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ABSTRACT

Many studies have found that literacy exists in low-SES (low socioeconomic status) children's daily lives--it is the meaning, frequency of use, depth, and general use of literacy at home that affect the children's progress in school. Research studies clearly show differences in home literacy development of low-SES and higher income children that affect children's successes in school. Higher income children write words that represented the adult concept of writing while low-SES children wrote strings of letters that had no reason and meaning. Other research found that successful children engaged in print frequently with their parents and started school with schemata that gave them an advantage in formal schooling. However, D. Taylor and C. Dorsey-Gaines found the opposite to be true. These studies found low-SES children across the board do have some kind of literacy activities going on daily at home, but they represent small populations and cannot represent the general low-SES population. Strategies for parents to try at home include: provide a variety of reading materials; read aloud to children; have children write to grandparents; and make weekly visits to the library with their children. Teachers can help children become better readers by getting to know the children through the parents; sending a book home as often as possible to promote reading; establishing a cross-age reading program; setting up a reward system; and establishing a silent reading program where children choose what they want to read. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

Low-SES Literacy Backgrounds: Effects on Formal Schooling

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to synthesize research on the effects of school literacy based upon literacy learning of low-SES (low-socioeconomic-status) children. Many studies have found that literacy exists in the low-SES children's daily lives and higher income homes. It's the meaning, frequency of use, depth, and general use of literacy at home that affect the children's progress in school.

This paper also provides some strategies for parents and teachers to help low-SES children to overcome their literacy disadvantages.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does home literacy of low-SES children affect their literacy at school?

RELEVANT RESEARCH

There are many studies on literacy development before and after children enter into formal schooling. Research studies clearly show differences in home literacy development of low-SES and higher income children that affect children's successes in school.

Although lower-income families engage in many literacy events daily, the children, as a group, still perform at lower levels than do middle class children (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986; Barnhart & Sulzby, 1986). Several factors that may contribute to their performance are: the level of print, duration of time spent on literacy activities, and level of education the parents have completed (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Some of the literacy materials found in low-SES homes include, newspapers, tv guides, and magazines (Purcell-Gates, 1996). The parents often engaged in literacy events in daily routines for short periods such as paying bills, writing letters, checking the entertainment schedule, etc. The parents rarely spent time reading story books to their children. As a result, children did not fully understand the function of print when starting formal schooling. Parents often became more involved in their children's education when they began formal schooling (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Barnhart and Sulzby (1986) examined early literacy differences in low-SES and higher income kindergarten children. They found task differences in writing dictated words and sentences, composing handwritten stories, and reading what was written.

Their research showed that higher income children wrote words that represented the adult concept of writing while low-SES

children wrote strings of letters that had no reason and meaning to the order of the letters (Barnhart & Sulzby, 1986).

Differences were also found in reading of new words and written words. The higher income children tried to sound out new words more than the lower income children. They did not possess the strategies necessary for sounding out new words. It also appeared that the lower income children had no concept of alphabetic reading or writing (Barnhart & Sulzby, 1986).

The fewest differences of low-SES and middle income children found were in the writing and reading of their own names and some single word dictation. Purcell-Gates (1996) also showed similar results and found that low-SES children did spend time reading and writing their own names before formal schooling which could account for fewer differences from higher income children. The greatest difference was in the reading and writing connections to meaning as shown in many research studies in the past.

In another study, Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1989) attempted to research learning to read and write in kindergarten and first grade from the low-SES child's perspective. The low-SES children's schemata about the written language were measured at the beginning and end of kindergarten. Four patterns of success/nonsuccess behaviors and patterns were found within the traditional classroom:

(1) The Independent Explorer was characterized by independent investigation of print,
(2) The Curriculum Dependent Path by learner inexperience with written language and reliance on instruction

(3) The Passive Non-Weaver Path by minimal engagement during reading and writing instruction and failure to weave literacy concepts into an understanding of process,
(4) and The Deferring Learner Path by a shift away from the learner's own written language knowledge.

This is what the children had to say and demonstrated. The Independent Explorer, the successful children, said and understood that print was meaningful and was important to daily life and entertainment. The Curriculum Dependent, the less successful children, said that the letters and sounds were something that had to be learned in school. The Passive Non-Weaver Path taken by the children did what the school required of them and believed that reading was saying only the words they knew. In the Deferring Learner Path, the children waited to be given the unknown words and generally took fewer risks in their work.

Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1989) found that the successful children engaged in print frequently with their parents and started school with schemata that gave them an advantage in formal schooling. Those children who did not engage frequently with their parents often fell behind and continued to struggle in the first grade.

However, the low-SES children do bring literacy knowledge to school that they have learned at home and in their community. The children can copy and write their names, identify store signs and restaurant signs, recognize environmental signs and print, know songs, rhymes and have some experiences with picture books

(Notari-Syverson & others, 1996). When parents and teachers recognize this knowledge, children can learn to build upon what they know and expand it through school.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found the opposite of Barnhart & Sulzby studies. They found that low-SES children do write and draw with meaning. The children made cards and wrote letters to family members. Even young children scribbled pictures that resembled faces and letters of their first names. The low-SES children also showed creativity in which their names were not used for just identifying their papers, but were part of a colorful picture.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) also found the opposite of Purcell-Gates' studies. They found that parents of low-SES children often get involved with their children's literacy development. Low-SES children are often required to complete their homework and was checked by their parents before they could go outside to play.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that the low-SES children read frequently to their parents, brothers, sisters, or to a relative. Parents and relatives often read to the children. Younger children would memorize parts of stories and retell them using pictures. Books were often shared with family and friends in social gatherings.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

There are strengths and weaknesses of the studies presented in this paper.

