



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 10 Sayı: 48 Volume: 10 Issue: 48

Şubat 2017 February 2017

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF GOOD AND POOR READERS*

Aysel TÜFEKÇİ AKCAN**

Abstract

The study is conducted to investigate literacy experiences of good and poor readers within their overall schooling experiences and from multiple perspectives. Data were collected in two public elementary schools and include classroom observations, interviews, questionnaires, profile sheets, and journal samples. While the findings indicates different patterns between the experiences of the good and poor readers, some within group variations were also observed. In addition, the factors, found to be contributing to good and poor readers' success or failure, are discussed.

Keywords: Literacy Experience, Good Readers, Poor Readers, Elementary School, Interpretive Methodology.

1. INTRODUCTION

A good deal of research is devoted to investigate literacy performance of good and poor readers by comparing their literacy related sub-skills such as phonological awareness, lexical knowledge, oral language proficiency, and so on (Bentin, Deutsch, and Liberman, 1990; Briggs, Austin, and Underwood, 1984; Chiappe, Chiappe, and Gottardo, 2004; Dolores, 1982; Fox and Baker, 1980; Gillon and Dodd, 1994; Johnston, Rugg, and Scott, 1987; Katz, Healy, and Shankweiler, 1983; McBride-Chang and Manis, 1996; Paris and Myers, 1981; Solan, Shelly-Tremblay, Hansen, and Larson, 2007; Waterman and Lewandowski, 1993).

While this literature helps identifying correlates of literacy failure and strengths of good readers so as to provide poor readers with better assistance in increasing their literacy performance, there is a need for interpretive research looking deeply into their experiences. The aim of this study is to explore literacy experiences of a small group of children, who were identified by their classroom teachers as good or poor readers, within their overall schooling experiences and from multiple perspectives.

2. METHOD

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from my doctoral dissertation research investigating a small group of good and poor readers' literacy experiences and their teachers' and school principals' conceptions of literacy. The original research was conducted using interpretive methodology and framed by cultural psychology (Cole, 1998) and Erickson's (1987) notion of school success/failure, both of which emphasize the micro and macro contexts of schooling. Cultural psychology informed the research by drawing attention to the everyday lives of the participants in their classroom context; by considering the children's and teachers' actions as mediated in the immediate and larger contexts of schooling; and by viewing learning as co-constructed by the teachers and children. Erickson's notion of school success/failure informed this research by pointing out the role of micro- and macro- factors in schooling.

Data Sources

Data were collected over two academic semesters in two public elementary schools and analyzed at case level (each child as a case) and cross-case level (good and poor readers groups as separate cases). Data sources included (a) classroom observations, (b) semi-structured interviews with the children, their teachers, and the school principals, (c) parents' and teachers' questionnaires, (d) classroom profile sheets, and (e) students' journal samples.

I conducted non-participant observations during in and out of literacy-related schooling events. I conducted semi-structured interviews with school principals, classroom teachers, and participating children by the end of the fieldwork. The audio-recorded interviews with teachers and school principals took between half

* The study is produced from the doctoral dissertation of the author submitted to the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

** Yrd. Doç. Dr., Gazi Üniversitesi, Gazi Eğitim Fakültesi, Temel Eğitim Bölümü, Okul Öncesi Eğitimi Ana Bilim Dalı

hour and an hour; interviews with children were conducted one-on-one, video-recorded, and took between 15 minutes and half hour. I designed questionnaires for parents and for teachers. At the beginning of each semester the teachers were asked to fill out a classroom profile sheet to see the overall classroom composition and to situate the participating children in the classroom dynamic in regard to success, family income, family structure, and so on. I selected 3 journals for Spring and 5 for Fall semester per child for analysis of their overall content, legibility, punctuation, capitalization, vocabulary and the number of the words, sentences, and spelling mistakes.

Research Sites and Participants

The fieldwork took place in two distinctly different public elementary schools in two different cities in the Midwest. The Lincoln Elementary School (hereafter Lincoln) was located in Clinton and home to a major public university. The Douglas Elementary School (hereafter Douglas) was located in Dawson, a working class city¹. According to the state *School Report Cards*, the two schools differed from one another in student background and student achievement profile. Clinton had few black students and few students from low income homes. Douglas had about the same number of black and white students, and a higher percentage of those were from low income homes. The percentage of children at or above state standards at Lincoln was higher not only than Douglas but also than other schools in its district. Although recent budget cuts affected both schools, they hurt Douglas at the staffing level whereas Lincoln was affected only at the materials and extracurricular activities level. Overall both schools invested more than half the instructional time to teaching literacy and undertaken various initiatives to improve their students' literacy learning, for example, the use of literacy coaches, after school tutoring, programs for targeted students such as Reading Recovery, Reading First, and Enrichment.

