

Windows on the world: The Art of Composing Meaning through Children's Literature

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Abstract

This qualitative research, using an interpretive and naturalistic inquiry, was conducted to investigate the interrelationships of viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, and socio-cultural dynamics and how they influenced the meaning-making process in literature in a fourth-grade classroom. The data collected from this study included field notes, transcriptions of audio-recordings, responses to questionnaires, and samples of written and visual texts produced by the teacher and the students. The researcher gained insights into the complexities of the art of creating meaning in literature: how the teacher and the students connected texts and viewpoints, interacted with each other, interpreted and negotiated understandings. Findings from this study suggested the teacher's viewpoints and ideologies influenced and determined the students' viewpoints, which contributed to how they interpreted texts and the discourse roles they assumed. Through social interaction among peers in literacy events, the students composed their own interpretations of texts and experiences, which allowed them to create and re-create various social discourses and roles, appropriate and negotiate newly constituted interpretations.

Introduction

Research reviews on literacy development, particularly reading and writing processes, have expanded exponentially in the past 30 years (Beach and Hynds, 1990; Marshall, 2000). The complex nature and the development of new theoretical perspectives on language and learning have yielded increasingly sophisticated questions about texts, readers, and contexts in instruction of literacy. Of equal interest are the effects that all of this research has had on what actually occurs in classrooms, how literature is treated in schools, and what insights from research might influence classroom practice in the 21st century.

In a study based on an extensive analysis of many classroom discussions during language arts blocks, Nystrand (1999) found that only about 15 percent of instruction in more than 100 middle and high school classes involved the use of authentic questions with no predetermined answers or following up on students' answers. There was little dialogic interaction. Nystrand writes, "...dialogic shifts are rare, occurring in less

than 7 percent of all instructional episodes observed. One striking finding is the virtual absence of dialogic shifts among low track classes. There were only 2 dialogic shifts in the 197 instructional episodes we observed” (2). Most classrooms still rely on the repetitive pattern of worksheet. Early research (Galda, 1982) discovered that readers rejected the actions of characters when those actions did not correspond to their own lived experience. Enciso (1994) connected this type of response to cultural practice when she documented how some readers might resist or reject a text that does not reflect their cultural expectations.

Other research has explored the types of textual connections that individual readers make between texts and their life experiences and/or other texts (Short, 1992). Students rarely make those textual connections – links defined in terms of shared topics, themes, or issues that are also connected to the social and cultural practices that surround them. This view of literary experience raises a number of questions. What does it signify for actual teaching aims and methods? How can teachers develop in the students a greater sensitivity to all of the related facets of literary work? What do the students bring to literature? What students’ needs and interests should the teachers be aware of? How can teachers utilize the potentialities of literature to aid the students to increase their emotional and intellectual grasps, to understand themselves better, and to see human beings and society in a broader context of ideas? In short, how can teachers help the students to profit from all that rounded literary experiences offer?

It is important teachers understand how textual connection, viewpoint, and socio-cultural dynamics interact and, ultimately, affect students’ interpretation of texts. An investigation into the influence of these four aspects provided the research community and practitioners with new directions to consider. Texts, readers, and contexts, each inseparable from the other, are also inseparable from the larger contexts in which they are enacted. Rogoff (1990) states, “Instead of working as separate or interacting forces, individual efforts, social interaction, and the cultural context are inherently bound together in the overall development of children into skilled participants in society” (18). Research needs to involve exploring the multifaceted socio-cultural nature of response and what that means for instruction. The crux of the matter is that literature embodies stimuli towards special kinds of intense and ordered experiences – sensuous, intellectual, and emotional – out of which social insights may arise.

The purpose of this study, using an interpretive and naturalistic inquiry, involving field observation, interviews, and document analysis, was to investigate the interrelationships of viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, and socio-cultural dynamics and how they influenced the meaning-making process in literature in a fourth-grade classroom. Through an examination of the teacher’s and students’ viewpoints, emerging patterns of textual connections, and socio-cultural dynamics, a more complete

picture developed of the meaning-making process and the ways in which students created and negotiated interpretations. In particular, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What effect does the interrelationship of viewpoint, textual connection, and interpretation have on the meaning-making process?
2. What is the interrelationship of viewpoint, textual connection, and interpretation in literacy events?
3. In what ways do the teacher and the students negotiate meaning in socio-cultural dynamic events such as literature discussions and book talks and how do these interactions influence the meaning-making process?

This study was conducted with the hope to illuminate the major factors influencing the meaning-making process within literacy events structured around pieces of literature. As students and teachers encounter the meaning-making process within the context of the classroom, it is important that they explore the ways in which interpretations of text emerge and reveal themselves. Teachers need to be aware of the importance of students' interactions in their classrooms and how students perceive each other as peers (Wigfield, 1997). Teachers can capitalize on and add to knowledge and experiences by structuring literacy events to explore a multitude of diverse pathways to meaning.

