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A Literacy PhotoStory: Improving

Classroom Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

In rapidly changing times, students need to understand and utilize various types of literacies in order to be productive citizens and communicate with each other in a fast-paced world. Literacy is often simplified to the ability to read and write, only on some occasions including other topics such as speaking and listening skills, or computer literacies. The need for improved literacy instruction is apparent in high schools, and this study seeks to inform educators of different needs and hopes that students may have in the broad field of literacy. This study seeks to expand the definition of literacy while simultaneously starting a conversation about ways to better incorporate literacy instruction into schools.

Introduction

As a future English teacher, I know that literacy is a vitally important skill for students to have to be productive human beings. Literacies can be multifaceted, and there are so many different aspects of literacy that sometimes teachers do not know where to begin in teaching literacy. When I was in high school, I had very little instruction of what literacy is, and had I not been self-motivated to discover various literacies, I would not be writing this study. Teachers in the American education system are not always prepared or motivated to teach literacy to students, and because of this, students do not learn literacies beyond a narrow definition of reading and writing; this is a severe detriment to their growth as human beings. On top of this, there is a gap between what literacies are being taught and valued in schools, and what literacies students are valuing at home—particularly with diverse students. Through this study, I have found that the ways students define literacy can be vastly different from the instruction they receive from their teachers. Hopefully this study will start a conversation about the breadth of literacy and ways literacy can be taught in our school system, as well as working towards valuing literacies that match up with a diverse array of students.

Literature Review

Literacy is a crucial skill that all students need to improve their daily lives. But even so, Jillian Wendt (2013) found that many high school students did not have the literacy skills necessary to graduate. One reason that students are not graduating with necessary literacy skills is because literacy education in the 21st century has changed dramatically from traditional literacy instruction (Bean & Harper, 2008). Literacy instruction is typically thought of as

something that elementary teachers are responsible for, but high school teachers also have a

hand in preparing literate students for the world (Wendt, 2013). The landscape of what literacy

is has changed drastically over the years, and there is a need for instruction practices to change

with it (McLean & Rowsell, 2013). Secondary instruction in literacy provides students with

better comprehension skills, as well as writing, fluency, and content-area understanding

necessary to their futures (Wendt, 2013).

Because the definition of literacy continues to change, the way it is taught should be

changing too. Multimodal literacies are forms of literacy that can be communicated through

many means, which would be the perfect way to teach literacy in our fluctuating society.

However, multimodal literacies are not always welcome in schools, and there is a narrow

definition of what literacy is and how it should be practiced (McLean & Rowsell, 2013). Many

new literacies revolve around technology, but there are also other modes of literacy instruction

that are necessary for educators to know about and effectively teach to their students (Bean &

Harper, 2008). McLean and Rowsell (2013) found that both teachers and learners benefited

from a use of multimodal texts during literacy instruction. The reading and writing of

traditional classroom literacy is no longer enough literacy instruction in our multifaceted world,

and Wendt (2013) encourages secondary teachers to use technology, oral language protocols,

fluency exercises, and other resources that have recently become available to classroom

teachers in order to increase literacy knowledge. A simple lecture-based classroom is not

enough for students to learn the literacies that are needed for them to be productive members

of society; a wider range of literacies needs to be taught through a wider range of instruction

strategies.

It is extremely important for students to take the time to get to know not only who they are, but what their literacy means, in and outside of school. This is because the identity of students is often tied into their literacy practices (Lutrell & Parker, 2001). Unfortunately, there is a gap between which literacy practices are happening in schools and how students see themselves as literate beings (Lutrell & Parker, 2001). This gap is intensified when the culture that a student comes from is at odds with the cultures that are practiced in school (Lutrell & Parker, 2001). Schooling in America is indicative of a middle class perspective, and students who are not in the middle class end up with values that do not fit in with the literacy they are being taught in school. The books that students read, the things that they write, and other texts that they consume should not be at odds with their passions, but Lutrell and Parker (2001) found that students' passions were not only disconnected from their success in school, but that this disconnect gave students a negative viewpoint about themselves. Even in a world of test-based standards, teachers must strive to instruct high school students in all areas of literacy, not just content-knowledge, in order to prepare them for life outside of school (Wendt, 2013). In order to better teach students literacy, Bean and Harper (2008) suggest that educators do not just ask *how* we teach, but *why* we teach.

