



Fostering Literacy in the 21st Century: a Study of Current and Future Educators' Perspectives

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Abstract

This poster presentation contributes to our developing understanding of literacy teaching and learning in a digital world by describing and discussing findings from a case study of the ways in which six current and aspiring teachers at various stages of professional development understand and foster 21st century literacies (National Council of English Teachers [NCTE], 2008; International Reading Association [IRA], 2009). Study participants included three practicing childhood educators, one recent graduate of an undergraduate teacher education program and two teacher candidates currently enrolled in an undergraduate teacher education program. Teachers and teacher candidates participated in interviews that explored their knowledge and understanding of literacy, their views on effective literacy instruction and the factors that influenced their perspectives. Findings indicated that the degree to which teachers' conceptions of literacy and effective literacy instruction reflected current research, theory and practice depended on the participants' academic experiences, level and frequency of participation in professional development opportunities and their professional experiences in the classroom. Findings also indicated that the depth and breadth of participants' understanding of literacy developed along a continuum of change. Participants identified collaboration with professionals in the field and observation of research and theory in practice as factors that had a significant impact on this growth. These findings clearly contribute to our understanding of teachers' perspectives of literacy and the types of academic, personal and professional experiences that influenced their conception of literacy and effective literacy instruction. This study provides insight into the types of academic courses, professional experiences and professional development practices that influence current and future teachers' knowledge and understanding of literacy and effective literacy instruction. These findings have the potential to inform present and future policy and practice related to the education and professional development of current and future teachers in the 21st century.

1. A Sociocognitive Framework for Exploring 21st Century Literacy

Literacy is the constantly evolving cognitive processes and social practices that members of a particular social or cultural group value, foster and engage in as they construct and communicate meaning (Langer, 1987). Group members demonstrate literacy through the tools they select, the ways they use them and the knowledge they construct and communicate with them. Members of such groups become literate by interacting with other, more skilled community members who model contextually appropriate ways of creating and conveying meaning (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1981). In the 21st century, these social and cultural contexts exist in real and virtual worlds. Whether group members interact in local, face-to-face communities or global, online communities, participation requires one to create and communicate meaning with and through digital tools and texts (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Position statements of organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English ([NCTE] 2008) and the International Reading Association ([IRA] 2009) reflect this sociocognitive perspective of literacy. NCTE (2008) states, "As society changes, so does literacy. Because



technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies- from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms- are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities and social trajectories of individuals and groups” (p.1).

Research on effective instruction in K-12 classrooms provides clear and substantive evidence that our ideas about effective literacy instruction have changed alongside evolving notions of literacy (Allington, 2002; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; Leu et al., 2008; McKenna, Labbo, Reinking & Zucker, 2007; Risko et al., 2008). Our knowledge of how teachers and teacher candidates define literacy and characterize effective literacy instruction is limited. Moreover, we have limited knowledge of how their membership and participation in various personal, academic and professional contexts shapes their perspectives (Deal & White, 2007; Fitzharris, Jones & Crawford, 2008).

2. The study

To understand these issues of literacy, this multi-case study examined the perspectives of teachers and teacher candidates. Through network and convenience sampling, I invited six teachers and teacher candidates with varying levels of experience and education to participate as cases. I informed all participants of their rights and assigned a pseudonym to each volunteer. All participants lived in the Northeastern United States. All earned or were in pursuit of degrees from comparable institutions within the same state. Participants employed as teachers worked in the same state.

Maureen was a certified early childhood educator, reading teacher and K-6 classroom teacher. She earned a Master's Degree in reading during the early 1980's, had twenty-seven years of experience teaching third grade and twenty-nine years total teaching experience. She did not participate regularly in professional development. Kathy earned a Master's Degree in Literacy in 2008 and held certification in literacy and childhood education. For over two years, she worked as a preschool and kindergarten reading teacher. Molly, certified as a childhood educator and middle school social studies teacher, was pursuing a Master's in literacy while beginning her second year as a fifth grade teacher. Mark, a recent recipient of a Bachelor's Degree in education, had recently accepted his first full-time position as a middle school social studies and religion teacher and started a Master's Degree program in literacy. Kim, an undergraduate enrolled in a teacher education program, earned twenty-three out of forty-six required education credits. Her classmate, Dina, completed sixteen credits.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with each participant about their academic, personal and professional experiences, knowledge and understanding of literacy, views on effective literacy instruction and the factors that influenced their perspectives. Data analyses included ongoing, constant comparison and descriptive coding to identify emerging themes.