The significance of this study also lies in its ability to provide an analysis that addresses how schools might more effectively plan for the instruction. Focusing on the inception of personal viewpoint opened awareness as to how engagement with text begins. Observing those readers resulted in knowledge and insights on how to further engage them to participate in literacy events.

Exploring the interrelationship among viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, and socio-cultural dynamics opens the pathway for educators to understand how students come to find themselves and imagine. It is also especially critical for researchers and practitioners because it provides them with answers to how teachers can utilize the potentialities of literature for teaching aims and methods, what needs and interests they should be aware of, how they can help students to understand themselves and learning process better to profit from literary experiences.

Context

The context for this study was an urban school in Northern California. The school was comprised grades K-8 with 20 teachers and approximately 450 culturally diverse students: 21% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic, 39% African American, 13% Asian, 3% American Indian, and 2% Others. The nature of

this study, observing and documenting in a fourth-grade classroom, provided the setting in which to discover the interrelated and complex relationships among viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, and socio-cultural interaction and their effects on the art of composing meaning in literature.

According to school records, there were 30 students in this fourth-grade classroom. Of these students, 12 were classified African American; 6 Hispanic; 8 Caucasian; and 4 Asian. Of these, 5 were identified as having a primary language other than English. The participants for the study included a teacher and seven students. The teacher has had 8 years of teaching experience. She has taught at this school for five years, bringing to the classroom her wealth of experience and knowledge. She possesses a broad knowledge of and experience in both literature-based and phonics-based programs.

Seven students were randomly selected by drawing their names to participate in the study. According to school records and informal observations, the seven students ranged in academic ability and in social adeptness among peers. The teacher perceived these students' academic abilities to range from underachieving and struggling, to exceptional and above grade level. Socially, the students were quite diverse. Some enjoyed peer interaction while others preferred to be by themselves. Of the seven students, the gender ratio was four girls and three boys. Four students were African American, one was Caucasian, one was Hispanic, and one was Asian.

Method and data sources

The data collected from this study included the observational data (field notes detailing participants, tasks, and responses), transcribed audiotape data (transcriptions of what the students said, level of participation, and who it was said to), and samples of teacher's and students' work (student activity sheets, visual representations, vocabulary words detailing the students' understandings of texts, samples of written and visual texts produced by the students, samples of written texts produced by the teacher, and responses to questionnaires). Interview data were analysed for each focal student across the different situational contexts.

The data collection process took place over a ten-week period. The study was divided into four phases of data collection, some of which occurred concurrently. The first was the preliminary phase, whereby the researcher observed the classroom and activities on an informal basis. The second and third phases occurred concurrently throughout the remaining eight weeks. During these phases, the researcher continued observations, interviewed, took field notes, and analysed students' written work. In the last two weeks, the fourth phase, formal interviews with students and teacher were conducted.

Limitations

One of the benefits of qualitative research is the opportunity to obtain rich data on a particular topic. Using a small sample can aid in this regard. The researcher acknowledges, however, that the study's sample characteristics necessitate caution when interpreting its results. This study involved a small sample of one teacher and a group of students and was limited in scope, in that the researcher focused on a fourth-grade classroom in an urban school district. This small sample decreased the case's generalizability to other settings and populations. Further studies with more diverse samples, including those from other age groups would be beneficial to strengthen the knowledge base.

Discussion

This study focused on an investigation of viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, and socio-cultural dynamics as factors contributing to the meaning-making process of a teacher and fourth-grade students. Existing studies suggest that viewpoint significantly influence the meanings and interpretations created by youth (McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004; Philpot, 2005; Rice, 2005; Ruddell and Unrau, 1994). These studies inform educators how students engaged in reading and writing events. Textual connection is the process of building connections between and among various texts and experiences (Duenas, 2005; Hartman, 1994; Warwick, 2005). Exploring the role of textual connection within the meaning-making process furthers understanding of how students create their own interpretations of texts based on background experiences, prior knowledge, and engagement with a variety of texts.

Along with viewpoint and textual connection, the ways in which students and teachers negotiate interpretations of texts contribute to the meaning-making process (Cazden, 2001; Elkad-Lehman, 2005). Discovering how students and teachers assume various discourse roles to create individual and collective interpretations contributes to broadening conceptions of the reading and writing processes. Other factors that play a role in engaged reading includes the context of the literary act and the socio-culture dynamics of the classroom (Ortiz and Ordonez-Jasis, 2005). Social processes are embedded within the culturally influenced development of readers (Vygotsky, 1978). Reading and writing are perceived as more than recognizing letters on a page or parts of speech; they are "complex, orchestrated processes whereby individuals actively create meaning in socially situated contexts" (Pearson and Stephens, 1994: 35).

