

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

Creating a Sociocultural Context for School Literacy

BY BERTHA PÉREZ UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO

For many English language learners the first task of learning is to interpret the sociocultural context of schooling. The first literacy task is learning to read this new world called an “American classroom.”

From their inception, one purpose of American schools has been to socialize children so they will become productive citizens and contributing members of society. Some schools and teachers have used this socialization purpose to justify an expectation that children learn and assimilate the mainstream social practices in order to participate in classroom activities. However, we know from studies conducted over the last thirty years that an assimilationist stance can, at a minimum, create misunderstandings and, at its worst, create a hostile context that may hinder the literacy attainment of English language learners. From the many examples described



From the many examples described in the professional literature, we also know that teachers have learned to accommodate a child’s sociocultural perspective within their classrooms and have worked to create a classroom that values diversity and encourages multiple ways of knowing (Pérez and Torres-Guzmán, 1996).

in the professional literature, we also know that teachers have learned to accommodate a child’s sociocultural

perspective within their classrooms and have worked to create a classroom that values diversity and encourages multiple ways of knowing (Pérez and Torres-Guzmán, 1996). These teachers have learned to listen to their students to find out about their lives and cultures; they have made space for the diverse ways students learn and interact within the classroom.

The Social Context of Literacy at Home

Learning to read and write is a social practice. Children who come from communities and homes where

important adults are literate, i.e., they use print and literacy for everyday activities, learn literacy as a social practice of the group. When children are invited to participate in the literacy practices of their social group, they learn the many uses of reading and writing. The standards and behaviors associated with decoding print (reading) and encoding print (writing) are communicated across generations and used in interactions among adults, among adults and children, and among children in their homes, churches, and other community institutions. These early community and home literacy experiences are contextualized within the cultural practices and social relationships of the group. The sociocultural context helps the child, as well as the adults, to understand and create meaning. This is not unlike the more familiar middle class cultural practice of an adult reading to a young child. In this interaction, the adult and the child create meaning together as they read and talk about the book. However, in diverse communities the literacy practices may be very different from storybook reading. For example, the importance of literacy may be seen through communication, for example, letter writing or message taking, done primarily in the native language. Some differential uses of literacy are also associated with occupation, class distinctions, or gender. Thus, to understand the use of print in the lives of a particular group of people and how they define literacy, one must account for the sociocultural context. Sometimes these social practices may produce expectations that conflict with school literacy practices.

Thus an ideal classroom environment will create opportunities for students to engage in collaborative activities involving thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing based upon their interests and experiences.

Literacy in the Classroom

A child's sociocultural environment affects how he or she makes sense of reading and writing. The sociocultural context varies from print environment to print environment, from classroom to classroom, and from community to community; however, each helps define the meaning of any given text. The literacy skills children acquire are directly related to how they interact with others to make meaning from text or to solve problems within specific sociocultural environments. Children internalize the kind of help they receive from others and subsequently use what they have learned to direct their own meaning-making and problem-solving behaviors. Thus an ideal classroom environment will create opportunities for students to engage in collaborative activities involving thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing based upon their interests and experiences.

The major instructional goal for a teacher should be to make the classroom an environment in which many language activities can take place and in which students can use their prior knowledge and experiences to understand and practice different types of literacies.

Every year, teachers can help children create a classroom that is conducive to literacy learning for all. Within such a classroom, English language learners can express and obtain knowledge in ways that will enable them to acquire and negotiate meaning. The major instructional goal for a teacher should be to make the classroom an environment in which many language activities can take place and in which students can use their prior knowledge and experiences to understand and practice different types of literacies. The decisions that teachers make about the classroom environment, instruction, and activities together create a complex

sociocultural context for learning to read and write. This context can allow, enhance, or impede a child's access to literacy, especially an English language learner.