The participating children were selected among those identified by their teachers as good or poor readers. At Lincoln, they include two good readers, Katie and Matt, and two poor readers, Alan and Olivia; at Douglas they include two good readers, Brian and Rose, and a poor reader, Roy. They were in the first grade when the study began and in the second grade by the end of the fieldwork.

Katie is one of the good readers at Lincoln. She participated in the Enrichment Program for both math and reading in the 2nd grade. Her mother has a Masters' degree; her father holds no college degree but has some schooling beyond high school. Her teachers' comments indicate not only that Katie lives in a financially and emotionally comfortable home environment but also that her family life enriches her academic learning through her parents' educational and professional background and the emphasis placed on education.

Matt is one of the good readers at Lincoln. Matt participated in the Enrichment Program for both math and reading in the 2nd grade. In the 1st grade he was pulled out for occupational therapy to receive help with his fine-motor skills. At least one of his parents has a four-year university degree (it was not indicated in the questionnaire response whether it was his mother, father or both). His teachers' comments described Matt as living in a financially and emotionally comfortable home with a family that supported his academic learning by the emphasis placed on education and by his parents' educational and professional background.

Olivia is one of the poor readers at Lincoln. She received Reading Recovery in the 1st grade and assistance from the literacy specialist in the 2nd grade. I was told by Olivia and her teachers that her father was in prison throughout the fieldwork. Her mother has no diploma or degree. Olivia's teachers frequently made references to Olivia's family and home environment, particularly to financial and emotional stresses as a big barrier to her academic performance and her future.

Alan is one of the poor readers at Lincoln. He attended Reading Recovery in the 1st grade and received assistance from the literacy specialist in the 2nd grade. Although his teachers suspected that Alan might have learning disability, they were not able to receive parental consent from his mother to have him tested. Alan's teachers made references to his family and home environment, particularly to emotional stress, which they associated with his parents' divorce and his mother's occupation as a school principal.

Brian is one of the good readers at Douglas. His mother has either a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (hereafter GED) degree and at the time of this research she was a full-time student. Brian's, teachers did not comment about his home life or family.

Rose is one of the good readers at Douglas. At least one of her parents has a high school diploma or GED (the questionnaire response did not indicate whether it was her mother, father, or both). Rose's teachers did not

¹ Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participating individuals and the schools.

comment about her home life or family, but her 2nd grade teacher pointed out her school absences, which, she said, were due in part to some health problems.

Roy is a poor reader at Douglas. He lives in a two-parent home with his father and step-mother. At least one of his parents has no diploma or a degree (it was not indicated in the questionnaire response whether his mother, father, or both). When talking about Roy, his 2nd grade teacher pointed out a communication problem between Roy and his step-mother.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are discussed in the following order: (a) good and poor readers' school performance, (b) adults' perceptions of the good and poor readers, (c) child and family related factors contributing to success and failure, and (d) institutional and sociocultural factors contributing to success and failure.

Good and Poor Readers' School Performance

Cross case analysis of the data revealed differences between the good and poor readers in their school performance including the parents' and teachers' ratings of their skills and performance, their task engagement and classroom participation, their relations with the teachers and the peers, and their journal writings.

Parents and teachers were asked to rate participating children's skills and performance on a list of areas in three categories (subject areas, personal and social skills, and learning-related skills) on a four-point scale (1: very poor, 2: poor, 3: good, and 4: very good). Subject areas include math, reading, drawing, writing, music, science, physical education (hereafter PE), and art. Personal and social skills include social well-being, physical health, emotional well-being, self-control, self-esteem, enjoyment of school life, leadership skills, self-expression, interaction with peers, and interaction with adults. Learning-related skills include oral language proficiency, appropriate classroom behavior, analytical skills, task engagement, classroom participation, attention span, school attendance, knowledge transfer and adopting new situations.

Overall, parents and teachers rated the poor readers lower than the good readers. In subject areas the poor readers were rated lower in *reading, math, writing, science, and PE* than the good readers. In personal-social skills, they were rated lower in *leadership skills, self-expression, self-esteem, and emotional well-being*. In learning-related skills, the poor readers were rated lower in *analytical skills, classroom participation, knowledge transfer, and oral language proficiency*. In addition, I found greater differences between parents' and teachers' ratings for the poor readers than those for the good readers. The poor readers, more often than the good readers, were rated *good* by their parents in areas for which their teachers rated them *poor*.

The analysis of observations indicates striking differences between the good and poor readers in their task engagement. The good readers were often focused, quick to start and finish tasks, and having finished a task they were self-engaged. The poor readers, however, were easily distracted, showed frequent off-task behaviors, and they were often behind their peers starting and finishing a task, and having finished a task they were not self-engaged. In addition, the good readers participated in classroom activities more frequently and voluntarily than did the poor readers.