Throughout the various literacy events, the teacher and the students accessed and utilized these factors – viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, socio-cultural dynamics – to make sense of the texts. They

relied upon viewpoint to determine the direction of the event; textual connections to contribute to the meaning of the text; and interpretation and socio-cultural dynamics to decide whose interpretations would be heard and validated. The socio-cultural dynamics within a literacy event led to a student's negotiation and creation of meaning in many ways. They had an effect on the source of meaning authority. When the source of meaning authority shifted, the amount of negotiation also varied. Meaning was created and negotiated more when students collaborated as partners or in small groups and the source of meaning authority resided within the peers. Since the students chose to work with each other to write a story and had the choice of topic to write about, the meaning authority resided within themselves as the writers and peers, as well as within the text they were creating.

By contrast, when individuals worked on a structured assignment such as comprehension writing, which restricted the amount of student choice, the meaning authority resided in the text or the teacher, thus distracting from intention to read and write and discouraged negotiation and the creation of meaning. Furthermore, the social dynamics, the ways students grouped themselves and the dialogic discourse, invited negotiation of meaning. Through the dialogic discourses the students engaged in, ideas were shared, background knowledge was accessed, and meaning was negotiated. Together they created the meaning of their story that empowered them to realize that meaning resided within their authorship.

Furthermore, the conditions and the situational contexts create the social structure within the classroom that provided opportunities for students to interact and influence each other regularly, thus contributing to the reading and meaning-making process. The situational contexts included the teacher's perspective, adopted viewpoint, and assigned literacy task. These situational contexts contributed to the development of a student's interpretation to engage and participate in literacy events. The student's participation given these situational contexts also enhanced the meaning-making. Experiences were shared through language. Language was conceived of as a mediating tool between self and others, one's actions and culture. As a tool, it provided the premise for thinking about how students composed understandings and meanings. Participants engaged in dialogic discourse juxtaposing their own ideas with others', creating new reverberations to connect onto the continuous chain of utterances.

Thus, meaning was rendered through culturally mediated behaviours and actions echoing ways of being in the culture. Through social interaction, the students composed their own interpretations of others' utterances and offered these newly constituted interpretations for others to appropriate as they enacted literacy events and participated in social discourse with each other regarding texts. Group discussion provided an opportunity for students to encourage and recommend through dialogic

discourse whereby students created meaning and expressed their opinions and interpretations of text, thus adopting a social voice. Creative writing also elicited a great deal of dialogic discourse that reveals different interactions among peers. The nature of the event invited the signs and symbols used in the act of communication, interpretation, and negotiation. The way children worked together affected their participation in reading and creating meaning.

Besides, students influenced each other to read, write, negotiate, and create meaning from text in the unofficial peer world, which included interactions and conversations with peers in the classroom. The students responded to text with a framework of experiences, background knowledge, and world knowledge. Students created and re-created knowledge through their experiences in the other social world, the official community of the school, the enacted curriculum, and the interactions with the teacher in the classroom. As they moved between these two social worlds, they situated themselves and their place in the classroom, which was expressed through their writing and their dialogic discourse. These ideas offered a structure for observing how students negotiated and created meanings through interactions and discussions within the classroom setting.

Into literacy events, they brought common understandings and individual experiences to shape meaning. Their responding to text was an interpretive act, whereby they shared and negotiated their own creations of meaning leading to new understandings not yet presented. The responses created when engaged in a literacy event were juxtaposed with other sources of knowledge and understanding. Students created and shared textual links to make sense of texts given their own particular socio-cultural histories and experiences. Within the response are textual connections to personal experiences, personal knowledge, world knowledge, and imagination. As they encountered new ideas, both possibilities and anomalies, they searched out connections to create hypotheses and evaluate whether to test them. The connections enabled students to link ideas and discover new relationships, leading to new compositions of meaning.

Conclusions

First, the types of questions asked by teachers and students are fundamental to structuring purposeful discussions. Questions focusing on the discrete pieces of information, the factual literal level questions, are easy to ask and relatively easy to answer. The interpretive and applicative questions, those that ask the students to reflect and consider new options or ideas, are much more difficult to ask and even harder to answer. If educators are to move discussions forward and assist students in finding relevance between their lives and those of the characters they are reading, inquires of the interpretive and applicative level need to be asked. In challenging students

to seek answers and interpretations to critical level questions, educators are providing opportunities to consider new directions, new connections.

Second, broadening the various participant and discourse roles students and teachers assume is critical to successful literature discussions. Enabling students to assume initiator and director roles within the discussions should encourage a higher level of engagement of texts. The students' comprehension of the text increases when they engage with the text. The way to encourage students to assume more diverse discourse roles is to suggest that the format of the discussion move into a more conversational format.

