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Practice makes Perfect: Shaping Influences on Informal Reading Among Adult Developing Readers

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Keywords: Adult literacy, reading development

Abstract: This study of 3 adult literacy learners' outside class text interactions, indicate that quantity and quality of reading practice may be influenced by the ways prior experiences have helped shape their beliefs and understandings about reading development, access to text, and the nature of family relationships related to learning and literacy.

The research on reading instruction for adult developing readers is so limited that many gaps in the knowledge base can only be filled using research on children. For example, a 2002 report of the Reading Research Working Group aimed at synthesizing research on adult reading instruction fell back frequently on research in K-12 in order to develop a relatively complete picture of evidence-based practice (Kruidenier, 2002). The did so despite the author's caution that adult literacy education contexts differ markedly from K-12, and that these differences "have the potential to affect reading instruction outcomes" (p.12). Unfortunately, we know little empirically about the ways in which adulthood influences reading acquisition and development. Therefore questions about the appropriateness of importing research done on a youth population to adults are relatively unexplored.

In general this research problem suggests the imperative of looking at the ways in which adulthood influences the teaching and learning process in reading development. For the study described here, this very broad research agenda has been focused on just one aspect of learning to read: practice outside of formal learning contexts. It asked, "what aspects of adulthood seem to influence adult literacy students in their efforts outside of class to improve their reading abilities through practice?"

To understand the significance of this question it is necessary to turn once again to the research on children because we lack any other. Extensive research on children has found a positive relationship between time spent reading and reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Goodman, 1996; Smith, 1994; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Although this relationship is largely untested on adult developing readers, the relatively few number of instructional hours available to most adults (either because programs are limited or adult learners' time is limited) makes it seem unlikely that most adult struggling readers will significantly improve their skills just by attending a program. The fact that adults may spend as little as 3 hours a week in adult literacy programs, and programs that do provide more instructional hours often focus on developing a diverse set of skills that might only tangentially include reading (e.g., workforce readiness and development, so-called life skills, math) highlights the likely importance of time spent practicing in non-instructional contexts. Developing adult readers simply may not spend enough time in formal learning contexts to become fully competent readers without outside practice.

Literature Review

This study is predicated on the notion that learning the technical skills of reading and writing is necessary, but certainly not sufficient, to actually acquiring literacy skills--that is, the ability to skillfully use reading and writing within the social worlds in which the individual functions (Gee, 1996). Acquisition is achieved by practicing the skill within the social context that it is used. Generally, this learning is supported and nurtured by a kind of apprenticeship relationship between readers and developing readers, imitation by novices of experts, trial and error, and construction of knowledge by learning from experience (Kolb, 1984). In the case of reading, this would suggest that acquisition occurs by practicing in the contexts where reading takes place, in the company of and with help from other readers, using the texts that are naturally present in those settings.

Research on children's reading practices outside of school have focused on issues such as motivation, culture of the family, and access to print. Previous research on adult reading practices has clustered in three different areas: readership and socio-cultural literacy practices. Some work has looked at reading practices (although not practice) of adult developing readers.

Medium and large scale studies of "readership" have focused on quantifying the amount of time adults spend reading, and defining the types of materials they actually read (Smith, 1995, 2000; Smith & Stahl, 1999). These types of studies have also enabled researchers to look at the relationships between broad reader characteristics such as age, gender, educational attainment, and occupation, and reading practices. Typically these studies depend on self report, despite known problems (McQuillan & Au, 2001) with this methodology. This work has consistently shown that a range of reader characteristics influence what and how much adults read.

Another strand of research has sought to understand adult reading from a socio-cultural perspective. These kinds of studies have led to detailed descriptions and analyses of how, why, with whom, and under what circumstances adults read, uncovering the multiple ways reading is shaped by social contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Neilsen, 1989; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). They have deepened our knowledge of the complex and varied ways there are to read, and how race, class, gender and other factors influence how texts are used, understood, and in what ways they impel action.

Much of the work related to adult reading practices and the ways in which motivation influences them has been done with a general population. However, a few studies have focused specifically on the reading practices of adult literacy learners. Sheehan-Holt and Smith (2000) tried to address the question of whether basic skills education affects adults' literacy proficiencies and reading practices. They found that adults who participated in basic skills education read a greater variety of texts, but such literacy practices did not necessarily transfer to higher reading scores. Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobsen, & Soler (2002) focused on the relationship between literacy instruction and actual changes in practice by doing extensive observations and interviews in students' homes, and compared the outcomes of instruction in several different types of programs (i.e., those that used real life activities and materials and shared decision making between students and teachers, and those that did not). Similar to Sheehan-Holt & Smith, they found that the type of literacy instruction does influence reading practices in terms of frequency and type of texts read. However, the Purcell-Gates, et al., study focuses on the connection between program processes and learner outcomes, skipping over adults' own efforts to improve their reading while actually participating in programs.

