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ABSTRACT

The literature review examines research and theory concerning the critical aspects of classroom culture for promoting literacy development, particularly for learners of English as a second language. It begins by establishing a conceptual framework for discussing classroom culture, then focuses on literature on six critical classroom attributes: the teacher as a guide in literacy learning; "meaningful" literacy experiences; establishment of a community of learners; student ownership in literacy activities; and discourse patterns that are compatible with students' home culture. It is concluded that awareness of these attributes must be supported in the literature by techniques for implementation, and that creation of an optimal classroom environment for literacy development involves risks for both teacher and students. Further research on the classroom culture viewed from the perspective of the learner is also recommended, particularly on how the classroom culture can achieve congruence with the learners' home culture. Contains 59 references. (MSE)

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Critical Attributes of Classroom Culture for Literacy Development of English Language Learners

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Table of Contents

According to Resnick and Nolan (1995), students in the United States score significantly below the academic performance standards of other nations. This comparatively low level of academic achievement is a cause of great concern for educators and the American public. This concern has fueled debates about effective educational practices and driven recent reform efforts.

Americans are clear in their belief that literacy is essential to a quality education (Johnson, 1995). National reports indicate that students are not reading at basic levels. The California Reading Task Force (1995), commissioned in response to the apparent "reading crisis", declares that literacy must be the highest priority in public schools.

Recent literature considers several variables as explanations for and solutions to the problem of low achievement in the area of literacy. These variables include instructional practices (Allen, Michalove, Shockley, & West, 1991; Reutzel, Hollingsworth, & Eldredge, 1994), print resources (Pucci, 1994), family and societal influences (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988; Meyer, Wardrop, Stahl, & Linn, 1994; Ogbu, 1992), and classroom culture (Oldfather, 1994). The focus of this paper is classroom culture.

According to the latest demographic statistics (California Department of Education, 1996), the school population in California is more diverse than ever before. Cultural groups other than EuroAmerican make up the majority (59.6%) of the school population. Twenty-four percent of the total school population are English Language Learners (ELL). This group adds another dimension to student diversity. This increase in cultural diversity brings to light the need to understand the effects of classroom culture on academic development (especially in the area of literacy). While literacy development for all students is a concern for educators, the

literacy development of ELL is critical due to particularly low achievement levels of this group (McLeod, 1994; Trueba, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to identify critical attributes of classroom culture that promote literacy development for all students with a special focus on ELL. A conceptual framework for classroom culture will serve as the basis for a synthesis of the literature linking literacy development and classroom culture.

Classroom Culture: A Conceptual Framework

Classroom culture has been studied extensively in the fields of anthropology, educational psychology, and sociolinguistics in recent years using ethnographic methods. In order to study a phenomenon, such as the "culture" of particular setting, a clear conception of the definition must be reached. In the conceptual frameworkset forth in this paper, several definitions will be presented in an attempt to clarify what is meant by classroom culture and its different dimensions.

The definition that appears in The International Encyclopedia of Education (Florio-Ruane, 1994, p.797), states that classroom culture is "the knowledge of shared rules for behaving and interpreting the behavior of others." This definition suggests that acquiring the classroom culture is a passive process of receiving knowledge.

Donato and McCormick (1994, p.454) imply a more active role of the participant in their definition. They state that classroom culture is a "social arena in which learning is constructed as gradually increasing participation in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a 'community of practice'." This definition implies a more active role of the participant in constructing knowledge and, subsequently, influencing the classroom

culture. According to this definition, classroom culture is dynamic and constantly emerging as individuals participate in social interactions. Turner (1995) hypothesizes that classroom culture emerges through three main types of patterns of social interaction: discourse, organizational practices, and acceptable actions.

Nunnery, Butler, and Bhaireddy (1993) define classroom culture as the belief systems, values, and cognitive structures in the classroom. They view classroom culture as being one component within a more complex classroom "climate". Other dimensions that make up the climate of the classroom include ecology (the physical and material environment), milieu (the presence of individuals and groups), and social system (the patterns of social relationships). The dimension of culture appears to overlap significantly with the dimension of social relationships. It also potentially affects the physical environment and the presence of individuals and groups. Thus, classroom culture is an extensive part of a total school climate, affecting all the dimensions within the climate.