Methods

With this research in mind, I wondered what exactly high school students were defining as literacy, and how they were learning it in their classrooms. I hoped to find out how much of a gap there was between in-school and out-of-school literacies, as well as how students were learning the literacies they valued. I wanted not only to be able to interview participants about

their thoughts on literacies, but also to find a window from which I could view the literacies in their daily lives.

In order to accomplish this, I used a method of research known as Photo Story. Photo Story takes research participants and has them communicate with the researcher via photographs. For this study, I contacted a high school in Missoula, Montana, a town of about 70,000 people. There are five high schools in the county, and the one I contacted had a student population that was 50% male, 50% female, as well as about 86% Caucasian, 6% Native American, and 2% Hispanic. The school also has a population that is 48% low income. The principal from this school connected me with a teacher, who connected me with three students to use as participants. All of the participants were 15 years old and in the 9th grade; two of the three students were females, and one was a male; two of the students were Caucasian, and one was Latino; all three of the students identified themselves as middle class. Nathan is a high-achieving student who loves soccer and plans on going to college for scientific journalism. Andrea enjoys reading and loves acting. She works at the local University's concessions to raise money for a trip she wants to take this summer. Isabel is on her high school's swimming team and enjoys the outdoors. She is also learning both Spanish and Arabic. All of these students were excited to participate in this extracurricular photography project.

Once the participants were armed with their cameras, they were instructed to take pictures over a two-week period that answered the question "What is literacy?" both in and out of school. After the pictures were taken and developed, I interviewed each participant in a one-on-one interview in which they answered questions about what they think of literacy and why they took the pictures they did (Appendix A). Though each interview differed depending on

responses and pictures, the main points of the interview were composed of questions about

who the participants were as individuals, what they thought of as literacy, how they learned

these literacies, why they took the pictures they did, and what they wanted other people,

specifically their teachers, to know about literacy.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded and the photographs were coded so that they could easily be

matched with responses from the interviews. The interviews were then carefully transcribed

verbatim and read over multiple times for accuracy. Participants were also instructed to choose

one photograph that they felt epitomized literacy for them. They then wrote a paragraph

explaining why they took this photo, and what it meant for literacy. Although this study only

focuses on a small amount of literate lives, the stories that these participants tell provide

unique insight into what literacy means to high school students.

Results

What is Literacy?

When participants were handed cameras and instructed to take pictures of what they

thought of as literacy, each student reported taking pause over the definition of literacy. One

student said, "When you asked me to take pictures of what literacy meant to me, that really

opened my eyes." This lack of a clear definition was originally expected, as literacy is a

multifaceted concept that many students are not familiar with even in college, let alone ninth

grade. As I hoped, this lack of prior knowledge led the students to a process of deep and

analytical thinking about what literacy truly means, and how it is reflected in their lives.

Because they had to take pictures and not just answer questions, the participants were also

forced to reflect on which aspects of literacy they could represent visually, and had to engage in

creative problem solving to decide what would be photographed.

A common understanding of what literacy was seemed to involve more than reading

and writing. Though students were unable to pinpoint exactly where their understanding of

literacy came from, they seemed to intuitively know that it had to be more than just what they

were learning in English class. Nathan defined literacy as an "innate ability to communicate with

different canvases." I was surprised by this definition of literacy, and wondered how much the

ability to communicate is innate, and how much it is learned. I think that what this student

meant by this comment is that everyone is born with the ability and need to communicate, but

they develop this ability in many different ways and through multimodal means. Isabel

identified literacy as the ability to read and write *as well as* the ability to communicate. This

understanding of literacy as the ability to communicate allowed for a rich discussion about the

"different canvases" that people, particularly these high school students, used to communicate

effectively.

