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Ellen McIntyre

University of Louisville

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Instruction Meets Learner: Success of an Inner-City Learner in a Traditional First Grade Classroom

Ellen McIntyre

In my language arts methods courses at the university, I spend time demonstrating the efficacy of a meaning-based curriculum. Students spend time in my classes reading and writing for functional purposes. They collaborate on assignments and choose many of the projects from an extensive list. They even design their own exams. I try to engage my students in activities which are alternatives to traditional instruction, so that they will teach young children in similar ways. Yet, I always have some students who argue for traditional instruction. One student may say, "It worked for me," while another might question, "If it's so bad, why don't all children who receive traditional instruction fail?" These questions made me ponder Audrey, a child I observed closely for two years. Audrey was a low-SES learner in a traditional classroom who was a successful literacy learner.

Recently there has been a surge of research on children in urban schools, especially children of low socioeconomic status, as they are often the students reported to fail in school (Pallas, Natriello, and McDill, 1990). Much of the research has documented "traditional" or "conventional" instruction (Knapp and Shields, 1990; 1992) which is what most low-SES children receive. Although there may be

multiple reasons for the school failure of so many of these children, most educators look to traditional instruction as one of the main culprits (Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1990; Knapp and Shields, 1990; 1992). There is some question as to whether traditional instruction encourages children to think.

Knapp and Shields suggest that even well-executed, well-planned traditional instruction limits children's critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, and self-sponsored learning. They suggest this instruction only serves children temporarily – that there is a “ceiling” on learning. Even when standardized test scores go up, literacy learning may actually be at a standstill. Yet, we know not all children who receive traditional instruction in inner-city schools fail to become literate. We know some poverty-stricken children do become independent learners who are responsible for their own learning. Some think critically and solve problems and choose to read and write. Some perform successfully in and out of school – even children from families with previous academic problems.

What is it, then, that allows some children of low-socioeconomic status who receive traditional instruction to succeed? What is it, specifically, about early literacy instruction that can or should occur in all instructional settings? This article addresses these questions by providing examples from one case study of a successful first-grader in an urban school with traditional instruction. Knowledge of successful instructional patterns can help educators further attempt to delineate the specific features of efficient, effective instruction in *all* settings. The conclusions drawn from examination of one learner can also raise questions for future research on a broader scale.

Observing and assessing the language learner

Audrey. This is a case study of Audrey, a white female learner of Appalachian descent. Audrey was observed for two years, at both her home and in her school from the beginning of her kindergarten year through the end of her first grade year. This report will focus on her first grade year. Her teacher, Miss Hinton, was in her fifteenth year of teaching first grade.

The classroom. The site for this study was a first grade classroom in Muller Elementary, which is located in the inner-city region of a midsized midwestern city. Muller serves a predominantly white population who have a history of Appalachian migration. Ten percent of the children are African-American. The families in this community generally live in multi-family houses or apartments. Just over 80 percent of the children are considered urban poor and qualify for the federal free lunch program. Many of the families, including Audrey's, are supported through public assistance.

There were three first grade classrooms in this school. Miss Hinton's classroom was the site for this investigation. There were 22 children in the room during the early part of first grade; 15 were white and seven African-American. The instruction in the classroom was labeled "traditional" or "conventional" (Knapp and Shields, 1990). It was characterized by a basal-driven curriculum which has an emphasis on the sequential mastery of discrete skills ordered from "the basics" to higher-order skills and a higher degree of teacher-directed instruction.

Procedures. At the beginning of her kindergarten year Audrey was administered several written language "tasks" to find out what she knew about print. The tasks assessed: intentionality of print, story structure, written

narrative register, alphabetic principle, concepts of writing, and Clay's (1979) Concepts About Print. (See Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1990, for the exact scoring and analysis of these tasks.) These data were combined to determine Audrey's knowledge of written language at the onset of formal schooling, which will be described in the next section of this report.

To collect data on Audrey's school behavior in response to instruction, I observed her two mornings a week throughout kindergarten and first grade. Other periods of the school day were sampled to gain a complete understanding of what occurred in her classroom. I decided to affect the instructional/learning process as little as possible to garner information on the typical instruction received by Audrey and her responses. Thus, observations were primarily non-participatory. I sat very close to Audrey and took extensive and careful notes on the talk and actions of both the teacher and the child. When observed, Audrey wore a wireless microphone so Miss Hinton's instruction and Audrey's verbal responses were recorded verbatim. I probed Audrey about some of her print activities with immediate questions such as, "Tell me about what you read," or "How did you figure that out?" Every utterance was systematically recorded, noting intonation patterns, lengths of pauses, and subvocalizations. At the end of Audrey's first grade year, I formally interviewed her classroom teacher, which provided a check on the interpretations made of the instruction. This check provided insight into how and why Miss Hinton used particular instructional strategies.