Literature suggests strong relationship between the types of achievement strategies children use and their performance (Bandura, 1993; Bar-Tal, 1978; Onatsu-Arvilommi et al., 2002; Poskiparta et al., 2003). Poskiparta et al. claims that children orient themselves in three ways when facing school stressors. The first is *task orientation*, a motivational-emotional resiliency factor leading to on-task behavior with a tendency to approach, explore, and master challenging aspects of a learning task. The second is *ego-defensive orientation*, a motivational-emotional vulnerability factor leading to off-task behavior with tendency to reduce negative feelings and motivational-emotional conflict or tension caused by the threat of failure. The third is *social dependence orientation*, also a motivational-emotional vulnerability factor leading to off-task behavior with a tendency to please the teachers and seek help and approval.

The overall task engagement patterns observed in the present study indicate task orientation for the good readers and a mixture of ego-defensive and social-dependence orientations for the poor readers. Interestingly, however, both parents and teachers rated the good and poor readers *good* indicating no differences between groups in task engagement. In addition, neither teachers nor school principals mentioned task engagement as a factor contributing to success or failure during interviews. It is not clear whether the teachers and principals did not notice the task engagement differences or whether they viewed them as a result of failure rather than a contributing factor. This finding suggests that teachers and parents need to pay closer attention to

children's task engagement. To help children learn to engage more intently on task, parents and teachers should also provide them with more guidance in work-related skills and strategies.

Children's relations with their peers and the classroom teachers also varied across groups. Good readers were more comfortable in their interactions with their classroom teachers. Their interactions were reciprocal and included answering questions, asking questions, casual conversation, and jokes. Poor readers were less comfortable in their interactions with their teachers. Their interactions were often initiated by the teachers and included asking and answering questions. In addition, the good readers, more so than the poor readers, had established close reciprocal friendships with several peers.

Although the literature contains some conflicting findings about the direction of the relationship between children's social competence and their success or failure in literacy, researchers agree that academic achievement and social competence are positively related (Corsaro and Nelson, 2003; Miles and Stipek, 2006; Welsh et al., 2001). Studies of teacher-student relationships indicate that the quality of the relationship the teachers have with their students influences students' self-efficacy, task engagement, and achievement. This suggests that teachers should monitor their relationships with each student carefully and consider the messages they convey and the effect they have on their students through these relationships.

The analysis of journals indicates that the good readers wrote more sentences, used a wider range of vocabulary and punctuation marks, and had a smaller ratio of spelling errors to the total number of words per journal than the poor readers. Within group variations are also observed in the analysis of children's journals. Two good readers, Matt and Rose, and a poor reader, Olivia, presented some exceptions to the overall pattern. Matt has the shortest entries with the fewest words and sentences in the good readers group. He was not motivated in writing due to his fine motor-skills problem. Rose had the highest number of spelling mistakes, but she wrote long stories with many words and sentences and using a variety of punctuation, indicating that she challenged herself. Olivia had fewer spelling mistakes than Matt and Rose as well as the other poor readers, but her entries were short and repetitious in content and vocabulary, signaling a risk-avoidance approach. This was confirmed by her 2nd grade teacher, Ms. Jones, who said Olivia wrote only what she knew how to write.

Adults' Perceptions of the Good and Poor Readers

Parents and teachers were asked to write three terms describing the children's personality and three terms describing them as students. Eighty terms were used for four children at Lincoln, and twenty-one for three children at Douglas. I grouped these terms into categories: (a) intellectual or cognitive traits; (b) attitude or dispositional traits; (c) performance or behavioral traits; and (d) social/emotional traits. With the traits sorted into categories by good and poor readers, some patterns emerged.

Analysis of parents' and teachers' responses indicates that the main difference occurred across the schools. The children at Lincoln were described with both student and personality characteristics by their teachers. The children at Douglas were described only with one student characteristics written only by the 2nd grade teacher. Although it may just be accidental that the teachers at Douglas were reluctant to describe student and personality characteristics for the children, it is also possible that they were detached or do not know enough about their students to answer this question. In addition, the highly academic-oriented and strictly-structured school climate at Douglas might have contributed to the teachers' reluctance.

Overall, cognitive and dispositional traits figured more strongly for the good readers, whereas behavioral and emotional traits figured more strongly for the poor readers. All the cognitive traits (e.g., smart, creative, intelligent, etc.) were used exclusively for the good readers; all the effort-related (e.g., hard worker, tries hard, works hard, etc.) and affectionate traits (e.g., lovely, sweet, caring, etc.) were used exclusively for the poor readers. The same pattern occurred in teachers' interview responses. This is a striking difference. The social/emotional category is the only one in which the good and poor readers were described with similar traits such as *kind*, *social*, and *friendly*. This is also the only category that poor readers got most descriptors both as student and as personality characteristics, while good readers got mainly as personality characteristics.