For the purpose of this literature review, the above definitions will be synthesized to form a concept of classroom culture that entails two main dimensions. These dimensions are: (1) social organization, and (2) discourse. The nature of the definition requires that classroom culture be viewed as an "organized" social phenomenon with participants interacting in some way. "Organized" in this sense means that there is some consistency in the values and beliefs that form the basis for norms for behavior.

This social interaction implies that discourse is a crucial factor in understanding the culture of a classroom. This explains the intense interest of sociolinguists in this area. According to Hymes (1974), language is a

major focus in the study of classroom culture for three main reasons. First, social norms and practices can be observed through linguistic interactions. Second, the analysis of classroom discourse allows researchers to trace teaching and learning within a classroom. Third, social stratification occurs through verbal interactions between teachers and learners.

In the various explanations of classroom culture, it is clear that the study of the concept is highly subjective and depends upon the observation of indistinct, subtle events. The analysis of classroom culture literature in this paper will acknowledge the subjectivity of the participants and view classroom culture as a dynamic social context, embedded in language. The characteristics of classroom social structure, discourse, and individual perceptions that promote literacy development, especially in English Language Learners, will be identified by using the following questions to examine the research. They are based on Erickson's (1986) questions that many educational anthropologists use to guide their research.

- What social interactions are taking place that relate to literacy? (teacher to student, student to teacher, and student to student)
- What do these interactions mean to those involved?
- What discourse patterns are apparent?
- How are the interactions related to literacy organized in patterns of social relations?

Synthesis of the Literature

According to Baker and Street (1994), there are two main frameworks for viewing literacy: autonomous and cultural. The autonomous model of literacy implies that reading and writing occur independently (outside of a social context). The cultural model presents a perspective of reading and writing as social practices that are developed in a cultural context and have personal significance.

While the autonomous framework drove traditional literacy instruction for several decades, the cultural (social) model has gained prominence in recent literature (Dyson, 1991; Green & Meyer, 1991; Oldfather, 1994; Pearson, 1993). Gutierrez and Garcia (1989,p.115) describe literacy as a "sociocultural entity." Oldfather (1994,p.2) characterizes literacy as a "social accomplishment" for which "the roots of motivation for literate activity are deeply embedded in the sociocultural contexts of literacy learning and the transactive processes occurring in those particular contexts." Green and Meyer (1991) and Dyson (1991) assert that classroom reading and writing contexts are sociopsycholinguistic. It makes sense that a social process, such as literacy, would be greatly affected by the cultural context in which it takes place. The social nature of literacy development is central to the attributes of classroom culture which promote it.

The critical attributes of classroom culture that promote literacy development relate to both the social structure of the classroom and classroom discourse. Most of the recent literature attends to both social structure and discourse as they are inextricably linked in context. The critical attributes identified by the literature are: the role of the teacher as a guide in literacy learning, the role of student in engaging in meaningful

literacy experiences, the establishment of a community of learners, student ownership in literacy activities, and discourse patterns that are compatible with students' home culture.

The Teacher as Guide

According to the literature, a classroom culture in which the teacher acts as a guide promotes literacy development (Applebee, 1991; Newman, 1985; Oldfather, 1994; Pierce, 1994). In the social context, the teacher's role is to direct literacy activities as a coach would direct athletes in sporting endeavors. This is in contrast to the traditional modes of instruction in which the teacher acts as the authority transmitting knowledge to a passive learner.

Constructivist learning theory, which conceptualizes the child as an active constructor of knowledge within a social context, is the driving force behind this shift (Applebee, 1991). Instead of transmitting knowledge, the role of the teacher is to monitor each child's literacy development and provide the guidance necessary for students to assume greater responsibility in literate activities. (Gutierrez & García, 1989).

Applebee (1991) proposes that the teacher is responsible for structuring the instructional environment to provide students with appropriate support in reading and writing tasks. This support may not be the same for all as different students have different zones of proximal development (ZPD) for literate tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the distance between what a child can do independently and what a child can do with assistance. The amount and nature of the assistance is determined by the child's individual ZPD in reading and writing tasks. In the ideal classroom culture, the teacher acts as a guide to each individual in literacy tasks , providing support based on ZPD.

"Meaningful" Literacy

Another attribute that is apparent in classroom cultures where literacy development is promoted is that "meaningful" reading and writing are valued. Learning is enhanced when it occurs in contexts that are meaningful to the learner (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Heath, 1986; Wertsch, 1985). This is the basis for whole language (Edelsky, 1991; Goodman, 1986) and balanced literacy (Mooney, 1990; Strech, 1995) approaches to teaching reading and writing.

