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Collaborative Research: Developing a Community Of Learners to Understand the Home Literacies of Kindergarten Children with a View to Informing Literacy Pedagogy in Kindergarten

Gillian Potter

Introduction

This project drew together in a collaborative partnership, 40 field-based researchers in 20 kindergartens in Singapore and two university-based researchers from the National Institute of Education, (Drs Gillian Potter and Celina Kwan). Its key **objectives** were to:

- facilitate teacher research for professional development and change,
- forge collaborative links between university and field researchers.

It facilitated teacher research in early years literacy development with a view to helping teachers to more fully understand the literacy experiences and skills of **preschool** children, the roles and expectations of parents and the implications of these for pedagogy.

Through the **use** of semi-structured interviews constructed by the teacher and university researchers together, the project set out to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of literacy activities are engaged in by the children and families at home?
2. What kind of literacy activities are deemed to be important by the parents?
3. In **what** language do these activities occur?
4. How do mothers and fathers perceive their roles in assisting their children to develop literacy skills?
5. How do parental responses correlate with SES, ethnicity,

gender of child, **age**, education level **of** parents, number of siblings in the family, working status of mother?

6. How can teachers' practices better respond to the literacy proficiency or literacy needs of the children.

Research **Process**

A series of meetings between the teacher researchers and university-based researchers were arranged. These meetings were conducted within a professional development framework and after discussions the teachers generated the questions to ask parents and children. Semi-structured interview schedules were subsequently designed to enable the gathering of information about home literacy practices and demographics **so** that the university **researchers** could explore relationships among variables.

The teacher researchers also provided data through a survey on their working contexts, their feelings about teacher research and their perspectives on their involvement in the project. In addition they completed sheets on 'Implications for Literacy Curriculum' and '**Reflection** and Visions.' From these, insight was gained into the effect that the project had on the teachers and their practices, given that part of the mission of this project was to develop a professional community of learners.

The analyses undertaken of the interview data were both qualitative and quantitative with the latter being done with SPSS. The former was done in the grounded theory style

that enabled categories and themes to arise from the data itself.

Results

Our professional community of researchers found that the majority of the parents engaged in literacy activities with their children and favoured the completion of assessment **books** and computer usage over story reading and everyday literacy activities. Less than 25% **took** their children to the **library**. Over 75% of the children spent between 2-4 hours daily, **watching TV** and playing on the computer; this was higher among families with working mothers. **Parents** believed that it is important for kindergartens to formally teach reading and writing and supported the **obtaining** of higher levels of professional qualifications by the teachers. The parents also felt that research in literacy development **is** important and contributes to the improvement of teaching methodology.

It was interesting to note that parents' understandings of literacy and its learning were quite limited; schooling and pedagogy constrained their conceptions of literacy engagement. This project was cast within a sociocultural framework where literacy was defined more as Discourse – speaking, reading and writing as social practices and products of specific groups of people. **Such** literacy could be seen in the discursive practices of the families and yet those practices were not valued by the very people who produced them. Without doubt, the parents saw literacy as desirable and part of their "identikit" which classes them as educated, successful and recognizable as such; it was possible to see the intertwining of literacy with status and identity construction. Yet, the notions of academic literacy were perceived as the only valuable literacy. Parents in this study did not believe that young children learn literacy through immersion in their social and cultural world.

The Teacher Researchers as a Community of Learners

The data collected from the teacher researchers about their participation in the research enterprise indicated that despite the time constraints, they felt professionally enriched by meeting and talking with others from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. They said that they found it particularly enriching to see the whole process of a research project and to view things from different perspectives. They commented that the project gave them the opportunity to

interview parents **to** find out about the children's home environment. This, they said, gave them an insight into the expectation of parents and helped them to plan for the curriculum that best suited the children. It also heightened their awareness of the literacy **activities** in which the parents engaged with their children at home. Some of ~~the~~ teacher researchers said that the research enabled them to work hand ~~in~~ hand with the parents and children. They felt that a parent-teacher bond was created. They said that they gained insight into the perceptions and attitudes of parents and children – I've never **taken the time to do** this before, said one.

In relation to whether teacher research could make a difference to curriculum content, all of the teacher researchers said they believed it could. Some of their verbatim comments were:

With our increased awareness and exposure, curriculum can be developed and fine-tuned to be more effective for all children.

It gives the teacher an in depth idea of what activities to plan for children and what the strengths and weaknesses are of the children in their care.

Yes, but I think there needs **to** be much more collaborative teacher research to make a big difference. It's very important for us to be involved.

These teachers indicated considerable commitment to research and awareness of its potential to assist **curriculum** change. As a result of their engagement in the research, their focus moved from "**pre-established** curriculum" to children at the centre of a dynamic and responsive program. They spoke of the relevance ~~of~~ the new information gained through research to their **own** pedagogy and expressed, in part, a confidence to change given their research data. An **advocacy** for more teacher research was evident.

The power of collaborative **teacher/university** research partnerships proved to be great in developing a community **of** learners to understand the **home literacies** of kindergarten children with a view to informing literacy pedagogy in kindergarten.