Graham (1984: 93) suggested, "In achievement context, sympathy is elicited when another's failure is perceived as caused by uncontrollable factors." This argument provides an explanation for why affectionate terms were used for the poor readers by their parents and the teachers. The parents and teachers, from this perspective, viewed poor readers' failure not due to lack of effort, a controllable factor, but due to ability, an uncontrollable factor.

The finding that the teachers and parents alike made *cognitive* references for the good readers and *effort* references for the poor readers intrigued me to look deeper. Research framed by cultural psychology found, consistently, that causal attribution beliefs are culturally embodied (Fryberg and Markus, 2007; Heine, Lehman,

Markus, and Kitayama, 1999; Holloway, 1988; Li, 2003; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Okagaki, 2001). Comparing attribution theories in American and Asian cultures, this literature reports that whereas Asians attribute success and failure to effort, Americans attribute them to ability. This literature explains the cognitive references made to the good readers, but it does not explain the effort references made to the poor readers in this study. Although, American parents and teachers tend to attribute school performance to ability in case of success, they may feel uneasy to do so in case of failure as it culturally sounds like an insult. As a result, lack of effort becomes a euphemism for lack of ability when talking about school failure. Ms. Jones's statement about Katie, a good reader, "is a smart child and can be successful at anything she wants" and Olivia, a poor reader, "would be at grade level if she worked harder" illustrates this argument.

Cultural attribution theories affect student outcomes, as Holloway (1988: 328-329) claims, through deeper messages that the teachers and parents convey:

Because adults in the U.S. think effort and ability are inversely related, individuals who try hard are seen as compensating for lack of ability. Thus, adults, who suggest to low-achieving youngsters that they can succeed if they try hard may be communicating the notion that the children must make unusual efforts to compensate for insufficient ability.

These messages, according to motivation theory literature, in turn, shape students' attribution and self-efficacy beliefs and their attitudes towards school. Mueller and Dweck (1998) argue that such messages have negative implications, for both the good and poor readers, especially when they faced with a challenging task. Thus, it is important for educators and parents to be aware of these cultural constructs and make reference to effort instead of ability not only when children perform poorly, but also when they perform successfully.

Child and Family Related Factors Contributing to Success and Failure

I found different patterns in the home and family backgrounds of the good and poor readers. Family income ranged from *very low* (Olivia and Roy) to *moderate* (Alan) for the poor readers; from *very low* (Brian) to *high* (Katie and Matt) for the good readers. All the good readers had at least one parent with high school or higher level of education; two poor readers (Olivia and Roy) had at least one parent with no degree. While the poor readers lived in a single-parent (Olivia and Alan) and reconstituted families (Roy), all the good readers, but Brian, lived in a two-parent intact family. Brian lived with his mother and her boyfriend, whom he calls "dad." These findings support the literature claiming that children living in single parent or reconstituted families and in low socio-economic status (hereafter SES) homes are more vulnerable to school failure than their peers from intact families (Kerr and Beaujot, 2002; Marks, 2006) and higher SES homes (Entwisle et al., 2005; Gillies, 2005; Heymann, 2000; Marks, 2005; McDonald et al., 2005; Silver et al., 2005).

The teachers' perceptions of the home and family environment appear to vary across the good and poor readers as well. The teachers at Lincoln, but none from Douglas, made frequent references to the home and family environment of the participating children in relation to their school performance. They described how the good readers (Katie and Matt) lived in emotionally stable and financially comfortable homes with supportive parents but the poor readers (Olivia and Alan) lived in emotionally or financially troubled homes. It is curious that the children's home and family played a large role in teachers' responses at Lincoln but not at Douglas. The differences in student composition and community between Lincoln and Douglas provide a tenable explanation. At Douglas, located in a working-class neighborhood, the number of black and white children was about the same and the majority of the children were from low income homes. At Lincoln, located in a middle-class neighborhood, the majority of the children were white and from middle income homes. Given these characteristics and the fact that achievement is negatively correlated with low income and being black, more so at Lincoln than at Douglas, it is more likely that the teachers at Lincoln saw a stronger relationship between family-home background and academic success. At Douglas, because low income is common among children and in the community, teachers are less likely to see it as a differentiating factor for school performance.

Institutional and Sociocultural Factors Contributing to Success and Failure

I found more between-schools than within-school variations among the four classrooms. Overall Lincoln provided a more favorable teaching and learning environment for teachers and students than did Douglas. Lincoln had more staff but fewer students; had been affected less dramatically by budget cuts; had high parental involvement; provided a more flexible, engaging, and cooperative learning environment; and likely benefited from faculty and student resources at the nearby research university.