Literacy development is accomplished by using reading and writing for authentic purposes. In a case study by Gutierrez and García (1989), a major goal of teachers in effective literacy classrooms was to create an environment in which meaningful, purposeful literacy experiences could occur. Speidel (1987) also concludes that language and literacy development should be fostered through purposeful use instead of decontextualized drill of skills.

The definition of "meaningful" literacy depends upon the culture the child brings to the classroom. Cultures value some literate activities over others (Au & Jordan, 1981; Boykin, 1978; Philips, 1972). Therefore, students' personal experience within their cultural frame of reference must be valued as the basis for what is meaningful to students (Trueba, 1988). Tharp (1994) asserts that literate activities undertaken in culturally meaningful contexts foster pride and confidence, which affect literacy achievement.

A Sense of Ownership

Related to meaningful literacy activities is the idea of student ownership of their reading and writing development. The literature states that literacy development is enhanced in classroom cultures that encourage student ownership of literacy learning (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983; Oldfather, 1994; Turner, 1995). According to Applebee (1991,p.554), "The need for ownership militates against traditional demands for recitation of previous learning and demonstration of skills, where the purposes are simply to display information that is already better-known by the teacher." Ownership can be fostered through encouraging students to develop their own interpretations of literature. In writing, students take ownership through developing their own topics.

Ownership of literacy learning has been linked to motivation (Harter, 1981; Oldfather, 1994; Turner, 1995). Oldfather (1994) found that ownership led to feelings of empowerment and self-determination. A sense of ownership can provide intrinsic motivation for continued success in learning. This motivation for learning can be developed through the students' opportunity to have some control over the learning activity (Harter, 1981).

Oldfather (1994) suggests that students' ownership of literacy learning is fostered through a classroom teacher who is supportive, understanding, listens to and respects alternative opinions, has high expectations, and builds a community of learners. The social context in this type of classroom is rich in positive interactions in relation to literacy experiences.

A Community of Learners

A classroom that functions as a collaborative community promotes literacy development (Atwell, 1987; Kagan, 1986; Oldfather, 1994). This sense of community is in direct opposition to traditional classroom cultures that foster competition among individuals (Kagan, 1986).

In a collaborative community, interactions facilitate learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) as participants construct understandings about literacy. This structure promotes the view of literacy as a "social accomplishment" (Oldfather, 1994,p.2) and recognizes the need for cooperation (Kagan, 1986) in attaining literacy learning goals. Pearson (1993) claims that quality literacy instruction is easier to achieve in a classroom culture that promotes the concept of a community of learners. This concept is the basis for the writing workshop model (Graves, 1983) of instruction in which students collaborate with each others and the teacher to publish pieces of writing taken through the writing process.

Interactive Classroom Discourse

Classroom discourse is of great interest to researchers of classroom culture as it reveals much about the values, beliefs, and shared knowledge of the participants. In a landmark study on classroom discourse, Philips (1972) used the term "participant structure" to describe the arrangements for verbal interactions in the classroom. These include lecture (teacher speaking to whole class), small groups (teacher leading a small group, such as a reading group), independent work (students working independently with the teacher circulating to give individual assistance), and cooperative groups (students interacting with each other to perform a learning task). Philips found that students were more willing to speak in structures similar to discourse situations in the home. It is logical that discourse patterns that

are more familiar to a child will enhance participation and, subsequently, promote learning.

Since speech is central to literacy development (Athanases, 1989; Cazden, 1986; Marzano, 1991), it can be inferred that participant structures in the classroom culture that are compatible with students' home culture lead to enhanced literacy development. This is supported by Au's (1980) work with Hawaiian children and Philip's (1972) work with Native Americans.

Implications for English Language Learners

The findings in the literature pertaining to classroom culture attributes that promote literacy development in English Language Learners (ELL) are similar to the findings in the literature on students in general, with a greater emphasis placed on the utilization of the home language and culture in the classroom.

As in the general literature, research pertaining to ELL proposes that the teacher take on the role of guide to promote literacy development. The author of a study of at-risk Spanish speaking students (Sheets, 1995) concluded that a student-centered classroom in which the teacher acts as a guide enhances literacy learning. The students in this study were active participants in literacy activities with the teacher acting as a facilitator, instead of dictator. Results showed that previously labeled "at-risk" students performed at "gifted" levels. This was also partly achieved through a collaborative classroom community rich in peer support and mutual respect (between teacher and students and among students themselves).