Strengths. A major strength in these studies is that they found low-SES children across the board do have some kind of literacy activities going on daily at home. Teachers may be able to learn and expand upon the knowledge that low-SES children bring to school in order to help them become more successful learners. The studies also found that parents' involvement increased their children's success across the grade levels (Purell-Gates & Dahl, 1989). The research also contributed significant data to show the importance of literacy development at home before children attend formal schooling. The information provided in this paper may be useful for teachers and parents to identify strategies early enough to help low-SES children to overcome learning problems.

Weaknesses. Although the studies in this paper represent small populations, they cannot represent the general low-SES population. A larger sample population is needed to reflect more accurate data. Most of the children used in these studies were black minority children. Whether or not black children make up the majority of the low-SES children with learning problems is unknown. The question remains on whether the results of these studies would be the same for other ethnic groups of children.

DISCUSSION

Although children from low-SES homes generally perform lower than children from middle income homes, it is not the socioeconomic status that affects their literacy development in school. Rather, it is the children's experience with written

language that determines whether the children's knowledge matches beginning literacy instruction at school and how successful they may be in school (Harste, Burke, & Woodard, 1983; Purcell-Gates, Dahl, 1989). Purcell-Gates (1996) showed that children from low-SES homes can be successful in school when they engage daily in reading events at home and observe their parents reading, writing, and communicating with them and others at various levels. Goldenburg (1989) found that low-SES children that were successful was because a teacher, parent, or both took extra measures that led to the child's reading achievement.

When low-SES children aren't given the support they need, they often display behavior problems which usually get them sent out of the classroom during important lessons on skills and strategies for reading. They become rejected by peers and self-esteem, confidence and motivation to learn are lost.

By the time these low-income children from inner-cities reach eleventh grade, they are generally achieving at about the seventh-grade level nationally according to the NAEP (1988). The drop out rates for these low-income students have risen to nearly one million students per year (Smith-Burke, 1989). Usually, these students enter the work force in the low paying, non-advancement jobs or go on welfare (Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1989).

LITERACY ADVANTAGE STRATEGIES

Research has shown that actions and routines set up by parents and teachers can overcome literacy problems for low-SES children (Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1989). In the following sections research has suggested some strategies for parents to try at home and with teachers and some strategies for teachers to try at school.

Parent Strategies

For low-SES children to become successful in literacy development, the immersion of print should start at home at the earliest age possible. There are many home activities that parents can do with their children. This paper suggests only a few.

Parent guidelines for building self-esteem through literacy include (Come, Fredericks, 1995):

S pend quality time together.
E ncourage your child to read for fun.
L isten carefully to your child's ideas.
F ind ways to praise your child.
E njoy family activities and projects.
S hare favorite books and stories.
T alk to your child often.
E stablish a daily read-aloud time.
E ngage your child in natural reading activities.
M odel the act of reading for your child.

It is important to have a variety of reading materials available at home such as books of different genres and levels, magazines, and newspapers. Research has shown that reading aloud to children from a variety of sources can help children develop listening skills, build vocabulary, increase reading

comprehension, and develop a positive attitude toward reading (Routman, 1991).

Have a variety of writing materials such as chart paper, various writing and drawing paper, art supplies, etc. The more children are engaged in literacy, the more successful they will be in school.

Children can write to grandparents and relatives. Letters create a bond and help children develop values that will make them successful citizens (Smith, 1995).

There are numerous workshops that parents can attend at their children's school and in the community. Parents can learn how to read to their children and promote activities that will help make their children more successful in school. Teachers can help parents get started and support them throughout the year by establishing compatible activities that will help their children adapt to formal schooling.

Family literacy activities can include learning songs, tracing the family tree, research projects, science projects, art projects, interviews, make calendars, predict weather, etc.

Parents can make weekly visits to the library to check out books together. If children see parents reading and writing, they will establish good reading and writing behaviors too.

School strategies

There are strategies used by schools to increase self-esteem, confidence, and to develop better readers. Teachers can start by getting to know the children through the parents. Working and

training parents will help them give the child a better chance in literacy develop before and after the child starts formal schooling.

Each child should have a book sent home every day or as often as possible to promote active reading. The books can help parents establish a daily routine of listening to the child read and reading to the child. The teacher and parents can meet regularly to note progress, promote new interests, discuss what's working and what's not, and to synchronize home and school activities.

Teachers can establish a cross-age reading program where children from upper grades and lower grades are reading to each other (Leland, Fitzpatick, 1994). Both older and younger children benefit in many ways by establish a reading relationship, interests and positive reading behaviors.

Teachers can set up a reward system. After the children reach a goal of reading an established number of books, they can receive a a certificate, treat, a trip to the prize box, etc.

The community and parents can volunteer to come in and read to small and large groups. Local authors can show and talk about the processes of reading, writing and publishing books.

Teachers can establish a Parent-Student Project Night where parents can read with their children and decide what project to do together on that book (Fawcett & Rasinski, 1995). This is a good time to discuss the next book to read at home and to just talk informally helping parents to feel more welcome in the school (Fawcett & Rasinski, 1995).

Teachers can establish silent reading programs where children can choose what they want to read for an established amount of time every day. Children can then choose the difficulty of the reading materials and explore interests.

There are numerous programs and activities that teachers can do in the classroom. Parents are very important to the planning process because they already know what works with their child. With both involved with the planning, the child will become a more successful reader.

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