The teachers' educational practices were in line with the overall educational climate of their schools. For example the teaching practices at Douglas were mainly teacher-directed, whole-class oriented, textbook and worksheet-based, and highly structured. The practices at Lincoln were more flexible, individual child-oriented,

free-choice activity based, and more collaborative. Overall, the differences in teaching and learning environment between Lincoln and Douglas reflect the literature on school composition which concludes that middle-income schools provide more favorable and flexible environment to students than working-class schools (Burns and Mason, 2002; Driessen, 2002; Thrupp, 1997; Thrupp, Lauder, and Robinson, 2002).

The teaching practices within the schools were not, however, exactly the same. Teachers, as Hansen (1995: 130) suggests, tend to create a unique learning environment in their classrooms within the boundaries of their school context, "Nonetheless, the decisive factor in the conduct of their [teachers'] work remains their perceptions of themselves, their students, and the practice of teaching." The 2nd classroom at Lincoln was slightly more structured, whole-class oriented, and teacher directed than the 1st grade classroom. The instructional practices in the 2nd grade classroom at Douglas, however, were quite different from those in the 1st grade. Ms. Turner, the 2nd grade teacher, unlike Ms. Smith, the 1st grade teacher, encouraged collaborative learning among students, constantly engaged them in whole-class discussions, used games as a teaching and learning tool, placed more emphasis on comprehension than on discrete skill-practice, developed a class-wide rewarding system, and included non-academic casual subjects in her conversations with the children. Nevertheless, Ms. Turner's classroom was more alike to that of Ms. Smith than to the classrooms at Lincoln.

Bandura (1993) suggests that school composition affects the school staff's collective self-efficacy belief. Staff's self-efficacy beliefs are lower in schools with predominantly low-income students and higher turnover and absenteeism, more the case at Douglas than at Lincoln. Low staff's self-efficacy beliefs negatively impact students' performance and school's overall achievement profile. This may explain why the instructional practices in Douglas, in comparison to those in Lincoln, were more teacher-directed, academic oriented, text-book based, and provided less room for interpersonal relationships among children and between teachers and students.

Osterman (2000: 338) states, "School conditions have a more direct influence on student academic motivation and behavior than does family." A supportive school context can mitigate the negative effects of children's individual characteristics and of family background. Alan's progress in the 2nd grade where he had a special relationship with the teacher provides example for this argument. These conditions can include a sense of belonging, which Olivia did not have at Lincoln, and an engaging teaching and learning environment, which Roy did not have at Douglas.

Student composition and the teaching and learning environment provided to students at Lincoln and Douglas interact with risk or resiliency factors and, as a result, increase or inhibit students' academic performance. I argue, tentatively, that the school composition at Lincoln hinders the academic performance of black and low income students for the following reasons: students' increased sense of alienation and low sense of belonging in a school community that differs from their own; teachers' and peers' perceptions of them; and students' perceptions of themselves resulting from comparing themselves and their experiences with their middle-class peers and their experiences. It is more likely for teachers at Lincoln than for those at Douglas to have lower expectations of the black and low income students than of white and middle income students. The teachers' expectations at Douglas are more likely to be influenced by children's individual abilities and performance than their ethnicity and income given that there are almost equal number of black and white students and most of them are from low income families.

Given the correlation between income and being black or white (0.92 and -0.85 respectively), a black student at Lincoln is more likely to come from low income home than is a white student. At Douglas, black and white students are almost equally likely to come from low-income homes (0.34 and -0.31 respectively), as the majority of the students are from low income families. In addition, low income and black students are a minority at Lincoln (low income: 30%, black: 27%, white: 66%). At Douglas, they are not minority (low income: 80%, black: 47%, white: 44%).

School context, such as student composition and school location and community, appears to affect parents' opinions as in Oliva's case. Olivia is the only child in this study attending a school where most students have a different income and ethnic background from her own. The majority of the students at Lincoln are white and middle class. When these children go to school, they enter a familiar world. Unlike Olivia, they do not have to try, day after day, to be part of a world unlike her own. Olivia carries daily the baggage of being almost an alien at Lincoln.

The only thing more difficult than finding a needle in a haystack is finding a needle in a needle stack. When an object is surrounded by similar objects it naturally blends in, and when it is surrounded by dissimilar objects it naturally stands out. (Gilbert, 2005: 168)

Olivia's mother's responses to the questionnaire items concerning the children's relations with the teachers and peers and those concerning home-school relations and educational equity differed strikingly from those of the other parents. For example she marked "agree" to the statements, "S/he feels intimidated by his/her teacher," "S/he feels intimidated by the other kids in the classroom," and "S/he has problems in relationships with other kids." She also marked "neutral" to statements indicating positive home-school relations and educational equity, for which all the other parents marked "agree." Olivia was the only child in this study who not only missed school many times in both grades, but skipped school often. While her school absence may have contributed to her poor performance at school, it is likely that her experiences at school also contributed to her absences.