I also visited Audrey's home to observe the environment and interactions she may have had with print and to conduct informal interviews with family members. These visits were used to augment the data found in school. In

summary, the methods used include: 1) administering six written language tasks to determine knowledge of print; 2) extensive observing and notetaking; 3) audio-tape recording; 4) probing about her reading and work; 5) collecting reading texts and other literacy documents; 6) structured interviewing; and 7) informal visiting at the home.

A search for patterns

I carefully examined field notes and other documents to determine consistent patterns of instruction, Audrey's interaction with print, and her reading strategies. To analyze the instruction and the responses, an adaptation of Glaser's (1969) constant comparative method and Bogden and Bicklen's (1992) procedures for qualitative analysis were used. First, each incident in the field notes was coded and constantly compared to each previous incident. This process led to characteristics of categories and conditions under which each characteristic occurred. When hunches about the categories emerged, I wrote a memo about the idea. Then I resumed the coding, paring off non-relevant material and reducing the data by collapsing categories into broader, more generalized sets of concepts (such as patterns of instructional interactions). This was done by examining underlying similarities of categories. As an idea began to emerge about the relationships among categories, I continued the coding by comparing incidents to well-defined categories. Finally, the memos written during the comparison process provided the main themes of the findings. The raw data provided examples for the themes, and enabled a close correspondence between the conclusions and the data.

Findings

Audrey's background and family. Audrey came from a family of five. According to her mother, who claimed she could not read at all, Audrey's older sister and brother had had difficulty in school. Audrey's father "could read anything he got his hands on" (although her mother said he did not usually *choose* to read). There were almost no adult literacy materials in the home during the period of the home visits, although there were a few children's storybooks as well as the older children's homework materials. Audrey's mother told me that on occasion Audrey liked to use these materials to play school and she often pretended to read from the storybooks before she was a conventional reader. In addition, her mother reported that Audrey's older sister read to Audrey on occasion (about once a week or so). Importantly, Audrey had (and took) the opportunity to sit in on her sister's tutoring sessions which took place twice a week in Audrey's home the summer before Audrey entered kindergarten. Although her mother tried to shoo Audrey away from these lessons, Audrey kept returning and her mother finally let her stay. This picture of one low-SES family is not unlike many families reported in recent research (Teale, 1986).

Print awareness of the onset of school. This case study focuses on Audrey's behaviors in first grade when she emerged as a conventional reader. Yet, it is necessary to examine what knowledge she held about written language at the onset of formal schooling and before first grade instruction began. This information is critical to understanding her success as a school participant as well as a language learner.

Audrey came into kindergarten understanding the intentionality of print. She commented that a sentence printed

on a page was “numbers and letters” and that they were for “counting and reading.” Audrey held some knowledge of story structure, shown by her ability to both generate and recall stories with some essential story elements. Audrey also knew some storybook conventions (lexical and syntactic features of written narrative), although still much less than many same-age middle-class children (Purcell-Gates, 1988; Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1990). The only other concepts of print (Clay, 1979) Audrey knew were how a book is held, that the print in a book contains the story, and the general direction of print. She was not yet able to exhibit voice-print matching or identify capital letters or punctuation. She scored below that of other children her age on this task (Clay, 1979). On none of the tasks did Audrey exhibit any understanding of the alphabetic nature of print, nor did she distinguish between letters and numbers or letter-like forms.

In kindergarten, instruction involved a traditional readiness program which focused on learning the letters of the alphabet and sounds in isolation (one letter a week), a daily story time, daily arts and crafts, and a period of play and snack time. Seatwork included a ditto page on the letter studied that day. In March, sight words such as *the*, *was*, *it*, and *in* were introduced. By the end of the year these words were combined in short sentences for the children to read.

At the conclusion of kindergarten year, Audrey had learned the alphabet, the sounds some letters represent, a set of sight words and most of Clay’s (1979) Concepts of Print. Audrey had also caught on to the alphabetic principle and could make some use of the graphophonic system when reading simple basalese sentences and names, although she was clearly not reading conventionally, as shown by her picture reading (Sulzby, 1985) when reading

on her own. She did not regularly focus on print during storybook reading time. Thus, Audrey's behaviors with written language upon entering first grade were somewhat similar to other children entering first grade (Freppon, 1991; McIntyre, 1990).