The shift in power suggests that the teacher can assume various roles other than initiator and director within the discussion. One role is the participant observer. Teachers can participate in the discussion, offering their personal experiences and knowledge, but can also observe the interactions among the students. Such observations are beneficial to understanding the meaning-making process of students. Focusing on participant structures and discourse roles, the perceptions and expectations of discussions, and how students employ strategies to comprehend text allows a new direction of in pedagogy.

Third, level of interest, and subsequently, the source of engagement, did not have to do with the story lines, but rather the purposes for reading the stories. As students and teachers encounter the meaning-making process within the context of the classroom, it is important that they explore the ways in which interpretations of texts emerge and reveal themselves. Students come into classroom with a wealth of knowledge and personal experiences to access during literacy events. Teachers can capitalize on and add to such knowledge and experiences by structuring literacy events to explore a multitude of diverse pathways to meaning. Exploring the relationships among viewpoint, textual connection, interpretation, and socio-cultural dynamics suggests that students come to find themselves and imagine others within literature.

Likewise, the teachers must stimulate their students to understand the process of sensuous and intellectual recreation. Such training is necessary to the quality of life in society. The teachers who help the students to acquire the habit of keen awareness to the colour, sound, and movement of the world around them give those students a precious possession. As students actively engage in reading and writing events with others, they make sense of their world, create and recreate ideas, negotiate interpretations and increase their will to learn. Their curiosity ignites the desire to learn and propels them into a dynamic world that is stimulating and exhilarating.

Finally, the readers' primary subject matter is the web of feelings, sensations, images, and ideas that they weave between themselves and the text. Learning is a combination of curiosity and reciprocity that carries the individual along into learning and sweeps him or her into the competence

that is required in the setting of the group. Learning what others have made of a text can greatly increase such insight into one's own relationship with it. A reader who has been moved or disturbed by a text often manifests an urge to talk about it, to clarify and crystallize his or her sense of the work.

Recommendations

Children develop literacy through interactions with others and participation in culturally valued activities. Educators need to know how socio-cultural dynamics affect meaning negotiation within the social structure of the classroom. With purpose and goal influencing the students' interactions, educators must make certain they assume a purpose for the events they ask the students to engage in. Since the congruence between the teacher and student's purpose or goal determines the adopted viewpoint and response, it is imperative that students have the opportunity to choose a viewpoint for reading and writing events.

The first step, then, for teachers to achieve this congruence, is to re-examine their instructional plan, philosophy of learning, ideology, classroom management techniques, viewpoint, and assigned tasks. Since the instructional plan plays such a prominent role in providing opportunities for negotiation and composition of meaning, the researcher believes that teachers must use effective teaching strategies, help students with their personal problems, create a feeling of excitement about the subject matter content or skill area, reflect a strong sense of personal caring about the students, and demonstrate the ability to adjust instruction to the individual needs of the student.

A second course of action to increase participation in literacy events is to provide many opportunities for students to engage in peer interactions with various children. Classroom interaction can have a significant impact on a student's opportunities to learn and participate in literacy events. Ways of assisting and encouraging need to be taught in classrooms. Students need opportunities to interact, collaborate, and negotiate meaning. Such experiences should allow them to lose themselves in the story and enjoy reading and writing for purely aesthetic reasons.

More events, such as creative writing, encourage peer interactions, which increase the negotiation of meaning between students. When there is a shift in source of meaning authority, which does not always reside within the text or teacher, the dialogic discourse and the amount of negotiation provides students with the opportunity to determine what an acceptable answer is and have control of the text. Proclaiming ownership of a story and transacting with the text are important components of the reading and writing processes and encourages students to negotiate, create, and re-create meaning.

Yet within any one culture, there are often many subcultures, groups with very different literary value. And within such groupings, teachers

encounter the fact of the uniqueness of the individual reader. As students actively engage in reading and writing events with others, they make sense of their world, create and recreate ideas, negotiate interpretations and increase their will to learn. Their curiosity ignites the desire to learn propels them into a dynamic world that is stimulating and exhilarating.

In summary, teachers of literature who are engaged in the actual task of developing sensitivity to a particular art form need to be reminded that any experiences depended not only on the work itself, but on the students' capacities and readiness. Sound literary insight and judgment should never be taught by imposing the meaning of the work on the students. Teachers have to become aware of some of the things that actually affect the students' reactions; then they should be able to help the students to understand and achieve ever more balanced and more rewarding literary experiences. The aim is to make the students more sensitive to all that literature has to offer. The artist using the medium of words must make his or her appeal primarily to the senses, if his or her desire is to reach the secret spring of responses. Teachers would do this most effectively if they recall that the student's role is an active, not a passive one.

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