I found little research on the relation between young children's schooling and their sense of belonging which plays a critical role in their well-being (Bamba and Haight, 2007). Most of the research on school belonging has been conducted at middle school or higher level and has focused on the relationship between school belonging and problem behaviors (Battistich and Hom, 1997; Booker, 2006; Faircloth, and Hamm, 2005; McNeely, and Falci, 2004; Nichols, 2006; Pittman, and Richmond, 2007), rather than on students' schooling experiences and performance.

Although the research in the context of school is less extensive, findings are strong and consistent: Students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school. These concepts of commitment and engagement are closely linked to student performance, and more importantly, to the quality of student learning. (Osterman, 2000: 359)

Overall school structure, teachers, and peers are the three main elements that affect students' sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000). Osterman found that students' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward self, work, and school, which are associated with success, are affected by their sense of belonging.

Situating the good and poor readers' literacy experiences in the larger context as well as within their overall schooling experiences helps developing a deeper understanding of their success or failure.

Without a culture we would not know what our problems are; culture or better, the people around us in culture, help to define the situation-specific, emotionally demanding, and sensuous problems that we must work on today with only the tools we have available here and now. We might just as well say that culture fashions problems for us and, from the same source materials, expects us to construct solutions. It is from life inside this trap that we often get the feeling that working on problems can make things worse. (McDermott and Varenne, 1996: 110)

Culture specific conceptualizations of schooling, literacy, and learning constitute a set of sociocultural factors affecting children's success or failure. These factors affect student experiences through their influences on the curriculum, the way children are socialized at home or at school, teachers' perceptions and expectations, and the daily teaching and learning practices.

The relationship between family income and children's school success or failure, particularly in literacy, has been one of the most consistent finding in the literature. "The statistical correlation between literacy and socioeconomic class is constant across cultures and time. This relationship is so obvious that it hardly seems worth repeating" (Fernandez, 2001: 13). Low income, however, has been viewed and presented by literacy researchers as a familial factor. This view obscures the role of low income as a sociocultural force and points to the children and their families as the agents of their failure. Low income, from a broader perspective, is a sociocultural factor. From a cultural capital theory perspective, low income is constructed and maintained within a given society and is an indicator of what material and cultural resources are available to what segments of a given society. Low income affects children's educational experiences not only by limiting the availability of material and cultural resources to the members of the family, but also through its relation to the financial status of the community and the school. As Books (2004) argues, communities in the U.S. are segregated by income and ethnicity, which results in school-wide poverty.

Another sociocultural factor contributing to children's success or failure involves educational policy changes such as No Child Left behind Act (hereafter NCLB). As some of the participants of this study pointed out, NCLB affected children's literacy and schooling through its impact on school budget, the curriculum, and teachers' daily practices. Rarely, however, are educational policy changes talked about in research on literacy learning and performance of young children.

Yet another sociocultural factor involves social changes that result in changes in educational standards. As some of the teachers and principals in this study pointed out, children today are expected to know more at younger ages than in the past. "Increasing standards, not decreasing performance, can be pointed to as the root

cause of the literacy crisis" (Fernandez, 2001: 5). An increase in educational standards in turn affects children's experiences by placing more emphasis on academics and testing.

Finally, educational research within the larger American culture provides the context within which the local culture of the professional educators is constructed and shaped. Educational research, whether teachers or school principals read it or not, shapes the local culture of the professional educators through its implications for educational policy as well as for teacher training programs. The congruence I found between the literature and the teachers' and principals' perceptions of the factors contributing to success or failure in literacy illustrates this argument.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to explore literacy experiences of a group of good and poor readers. The good and poor readers' literacy experiences were examined within their overall schooling experiences and from multiple perspectives. The overall finding of the study indicates different patterns of experiences for the good and poor readers. Some within group variations were also observed for both groups.

Literacy researchers focus primarily on child and family-related factors in explaining success or failure, especially when comparing the experiences of the good and poor readers. The findings of the present study indicate, however, that children's literacy and schooling experiences are context-bound. The context includes micro and macro spheres—individual children, their family, the classroom and school, and the larger society and culture. Failure in literacy, as in the case of the three poor readers in this study, appears to occur when multiple and interacting risk factors are present.