The Origins of Literacy

Reading and writing have not always been forms of literacy available to the majority of

people, but there have always been unidentified forms of literacy that people use, even from a

young age. The literacies in our lives begin forming before we can even remember them, and

each new literacy learned or skill developed builds on the foundations of literacy that we form

as children. Even though students could not name an exact day—nor were they expected to—

when their knowledge of literacy emerged, all of these students could trace back the roots of

literacy to their parents. Each student came from a two parent household, though they did not

all live with their birth parents. Naming at least one parent as a literacy role-model,

participants stated that their parents read to them often when they were younger, and this

time helped to develop a love for literacy at a young age.

More than one participant incorporated at least one picture of what is known as

"emergent literacy" into their photostory. Nathan chose a picture of crayons as the one image

he wanted to write about. He said that literacy at a young age is important to the development

of literacy, and that the knowledge of literacy we gather as young children forms a foundation

for the rest of our lives.

Figure 1: "Through the understanding of basic shapes and scribbles,

we are allowed to make those into something much more."

Isabel expressed her love for the "literacy of play" that she remembers forming as a

child, wishing that this form of discovery was still accepted as a form of literacy as we become

adolescents and move into adulthood. This student stated that "you start out when you're

really young already trying to communicate through drawings." In this statement, this

participant was building on her understanding of literacy as a form of communication, which

helped her to choose this important phase of literacy development.

At this age of literacy development, the only role models that students named for

literacy were family members, illustrating how important parents or guardians are at this age.

Students need positive role models at all stages of life in order to become literate individuals,

and the literacies that are taught and learned as infants develop into the literacies of

adulthood, which makes them a crucial foundation to becoming literate. As teachers, we should

not only be capitalizing on the early development of literacy, but making sure that we build on

the foundation of literacy that students learn while they are young. Students need time to

color outside of the lines as they take small steps to becoming more literate.

Literacies Taught in Schools

The traditional modes of literacy instruction are no longer enough to keep students

engaged and learning. When asked what literacies the participants were being taught in school,

the answer was unanimously "English class." All three students were being taught that

analyzing texts through reading and writing were literacy, but not being taught about literacy in

any other contexts. When pressed to think about different forms of literacies, students could

come up with many, but they did not have this knowledge close to the surface because they

were not being explicitly taught that knowledge other than what they learned in the English

classroom was considered literacy. In order to help students come by the knowledge of

literacies, they need to be explicitly defined and taught in all content areas, not just the English

classroom.

Andrea understood themes and motifs to be the main components of her in-school

literacy education. When she thought of literacy, she immediately jumped to "literature," which

she identified as the only type of literacy that her teachers taught her. This participant

regretted the fact that so much of school literacy focuses on finding motifs, and reflected that

this made some people hate reading. She said that she wished schools would teach students

how to love reading and have fun while doing it.

Figure 2: "A lot of times to add suspense authors make main characters on the edge

about to plunge to their deaths, but then they do something miraculous and survive."

When pressed, students thought that their math and music teachers probably thought

of those subjects as literacy, but that they never said so. Even foreign language teachers did not

explicitly define their subjects as forms of literacy, which left students to their own devices

when trying to understand what literacy really meant. Students regretted that they weren't

allowed more time to explore literacies for themselves in school, and felt that most of their

literacy learning revolved around some form of a textbook, which didn't allow for creativity or

exploration that they craved. Becoming a literate being is a process, and it is not all going to

happen in one day. By allowing students time to explore what literacy means to them, teachers

and parents can help accelerate the process of becoming literate and add depth to students' lives.

Out-of-School Literacies

There is often a gap between what literacies are taught in schools and what literacies are taught outside of schools. These students illustrated this by giving multiple examples of literacies they learned on their own, or with help, in contexts not related to school. Though not religious herself, Isabel was fascinated with the idea of religion as a form of literacy. She believed that religion formed individuals with a common background for communication, and that it was just as effective of a literacy mode as foreign languages. Because this participant did not have a religious background, it was interesting that she thought of religion as a form of literacy. She did not learn this literacy through explicit means, but through analytical thinking and observing the world around her.

Figure 3: "I thought you could also communicate through religion, and if other people

are the same religion as you, you can talk to them about it [because of a shared background]."

