgrounds draw on diverse cultural materials (e.g. stories, jokes, songs, language, plays etc.) to accomplish social work such as building relationships among themselves. She points out that children for whom literacy was not emphasized at home bring 'diverse experiences to symbol-producing – talking, drawing, playing, story-telling, and for some, some kind of experience with print, all resources with which both teachers and learners can build new possibilities'. Prinsloo and Stein (2004, p. 82) maintain that 'literacy pedagogies which work productively and sensitively with indigenous, local forms of knowledge, drawing on children's multiple semiotic resources in combination with other forms of knowledge which are dominant and powerful, like academic and critical literacy, might be an important starting point'. Prinsloo and Baynham (2013, p. xxxiv) also point out that 'while classrooms have mostly stuck to maintaining clear borders between the languages and learnings of school and the out-of-school languages and literacy practices of bilingual youths, research have called for translanguaging and situated literacies in the classroom, based on the argument that all literacy pedagogical approaches should be contextualized and start with the language and literacy resources that children bring to school'.

It is by bringing the social and the multimodal/semiotic together to make 'new literacies' that we can accommodate our learners in Windhoek urban settings. Through such a design, everybody will at some point in their literacy learning encounter a text or other cultural art forms or genres that will appeal to them because of familiarity. It is through the cross-fertilization of the 'local' with the 'dominant' that we can make literacy learning better for all. I maintain that the dominant one-way flow of schooled literacy from educational institutions to home should now be reconsidered in favor of multi-literacies and multimodality and that teachers and curriculum developers start to take meaning from what their learners bring with them into the classroom. We have seen that literacy learning is not school-based only but that the home environment also presents learners with other categories of literacy practices.

By recognizing and accepting the different literacies in different environments (e.g. visual literacy, computer literacy, performative literacy, vernacular literacy etc.) and by taking something from each of these varied literacies into our school curriculum we can remix the cultural and social resources into a 'new literacy' for literacy learning and meaning making in the classroom. Such a move requires that we conduct extensive research in order to document the variable ways in which families use time, space and varied resources to help their children learn literacy. The different social and cultural groups will reveal their different literacy practices, and thus avail valuable information on children's early literacy development. By analyzing common literacy practices in the home, community and school settings, a relationship in terms of its purposes can be arrived at between them. It is by utilizing common literacy practices and their pedagogies from home that schools can meaningfully build on what their learners bring with them to the literacy learning classroom. Such an approach will ensure that learners are studying to become literate in an atmosphere or context that is not so hostile but one that they are familiar with and that the subject matter or the texts around which they develop their literacy are familiar as well.

Conclusion

The study, which was a small-scale ethnographic-style inquiry, offers a new paradigm to the study of literacy learning in a Windhoek urban setting in Namibia. This paradigm allowed me to come directly into analytic contact with the 'raw data' of everyday early reading and writing teaching and learning at home in Windhoek urban school settings in order to understand what counts as literacy in these settings. By selecting 'telling cases', the evidence of what counts as literacy and how it was supported during its early learning was pointed out.

The parents, caregivers and siblings at home repeat schooled literacy in order to enhance learning to read and write, rather than engaging the children in informal literacy learning in culturally valued activities that are part of the family life and having a non-school purpose (Gillanders et al., 2004; Goldenberg et al., 1992; Serpel et al., 2005). Such literacy activities take place through direct instruction in completing workbooks and worksheets, taking dictation, writing numbers, writing the names of family members, reviewing homework, practicing letter-sound associations and reading basal readers to their children. The school sends most of these materials home in order to help the learners learn to read and write. At home most activities with print take on some characteristics of drill and practice and concentrate heavily on enhancing learning and mastering the orthographic code, with no attention being given to the meaning of the text.

It is by studying the literacy learning activities taking place in the different settings of society that we can determine what counts as literacy in them and become familiar with the funds of knowledge that our learners bring to the classroom. There is thus a need to know and understand the culturally diverse literacies in families and communities if we are to develop a more responsive curriculum for both pre-and primary schools in Namibia.

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