REFERENCES

- BAMBA, S., and Haight, W. L. (2007). "Helping maltreated children to find their Ibasho: Japanese perspectives on supporting the well-being of children in state care". *Children and Youth Services Review*, S. 29, s. 405-427.
- BANDURA, A. (1993). "Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning". *Educational Psychologist*, S. 28(2), s. 117-148.
- BAR-TAL, D. (1978). "Attributional analysis of achievement-related behavior". *Review of Educational Research*, S. 48(2), s. 259-271.
- BATTISTICH, V., and Hom, A. (1997). "The relationship between students' sense of their school as a community and their involvement in problem behaviors". *American Journal of Public Health*, S. 87(12), s. 1997-2001.
- BENTIN, S., Deutsch, A. and Liberman, I. Y. (1990). "Syntactic competence and reading ability in children". *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, S. 49(1), s. 147-172.
- BOOKER, K.C. (2006). "School belonging and the African American adolescent: What do we know and where should we go?". *High School Journal*, S. 89(4), s. 1-7.
- BOOKS, S. (2004). "The schooling of poor children". In *Poverty and schooling in the U.S.: Contexts and consequences* (pp. 101-147). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates., Mahwah: NJ.
- BRIGGS, P., Austin, S., and Underwood G. (1984). "The effects of sentence context in good and poor readers: A test of Stanovich's Interactive-Compensatory Model". *Reading Research Quarterly*, S. 20(1), s. 54-61.
- BURNS, R. B., and Mason, D-W. A. (2002). "Class composition and student achievement in elementary schools". *American Educational Research Journal*, S. 39(1), s. 207-233.
- CHIAPPE, P., Chiappe D.L., and Gottardo, A. (2004). "Vocabulary, context, and speech perception among good and poor readers". *Educational Psychology*, S. 24(6), s. 825-843.
- COLE, M. (1998). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- CORSARO, W. A., and Nelson, E. (2003). "Children's collective activities and peer culture in early literacy in American and Italian preschools". *Sociology of Education*, S. 76, s. 209-227.
- DOLORES, P. (1982). "Spelling strategies in good and poor readers". *Applied Psycholinguistics*, S. 3(1), s. 1-4.
- DRIESEN, G. (2002). "School composition and achievement in primary education: A large-scale multilevel approach". *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, S. 28(4), s. 347-368.
- ENTWISLE, D. R., Alexander, K. L., and Olson, L. S. (2005). "First grade and educational attainment by age 22: A new story". *American Journal of Sociology*, S. 110, s. 1458-1502.
- ERICKSON, F. (1987). "Transformation and school success: the politics and culture of educational achievement". *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, S. 18, s. 335-356.
- FAIRCLOTH, B.S., and Hamm, J.V. (2005). "Sense of belonging among high school students representing 4 ethnic groups". *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, S. 34(4), s. 293-309.
- FERNANDEZ, R. (2001). *Imagining literacy: Rhizomes of knowledge in American culture and literature*. University of Texas Press, Austin: TX.
- FOX, B., and Baker, R. (1980). "The acquisition of grapheme-phoneme correspondences in a word learning task". *Reading Psychology*, S. 1(3), s. 156-164.
- FRYBERG, S. A., and Markus, H. R. (2007). "Cultural models of education in American Indian, Asian American and European American contexts". *Social Psychology Education*, S. 10, s. 213-246.
- GILBERT, Daniel. (2005). *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: Vintage Books.
- GILLIES, V. (2005). "Raising the 'Meritocracy': Parenting and the individualization of social class". *Sociology*, S. 39, s. 835-853.
- GILLON, G., and Dodd, B. J. (1994). "A prospective study of the relationship between phonological, semantic, and syntactic skills and specific reading disability". *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, S. 6(4), s. 321-345.
- GRAHAM, S. (1984). "Teacher feelings and student thoughts: An attributional approach to affect the classroom". *The Elementary School Journal*, S. 82(1), s. 90-104.