First grade success. The data from the home visits, the written language tasks given in early kindergarten, and the kindergarten data from school response all serve to augment the findings from Audrey's first grade year. The most salient conclusions as to why Audrey was a successful literacy learner in a traditional setting include the following: 1) although she did not have extensive experiences with print prior to school, Audrey entered first grade knowing what she needed to know about print to interpret instruction successfully; 2) Audrey was provided a balance of direct instruction and time to explore print on her own; 3) Audrey was given varied and positive feedback which reinforced successful learning.

Instruction meets learner. Audrey was lucky. She appeared able to understand successfully much of the instruction directly presented to her in first grade. In the early months, she was able to follow the print and "read" from memory sentences Miss Hinton had just read aloud. Unlike many of the other children in the class who merely mouthed words and looked globally toward the board or chart (McIntyre, in press), Audrey was able to follow the direction of print as she read. This seemed to enable her to learn the voiced words for the printed words, one key factor in learning to read (Ehri and Sweet, 1991). Later in first grade, when instruction focused on the more abstract aspects of written language and sounding out words, Audrey was one of the few children who seemed to interpret instruction successfully. When she came upon unknown words she

immediately focused on the graphophonics, which was intended by the instruction. She blended sounds together to make words, and used the visual aspects of words as her primary reading strategies (also emphasized in instruction). For example, in January she read, "The /pppplan/flew up" for "The plane flew up," and later, "The /trah tra tra tray train/ is coming... the train is coming," for "The train is coming."

In February of first grade when instruction emphasized lengthier texts, Audrey began a move toward more language-like reading, shown by her intonation. She was frequently observed self-correcting miscues and taking quick glances at pictures to cue herself or affirm unknown words. She continued to sound out words while Miss Hinton patiently waited. Her attempts were almost always meaning-governed and her eventual response syntactically appropriate or she waited for Miss Hinton to provide help or supply the unknown word. This meaning-governed reading occurred most often in reading group where it was emphasized, but it also occurred during independent reading time. Audrey continued to use and understand the skills Miss Hinton taught, and by mid- to late-first grade she seemed to "have it all together" (Sulzby, 1985) in her reading attempts.

Opportunity. Audrey had opportunities with print which many of the other children in the class did not have. Because she was able to interpret instruction successfully, she was afforded extended free time in which she could read books, work language puzzles, or play in the play center while other children finished worksheets. In traditional classrooms, this free time in learning centers often occurs only for those children who finish their real work (Deford, 1984). Such was the case in this classroom and it seemed to benefit Audrey. It seemed to give what some

educators advocate for children of low-SES, a balance of direct instruction and time to explore written language on their own (Delpit, 1986; Delpit and Teale, 1991). Audrey often chose to read books and engage in other print activities, which allowed her time to practice the skills learned during direct instruction time.

Importantly, Audrey also had the opportunity to begin writing before most children in traditional first grade classrooms do (Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1990). Miss Hinton's conventional view (Knapp and Shields, 1990) of literacy learning dictated that first graders cannot usually write stories on their own until they can read independently. Yet Audrey began writing stories at home and bringing them to school. These stories were corrected by Miss Hinton (spelling), copied over neatly by Audrey and made into books which were put on the classroom shelf for all the children to read during free time. Miss Hinton praised Audrey's "beautiful work" and proudly displayed the stories to other teachers. Thus Audrey, unlike any of the other children, had the opportunity to learn about reading through her own writing during this period of first grade. Early writing has been shown to enhance young children's sense of the alphabetic nature of print (Gunderson and Shapiro, 1988) and their awareness of reading processes (Smith, 1986).

High expectations and positive individual feedback. Miss Hinton held high expectations for Audrey, noting that, "she always tried so hard, and she could read anything" (Interview, May 1989). Miss Hinton usually asked Audrey to read the most difficult parts of texts, such as the directions on worksheets or the social studies and science texts. Audrey responded to these high expectations by working at reading, puzzling over some texts and examining print around the room. She also seemed to have a sense of

herself as a successful reader as shown by her metacognitive responses when I probed her about her work or reading. For example, in December I observed Audrey “reading the pictures” of an advanced level basal text. When I asked her to tell me about what she had just read she said, “Oh, I didn’t really read this. It’s a second grade book. But I can read *this!*” and she pulled from her desk *Danny and the Dinosaur*, one of her favorite storybooks.

School seemed a pleasant place to be for Audrey, as shown by her engagement with the work of school, reading and play. She was respected and well-liked by both her peers and her teacher. Miss Hinton praised her work, attempts at reading, and behavior in the classroom. Audrey’s response to the praise was simply to work even harder. During seatwork time, Audrey put forth a lot of effort. She spent considerable time copying sentences from the board for neatness. She reread what she had written for accuracy. Audrey also took care to spell words correctly, copy all of the text and put in punctuation. On her worksheets, Audrey worked independently as she carefully read sentences to fill in blanks or match pictures with beginning sound letters. She worked for accuracy and nearly always achieved it. Audrey also took time to color the pages carefully when asked to do so. She rarely missed anything on any of her worksheets, often carrying a stack of stickered 100 percent papers home daily. Audrey certainly had the positive environment necessary for successful early literacy learning.