Art and music were two other common modes of literacy among the participants. Students learned these literacies both in and out of school, but they felt they really thrived with these outside of school, either through private lessons or self-discovery. Both of these literacies were described as ways to express yourself. Self-expression was not included in any of the participants' initial definitions of literacy, but they were all adamant that art and music were different types of literacy. These modes not only help people communicate with each other, but they also help individuals to better understand themselves, and therefore communicate their feelings.

Nathan captured a clock as the visual representation for what he described as "the literacy of time." His idea was that time tells a story, and therefore it is a form of literacy: "it can be interpreted a lot of ways between different people." The idea that time itself is a form of literacy really broadens the working definition of literacy, and opens up a world of possibilities for how we understand literacy.

Board games, sports, oral conversations, and maps were all described as types of literacies that the participants either picked up on their own, or outside of school. Even though oral language is officially considered a form of literacy on the Common Core State Standards, students were still not being taught that this was a literacy while they were in school. Participants thought of all of these activities as ways to build a common background, and therefore communicate, with other people, which was the core of what literacy meant to them. There are some things that teachers do not have the time or ability to teach in school, but all educators should make sure they are aware of the types of literacies that students are learning and valuing outside of the classroom, and make sure not to devalue these literacies inside the

classroom. Wherever possible, teachers should try to bridge the gap between in school and out

of school literacies because each of these activities are essential to forming a student with a

broad background of literacy.

Conclusion

The wide range of literacies that students could think of really showcased the depth and

richness that is literacy, while also pointing out the glaring deficits within the education system

when it comes to literacy. Among the three participants, none of them could think of a single

instance where a teacher described something other than reading and writing as a form of

literacy, and even then it was only their English teachers who had done so. There is a desperate

need for literacy instruction in all content areas, and a common understanding of literacy as

more than just the building blocks to learning in an English classroom. Even when teachers did

not recognize their content as literacy, students could pick up on the way these subjects

enhanced the ability to communicate, but only after deep thought and analysis that most high-

schoolers are never given the opportunity or instruction to do. All teachers need to explicitly

define literacy within their content areas so that students can understand the broad range of

literacies that they can participate in.

As students grew older, they felt that there was less allowance for exploration when

learning literacy. Whether this learning happens through field trips, trips to the library, the

opportunity to create art or music, or simple physical exploration, students crave the ability to

discover literacies for themselves. Teachers and parents should be there to help students along

the way, especially when they are at a young age and are forming the critical foundation for

literacy that they will build on for the rest of their lives. If teachers want students to become

literate, they should not only allow for self-exploration, but encourage a love of literacy in

students. There are so many different forms of literacy; there is bound to be some form that

each student loves, and it is the duty of teachers to help students find these modes so that

students do not feel illiterate when they are put in the box of a narrowly defined concept of

literacy.

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Appendix A

Basic Interview Questions
Before Pictures:
Who are You:
1. What grade are you in, and how old are you?
2. What is your race, SES, gender, and religion?
3. What do you do in your free time? Hobbies, extracurricular activities?
4. Do you have any jobs?
5. What is your family like?
6. Did your parents go to college?
7. Do you plan on going to college? What job do you want?
8. What kind of student are you?
9. What is your favorite part of school?
What is Literacy:
1. What does literacy mean to you? Can you define it?
2. What do you think your teachers think of as literacy?
3. What literacy have you been taught in school? Are these things defined as literacy by your teachers?
4. What literacies have you been taught out of school, and who taught you/where did you learn them?
5. How do your teachers/others teach you literacy? What works and what doesn't?

6. How is literacy different for you in and out of school?
7. What significant events in literacy learning have you had?
8. What teachers have had an impact on your literacy, and how?
During Pictures:
1. What pictures stand out to you?
2. Are any of these representative of the way you feel about literacy?
3. If you had to pick only three of these photos to represent literacy, which would you pick and why?
4. Tell me about these pictures.
After Pictures:
1. What do you think the role of technology is in literacy?
2. Can you write a response about this picture and email it to me?
3. If you could retake these pictures, is there anything you would change?
4. What literacies do you wish were taught in school? What do you wish weren't so focused on?
5. If you could let your teachers know one thing about how literacy is taught, what would it be?