As teachers work to create a sociocultural context for their classrooms they might consider the following guidelines:

- 1.** When negotiating the rules for how to talk, e.g. "you must raise your hand before speaking" or "only one person speaks at a time," it is important to first learn what the different cultural expectations for adult-child talk are for the students in this year's class and to have multiple discussions leading up to the establishment of the class rules. See Au (1980) for a discussion of classroom talk expectations.
- 2.** When negotiating the roles and responsibilities of the students and the teacher in creating actual content knowledge, for example, in teacher-directed discussion or in small-group learning activities, it is important for the teacher to know what the children's expectation of the role of the teacher might be. In some traditional and especially new immigrant groups, the expectation may be for the teacher to be the authority figure that transmits knowledge. Some children may need to learn the rules and roles of interactive small-group discussion and learning. See Igoa (1995) for a discussion of new immigrant children's view of the role of the teacher. Remember that the child's way of talking reflects the mastering of his or her community or home discourse, and knowledge of a community discourse does not reflect one's intelligence. Be aware that some teachers are influenced by the dialects spoken by children. Do not allow dialect to cloud your perceptions of students' academic abilities, to limit the students' learning opportunities, and to influence your evaluation of their contributions to class discussion.
- 3.** Invite children and parents to share their unique knowledge and ways of knowing with the class. This can be done through the study of multicultural literature

and literature that includes occupations at all the socioeco-nomic levels. For example, reading and writing about *The Best Older Sister* (Choi, 1997), a story about an Asian-American girl who experiences sibling rivalry, may present an opportunity for parents and children to share their perspectives, cultural practices, and knowledge.

- 4.** Encourage children to use all their linguistic knowledge to access English. For example, in discussions following the reading of a text, you might ask reluctant English language learners to share their understanding of the text in their own language with the assistance of peers who can help them translate. Numerous studies have shown that many bilingual children can demonstrate higher levels of comprehension when encouraged to think about and discuss the text in their native language.
- 5.** Assist children in making friends and becoming part of the children's classroom social networks. Teachers can assist with peer bonding by allowing children to choose partners in pair activities and by valuing and praising the unique skills or perspectives that culturally diverse children might bring to particular tasks that would make them desirable partners.
- 6.** Develop an environment where "errors" are valued as an important step in "risk-taking" and learning. This creates an atmosphere where children develop positive personal and social attitudes toward literacy and learning.

All students need a classroom context that views each individual as an active participant. Students need to feel safe using their home language and experiences in the classroom to discuss, infer, predict, persuade, and critique their own reading and writing.

Thus, one of the main functions of a teacher is to create a social context in which content and skills are used in interactions that facilitate the learning of all the children. The cultural categories that are used to organize instruction, whether these be themes such as “communication” or subject matter such as “science,” and the symbolic significance of these categories within broader social relationships (for example, which languages are studied in a theme of communication or whose contributions are studied in science) become the filters through which a student reads the intent and meaning of social interaction within a lesson. Thus, when a teacher attends to the social systems inherent in the text as well as the classroom, he or she will have a better understanding for the need to create an inclusive sociocultural classroom environment. Such a classroom can accommodate literacy learning through social interaction between teacher and students and among students.

All students need a classroom context that views each individual as an active participant. Students need to feel safe using their home language and experiences in the classroom to discuss, infer, predict, persuade, and critique their own reading and writing. They also need access to other ways of using language and literacy that are part of other cultural groups, and they need access to the middle class mainstream ways of using language and literacy.

References

- Au, K.H. “Teaching Reading to Hawaiian Children: Finding a Culturally Appropriate Solution.” In H. Trueba, G.P. Guthrie, & K. Hu-pei Au (eds.), *Culture and the Bilingual Classroom* (pp. 137–152). Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1980.
- Choi, S.N. *The Best Older Sister*. New York: Random House, 1997.
- Igoa, C. *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995.
- Pérez, B., and Torres-Guzmán, M. *Learning in Two Worlds*, 2nd ed. White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996.
- Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind and Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.