Research Design

This case study of three adult learners used a combination of observation and self report to collect data. The participants, two women and one man, were all learners in a large, urban basic skills program. They were selected by recommendation of their teachers based on duration and consistency of participation in the program, and willingness to participate.

Data was collected in four steps: an in-depth, semi-structured interview which focused on the learners' educational background, literacy goals, current interactions with literacy, and beliefs and practices regarding improving literacy skills; one day of researcher "shadowing" the learner, focusing on his/her interactions with literacy; a self-report, one day audio log of all reading and writing activities; and a debriefing interview following completion of all other data collection. The participants' teachers were also interviewed.

Findings

The following descriptions of the three focal learners in this study are drawn from the data and are constructed to help us understand more about how, why, and under what circumstances adult struggling readers interact with text in outside their classes. At the program they attended, none of the teachers assigned homework, and none had a class library or made a particular effort to encourage their students to read outside of class. Whatever reading the learners did was as a result of their own initiative.

Edna is a 54-year-old married woman and mother of five adult children. She was born in Guatemala and came to the US at about age 16. Literate in Spanish, she earned her GED in English when her children were young. She has recently returned to school to improve her skills for different kinds of work after being laid off from an air conditioning factory, where she had worked for 24 years. Edna participates in the adult high school classes at the program, and reads relatively fluently. Of the three participants, Edna reads at the highest level.

Outside of school Edna likes to read in both English and Spanish, and does so on a daily basis. However, when talking about reading at home, she primarily referred to reading her schoolwork. Although Edna reported that several times a week she reads the local newspaper, magazines that her daughters give her, the bible and other religious texts and that reads headlines on the Yahoo website and a Guatemalan newspaper on the Internet, she spends much of whatever spare time she has completing reading, writing and grammar, and math workbooks, often slipping it in between household chores.

Since starting back to school, Edna feels her skills have improved. She believes that doing school work at home, although not required, is critical to her success in school. Being able to go to her daughters and a family friend for help on homework, as she does, is also an important source of assistance for her. Edna believes that reading books would help her improve her skills, but doesn't do this often. She believes that spending time reading would "calm me down." Although she spends time reading on the computer, she believes this is less valuable.

Quite a bit of text visible was in Edna's house, including mail and newspapers in her dining room; books in her computer room; notices, coupons, and recipes stuck to her refrigerator door, and a framed printed passage on the wall entitled "The Unknown Guest" (referring to God). On the day we spent observing her, Edna went to class, the grocery store, and the bank. During the course of her day she was surrounded by text in all of these places and seemed to interact comfortably and fluently with it.

Juan is a 21-year-old man who lives with his mother, was born in the US, but has spent extended periods living in Puerto Rico with his father, who resides there. He describes himself as

equally fluent in English and Spanish. He is the father of 2 ½ year old twins who live in another city with their mother. Juan explained that, subsequent to a serious car accident at age seven, he was always in trouble at school. Transferred from his regular high school to a disciplinary school in high school, he dropped out at age 16. After returning from a five-year stay with his father he decided to go back to school, apparently inspired by his brother and his sister graduating from high school and spurred on by his father calling him a quitter. “So now, as soon as I get my high school diploma, I’m going to take off to Puerto Rico with my mom, and I’m going to pop him upside his head with the diploma!” Juan reads at an intermediate level.

Juan reports that, “Sometimes I write, I don’t hardly read.” When asked why he doesn’t read, he said, “It’s ‘cause I got things I got to do.” He later admitted that reading just “doesn’t attract my attention...I look for something...that’s more comfortable for me [than reading].” In school, he explained that he reads, because that’s what you do there. “When I’m home, that’s my freedom, and I do what I want.”

Juan does not have a job, but he described himself as the person his family counts on to help out with various responsibilities. His days tend to be somewhat unstructured. He reported that on a typical day he may hang out in the downtown business area, or help out in the beauty salon where his godmother works. When Juan was observed, there was almost no evidence of interaction with any text. He seemed to operate almost completely outside a world that demands reading. He does not drive. He does not work. He does not have a bank account. Although we were not invited inside his home, Juan reports that there are no books or magazines there. Though he can read some, there is almost nothing in Juan’s life that requires him to do so, and he just about never seeks out text to read except when he’s in school.