3. Results and discussion

Findings indicated that the depth and breadth of participants' understanding of literacy and effective literacy instruction developed along a continuum of change that was not dependent upon years of experience or education level. The degree to which teachers' perspectives reflected current conversations about 21st century literacies depended on whether or not teachers and teacher candidates participated in authentic personal, academic and professional experiences that reflected current theory, research and practice related to literacy.

3.1 Perspectives of Literacy

Four out of six participants characterized literacy as a set of skills rather than what one can do with those skills. While Kim described literacy as reading only, Dina, Kathy and Mark equated literacy with reading and writing. Maureen and Molly described literacy as reading, writing, listening and speaking skills for learning, interacting and communicating. Only Molly associated technology with literacy. When talking about technology she described kids as “completely immersed in that whole idea of technology and video games and faced paced ways of communicating...to be a literate person in the 21st century, you need to be a part of that and be aware of information coming in that way.” According to Molly, “Seeing how savvy kids are with technology and the technology we have in our classrooms, it changes how we teach.”



3.2 Perspectives of effective Instruction

While teacher candidates had difficulty talking about instruction due to limited experience and content knowledge, participating teachers fostered literacy in ways that reflected current theory and research on effective instruction. They discussed reading and writing workshops, shared reading, word play and strategies for questioning. Teachers emphasized the importance of integrating skill use and skill instruction across the curriculum. Maureen emphasized comprehension and listening skills in all content areas while Mark focused on integrating reading and writing. Participants also described effective instruction as student centered. Molly stated that by giving students “freedom” and “choice” she created “independent” learners. Mark emphasized the importance of choice in developing students’ “love and passion” for reading and writing.

3.3 Authentic experiences

Authentic personal, academic and professional experiences influenced participants’ perceptions of literacy and effective literacy instruction. Kim, for example, based her definition of literacy as “building blocks” on early memories of learning how to read with help from family and field experiences. Molly developed her understanding of literacy and ideas for reading and writing workshops by participating in courses and professional development programs that allowed her to collaborate with experts in the field. Participation in these authentic, often collaborative experiences enabled participants to identify and understand the skills and content they needed to teach and to consider how they might teach them. In some cases, these experiences allowed participants to understand why the skills, content and instructional approaches were important for literacy. Kathy described it best stating, “Those five components of literacy, I learned them back in school...I never really knew why they were important, why they should be implemented until I started teaching.

3.4 Absence of technology

Absent from most participants’ descriptions of literacy was any mention of technology. Only one participant, Molly, associated the skills and processes of literacy with technology. Perhaps this absence exists because most participants had not experienced digital tools and texts as literacy in academic or professional development contexts.

At the end of the hour-long interview, I asked participants to read and react to NCTE (2008) and IRA (2009) position statements emphasizing technology’s role in 21st century literacies. Most agreed with the statements and considered incorporating technology into their classrooms. Kim and Dina found these statements “interesting.” Dina said, “I wouldn’t have thought of this, but it makes sense for literacy.” Kathy reiterated stating, “That’s interesting...It’s true...When I think about literacy I don’t really think about this...but I’m thinking that maybe I should!” Mark responded similarly stating, “It’s important to not hide from these new literacies but to encourage and incorporate it. So, maybe one of my [writing] formats will be a webpage or a status update about Lincoln on Face book.” Maureen responded less favorably stating, “Everyone can’t be that way. That’s absolutely impossible...Kids do need to be exposed to more technology because that’s the world we live in....but I don’t think we need to hold a bar up here and say everybody has to get here because some of that’s useless.”

5. Study significance

This study has the potential to inform policies and practices related to state and district level professional development plans. It may inform the curriculum, instruction and field experiences that characterize teacher education programs. It also informs our understanding of literacy from a sociocognitive perspective. Specifically, study findings highlight the importance of providing teachers and teacher candidates with opportunities to participate in authentic, collaborative academic and professional development contexts that reflect current theory, research and practice related to 21st century literacies. From a sociocognitive perspective, teachers and teacher candidates will adopt and



adapt to the literacy tools, beliefs and practices valued and modeled within these learning contexts. If the members of these academic and professional development contexts do not recognize, utilize or value tools of technology as tools of literacy, then our teachers and teacher candidates are not likely to do so.

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