- HANSEN, D. T. (1995). *The call to teach*. Teachers College, New York, Colombia University.
- HEINE, S. J., Lehman, D. R., Markus, H. R., and Kitayama, S. (1999). "Is there a universal need for positive self-regard?". *Psychological Review*, S. 106(4), s. 766-794.
- HEYMANN, J. (2000). "What happens during and after school: Conditions faced by working parents living in poverty and their school-aged children". *Journal of Children and Poverty*, S. 6(1), s. 5-20.
- HOLLOWAY, S. D. (1988). "Concepts of ability and effort in Japan and the United States". *Review of Educational Research*, S. 58(3), s. 327-345.
- JOHNSTON, S., Rugg, M. D., and Scott, T. (1987). "The influence of phonology on good and poor readers when reading for meaning". *Journal of Memory and Language*, S. 26(1), s. 57-68.
- KATZ, R. B., Healy, A. F., and Shankweiler, D. (1983). "Phonetic coding and order memory in relation to reading proficiency: A comparison of short-term memory for temporal and spatial order information". *Applied Psycholinguistics*, S. 4(3), s. 229-250.
- KERR, D., and Beaujot, R. (2002). "Family relations, low-income, and child outcomes: A comparison of Canadian children in intact-, step-, and lone-parent families". *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, S. 43(2), s. 134-152.
- LINCOLN, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- MARKS, G. N. (2005). "Cross-national differences and accounting for social class inequalities in education". *International Sociology*, S. 20, s. 483-505.
- MARKS, G. N. (2006). "Family size, family type and student achievement: Cross-national differences and the role of socioeconomic and school factors". *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, S. 37(1), s. 1-24.
- MARKUS, H. R., and Kitayama, S. (1991). "Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation". *Psychological Review*, S. 98(2), s. 224-253.
- MCBRIDE-Chang, C., and Manis, F. (1996). "Structural invariance in the associations of naming speed, phonological awareness, and verbal reasoning in good and poor readers: A test of the Double Deficit Hypothesis". *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, S. 8(4), s. 323-339.
- MCDERMOTT, R. P., and Varenne, H. (1996). "Culture, development, disability". In R. Jessor, A. Colby, and A. Shweder (Eds.), *Ethnography and human development: Context and meaning in social inquiry* (pp. 101-126). IL: University of Chicago Press.
- MCDONALD C. C., Son, S-H., Hindman, A. H., and Morrison, F. J. (2005). "Teacher qualifications, classroom practices, family characteristics, and preschool experience: Complex effects on first graders' vocabulary and early reading outcomes". *Journal of School Psychology*, S. 43, s. 343-375.
- MCNEELY, C., and Falci, C. (2004). "School connectedness and the transition into and out of health-risk behavior among adolescents: A comparison of social belonging and teacher support". *Journal of School Health*, S. 74(7), s. 284-292.
- MILES, S. B., and Stipek, D. (2006). "Contemporaneous and longitudinal associations between social behavior and literacy achievement in a sample of low-income elementary school children". *Child Development*, S. 77(1), s. 103-117.
- MUELLER, C. M., and Dweck, C. S. (1998). "Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, S. 75(1), s. 33-52.
- NICHOLS, S. L. (2006). "Teachers' and Students' beliefs about student belonging in one middle school". *Elementary School Journal*, S. 106(3), s. 255-272.
- OKAGAKI, L. (2001). "Triarchic Model of minority children's school achievement". *Educational Psychologist*, S. 36(1), s. 9-20.
- ONATSU-Arvillomi, T., Nurmi, J-E., and Aunola, K. (2002). "The development of achievement strategies and academic skills during the first year of primary school". *Learning and Instruction*, S. 12, s. 509-527.
- OSTERMAN, K.F. (2000). "Students' need for belonging in the school community". *Review of Educational Research*, S. 70(3), s. 323-367.
- PARIS, S. G., and Myers, M. II. (1981). "Comprehension monitoring, memory, and study strategies of good and poor readers". *Journal of Reading Behavior*, S. 13(1), s. 5-22.
- PITTMAN, L. D., and Richmond, A. (2007). "Academic and psychological functioning in late adolescence: The importance of school belonging". *Journal of Experimental Education*, S. 75(4), s. 270-290.
- POSKIPARTA, E., Niemi, P., Lepola, J., Ahtola, A., and Laine, P. (2003). "Motivational-emotional vulnerability and difficulties in learning to read and spell". *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, S. 73, s. 187-206.
- SILVER, R. B., Measelle, J. R., Armsrong, J. M., and Essex, M. J. (2005). "Trajectories of classroom externalizing behavior: Contributions of child characteristics, family characteristics, and the teacher-child relationship during the school transition". *Journal of School Psychology*, S. 43, s. 39-60.
- SOLAN, H.A., Shelly-Tremblay, J.F., Hansen, P.C., and Larson, S. (2007). "Is there a common linkage among reading comprehension, visual attention, and magnocellular processing?". *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, S. 40(3), s. 270-278.
- THRUPP, M. (1997, March). *The school mix effect: How the social class composition of school intakes shape school processes and student achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- THRUPP, M., Lauder, H., and Robinson, T. (2002). "School composition and peer effects". *International Journal of Educational Research*, S. 37(5), s. 483-504.
- WATERMAN, B., and Lewandowski, L. (1993). "Phonological and semantic processing in reading-disabled and nondisabled males at two age levels". *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, S. 55(1), s. 87-103.
- WELSH, M., Parke, R. D., Widaman, K., and O'Neil, R. (2001). "Linkages between children's social and academic competence: A longitudinal analysis". *Journal of School Psychology*, S. 39(6), s. 463-481.