Margaret is a 42-year-old African American woman. At the time of data collection she was pregnant. She already had a 10 ½ year old daughter who lived with her mother; her daughter visited Margaret on the weekends. Margaret dropped out of high school, at age 18, just weeks short of graduation. She reported that school had been hard for her. Margaret did not articulate any specific long terms goals for participating in the program, other than simply going to school. “My goal was going to school and finishing school.” She hasn’t thought much beyond that. She does see herself going to school not only for herself, but her daughter too. “I want to get something for my life for my daughter and so she can get an education, and I can get a education, and we can learn something together. That’s the best thing for my daughter, for me.” Her teacher reported that when Margaret first came to class, “She could not read five words.” However, she sees her as one of her successes. “She has done amazingly well...She has made really good strides.” Margaret was reading at the most beginning level of the three study participants.

Margaret does not drive, so on a typical day, she rides the bus or takes a cab to school. Sometimes she is absent from school because she can not afford the transportation. She comes directly home afterwards. She reports that at home she “looks” at her mail and the newspaper. She also says that she reads the Bible and other religious materials frequently. When she has difficulty decoding something, she seeks help from her fiancé with whom she lives. He often reads the newspaper aloud to her. Margaret always keeps the TV on when she’s home. She likes to watch shows about animals, but she said she also likes to watch games shows that involve figuring out words.

Margaret lives in a residential area with no stores within walking distance. Although she doesn’t make shopping lists, Margaret reports that she does read when she goes shopping, “I have to read stuff there to buy something because I might buy the wrong thing. You’ve got to read it.” She also reads directions and recipes on food boxes. Although Margaret does read some,

there is a scant amount of print material in her home, and the time she spends engaged with it is on a daily basis is short.

Discussion

The three study participants, Edna, Juan, and Margaret, all attended the same basic skills program but were diverse in many ways. Given the research discussed above, it is unsurprising that these three adults' reading practices differ quantitatively and qualitatively. Despite their differences, however, there do appear to be similar shaping influences on their outside-of-class reading practice which are distinctively adult. These include the ways in which experiences have helped shape their beliefs and understandings about reading development, their access to text, and the nature of their family relationships related to learning and literacy.

The research participants held varying understandings of how important reading practice is in reaching their goals. In all three cases, however, their actions seemed greatly influenced by their previous school experiences which led them to assume that reading is primarily and most importantly school-like reading. For example, Margaret believed that she could benefit from practicing, but felt that the only context where she could do this was school. Juan, too, assigned reading time to school only, explaining why he refused to take work home with him "I've done enough [at school]. I don't want to read no more."

Although the participants engaged in very little or no book reading or interacting with other kinds of extended texts that might afford them significant opportunities to practice, they all had opportunities to read that came to them by virtue of their being adult. The adults were observed reading grocery items, bills, menus, and mail. Without intentionality, they were exposed to and interacted with text in authentic contexts and for real purposes that go well beyond most children's experiences. Although neither they nor many traditional researchers would consider this reading practice, they are reading. What we do not know is the relationship between these kinds of adult reading practices and reading achievement.

The importance of reading to and helping children has always been understood as an important motivation for adult literacy learners, however, we have not previously understood the ways in which adult relationships influence adult learners in their efforts. The nature of these relationships varied among the three participants, but in each case seemed to play a role in the quantity and quality of interactions with text for the adult learner. Research indicates that parents play an important role in shaping children's motivations and understandings about reading (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997). The data described here also indicates that familial relationships are significant regarding support, motivation, and understandings of reading. However, the adult nature of the relationships makes them distinctive from the parent child interactions traced in the research.

Conclusion

The data make clear that on the topic of reading practice, there are distinctive characteristics of adult learners that influence the quantity and quality of interactions with text among adult literacy learners. These suggest the need for further research to determine the ways in which these findings should influence formal instruction. This preliminary data implies the importance of practitioners helping learners to reflect on and "re-story" (Randall, 1996) prior experiences learning to read and gain a greater understanding of the importance of reading practice in improving skills. Additionally teachers may need to think about ways to build reading networks into class time when adult learners' family relationships do not support a rich

reading environment at home. Learners may also need support in identifying a range of high interest texts to read and strategies for reading independently.

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