Discussion

Low-SES children in urban schools with traditional instruction can succeed in school and literacy learning if school instruction meets the learner. It is necessary for educators not to simply condemn traditional instruction and advocate alternatives, but to examine closely the instruction

which actually occurs and seek to identify the specific characteristics which allow for successful literacy learning. The instruction must match what the learner knows upon entering school, there must be extensive time for reading and writing texts of choice in order to try out skills or strategies learned in direct instructional contexts, and there must be regular and positive interactions with the learner about written language.

Children's prior experiences with print clearly determine whether there is a match between what the learner knows and the instruction. One reason Audrey benefited from the traditional first grade instruction was because she had the prerequisite knowledge necessary to function appropriately within that classroom. She exhibited understanding of the nature and functions of print and she understood there existed a principle which correlated sounds and symbols. Audrey understood there were exceptions and the system did not always work. She knew enough about written language to take from formal instruction its intended goals. Although not extensively, Audrey was read to at home and she sat in during her sister's tutoring sessions. These two home experiences may have provided just the amount of print awareness and knowledge of how to "do school" (Dyson, 1984) necessary for success in traditional classrooms. If experiences with print prior to school are limited with some children, it is those children who need more "lap time" (Holdaway, 1979), storybook reading in the classroom and possible explicit instruction in how to go about completing school tasks (Delpit and Teale, 1991).

Educators who claim that traditional instruction is one of the main culprits for failure of low-SES children to succeed in literacy often view a high degree of direct instruction as contrary to what young children need. This research

would suggest the same, except to explain that a *balance* of both direct instruction and extensive opportunity to explore print on their own may be most beneficial for some children. Clearly, if children do not read a lot, they are not going to become good readers (Allington, 1980) and if children are not encouraged to write, they may not be able to benefit from all that writing teaches about reading (Gunderson and Shapiro, 1988; Dyson, 1982; Freppon and Dahl, 1991). Children need time to figure out the “written language puzzle” (Dyson, 1982). Opportunity to practice literacy in combination with some direct instruction may be exactly the combination necessary for children such as Audrey.

Finally, young children emerging as literate individuals will be most successful in positive, supporting environments in which there are high expectations for success and children’s attempts at literacy learning are praised and encouraged. Also, Audrey had the individual attention so critical for young children. It has been shown that some individual literacy instruction can help even the most “at-risk” children (McIntyre, in press). For Audrey, her environment provided both the affective and cognitive interactions necessary for success.

Is it enough?

Audrey was successful at learning to read and write in first grade. She was one of the lucky ones. The instruction met her developmental needs, she had opportunity to explore, and she had positive, individual feedback. Many children in traditional classrooms do not have these opportunities. Instruction may be too abstract, and there may not be enough time to explore print on their own. It is not that the very skills-oriented instruction is bad, it just may be inappropriate for the children who are not yet developmentally ready for the study of the abstract aspects of print. In many

classrooms this may include the majority of the children. Traditional instruction may be appropriate for the few children, like Audrey, who are developmentally able to transfer skills learned in highly controlled settings to more natural reading settings (such as independent reading time). It may be appropriate for those learners if they are provided enough time to practice these skills during school time.

Audrey was luckier than most of her classmates. But she may not remain lucky. Knapp and Shields (1992) suggest that traditional instruction only serves children temporarily. It is likely that without a lot more opportunity with print to practice both reading and writing in functional settings, Audrey may begin to fall behind. If her home environment does not offer her the kinds of opportunities found in many middle class homes (such as many children's books), then she may need more time at school. Unfortunately, if her subsequent instruction in later elementary grades is similar to her first grade instruction then she may be in trouble. A few minutes for independent reading, and a few opportunities a week to write while she is learning more and more skills which need application for understanding, may not be enough. It may be that more progressive, alternative instructional settings are most critical in the middle elementary years when so many children begin to fail.

Future research

This was one case study of one learner who was successful in her traditional first grade classroom. Although we can speculate about Audrey, it is impossible to make claims about children in general from these findings. A useful future study could examine children in the same way with a larger sample of learners. It would be interesting to see what happens with children in these settings later on in their

elementary years — to see if their early success continues to serve them, or if the traditional instruction eventually limits children such as Audrey.

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Ellen McIntyre is a faculty member in the Department of Early and Middle Childhood Education at the University of Louisville, Louisville Kentucky 40292.



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