The importance of a learning community for literacy development of ELL is supported by Berman, Minicucci, McLaughlin, Nelson, and

Woodworth's (1995) examination of case studies of exemplary practices for ELL. They found that establishing a classroom community of learners and fostering cooperation and collaboration within a culturally validating context promotes literacy learning.

Meaningful uses of literacy (based on students' personal experience and cultural backgrounds) was identified by the literature regarding ELL as a critical attribute of classroom culture that enhances literacy. Berman and others (1995) found this characteristic of classroom cultures in case studies of successful practices with ELL. In her research, Pérez (1993) found that effective programs for ELL capitalized on the personal experience of the students. In addition, Ladson-Billings (1992) suggests evidence for a link between meaningful, culturally relevant learning to higher levels of achievement.

The Title VII Project P.I.A.G.E.T. (Promoting Intellectual Adaptation Given Experiential Transforming) utilizes students' cultural background and experiences in constructing classroom literacy experiences for native-Spanish speaking ELL. Yawkey, Gonzalez, and Juan (1994), in their study of P.I.A.G.E.T., emphasize the importance of personal meaning in the development of literacy in both languages.

In order to facilitate meaning in literacy experiences, classroom discourse should be rich in interactive dialogue (Petrykowski, 1992) based on active experiences in both languages. Cummins (1986) calls this dialogue "reciprocal interaction" and stresses its importance in the academic success of ELL. With regard to the establishment of a community of learners, the literature on ELL favors the cooperative group participant structure in promoting literacy development.

Conclusions

As a result of the review of the literature regarding the critical attributes of classroom culture for promoting literacy development, several conclusions can be reached. These apply specifically to English Language Learners, but also apply to other student populations.

First, simply being aware of the critical attributes of classroom culture is not enough to create such an environment. Implementation strategies are needed in the literature so that teachers can move towards the ideal classroom culture for literacy development specific to their students.

Second, the creation of an optimal classroom culture for literacy development involves risks for the teacher and the students. Traditional classroom cultures granted complete control over the learning environment to the teacher. With the classroom culture proposed in this literature review (teacher as guide, meaning-centered literacy, student ownership, community of learners, and interactive classroom discourse), it is likely that a teacher may feel out of control and overly "permissive" until a deeper understanding of the new classroom norms evolves. Students who are accustomed to a teacher-directed environment may also feel uneasy during initial stages of implementation of this type of classroom culture.

A classroom culture that promotes literacy development is critical for all students. However, ELL are an immediate concern in light of their low academic achievement. Many programs for ELL have placed these children in a classroom culture that tends to value English over their native language. This type of classroom culture does not truly affirm the students' background and experiences.

Much of the research in this area has examined the classroom culture from the perspective of the researcher/observer. Few studies have

attempted to understand the classroom culture through the viewpoint of the learner. Masters (1993) studied student perceptions of classroom culture and its results on student self-perceptions. Results indicate that ELL rate their reading ability significantly lower than their native-English speaking peers. This presents a need to further explore the issue of self-concept of ELL within the study of classroom culture.

It is clear from the literature that classroom culture should be congruent with the students' home cultures in order to provide a smooth transition from home to school (Trueba, 1988) and promote higher levels of literacy through meaning-centered activities (Gutierrez & García, 1989). How can this be achieved in a classroom that is culturally heterogeneous? This implies a need for future research on multicultural classrooms. This also provides implications for preservice teacher education and inservice training as a teaching force that is predominantly EuroAmerican attempts to create culturally congruent classrooms for their minority students.

Recent reports indicating the increase in the number of ELL in California schools and the low reading achievement scores for this group provide justification for more research to be conducted on classroom culture, its implications for literacy development, and specific implementation strategies for creating a classroom culture that has all five of the critical attributes set forth in the current literature. The effort to implement these five attributes will be ongoing as the needs of the school population change and more attributes are delineated. According to Tharp (1994,p.129), "Research on cultural issues in education is by no means complete." This is encouraging because the search for information to guide educators in creating classroom cultures that promote literacy

development for English Language Learners and other groups will continue until all students reach the highest levels of performance for reading and writing.

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