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Cultural Clash in Parents' and Teachers' Understandings of Literacy Pedagogy

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Abstract: There is very little research which compares newly arrived English as an Additional Language (EAL) parents' and teachers' understandings of literacy pedagogy. Parent views are as important as teacher views since parents also impact on children's literacy development. This article, which is based on a qualitative doctoral study, explores new EAL parent and primary school teacher perspectives on literacy pedagogy, using a sociocultural framework. The findings reveal that there is a cultural clash between parent and teacher understandings, which affects the home-school partnership. Data were drawn from a questionnaire, semi-structured group and individual interviews, classroom observations, audio recording of lessons, and field notes. Revealing the gap in understandings of literacy pedagogy is a step towards developing strategies for communication between EAL parents and primary school teachers in Australia.

Keywords: primary English literacy pedagogy, EAL parent literacy perspectives, teacher literacy perspectives, mismatched parent-teacher literacy understandings, home-school partnerships, home-school communication

Introduction

Each year, more than 120,000 migrants from different parts of the world enter Australia, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2010). In the school context, it is useful to learn about the ways that parents from diverse social backgrounds and mainstream school teachers understand literacy, and see to what extent their understandings match. Research says that if parents are involved in their children's literacy learning, the children can improve their learning and increase their achievement level (Barnard, 2004; Ford & Amaral, 2006; Rogers, Theule, Ryan,

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Adama, & Keating, 2009). There is a significant volume of research regarding second language pedagogy (Adoniou & Macken-Horarik, 2007; Currie & Cray, 2004; Gibbons, 2009; Grant & Wong, 2003; Kennedy, 2006; Pawan, 2008; Tardy, 2006). These studies relate to English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and mainstream school teachers in English-speaking countries. There has, however, been very little research conducted exploring EAL parent views on literacy, and even fewer which compare parent and teacher views. Informed by sociocultural theories of literacy, this article addresses this gap in the literature.

Sociocultural theories of literacy

A view of literacy as a social practice emphasises that literacy is not limited to activity in the mind, but it is understood in social contexts, where it is being used (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 2009). There are autonomous and ideological models of literacy according to Street (1993). The autonomous model of literacy is related to people's cognitive ability, which focuses on transmission of knowledge, without considering social factors. This is a one-size-fits-all model of literacy. Street (1993) argues against this model and proposes an ideological model. The ideological model of literacy examines literacy in relation to particular social contexts where it is in use. This has an implication that literacy practices valued in one social context may not necessarily be valuable in another context. Gee's notion of Discourses (1996, 2011) is also important to understand the view of literacy as a social practice. He identifies primary Discourse and secondary Discourses. According to Gee, we acquire primary Discourse in our family, where socialisation begins. People's first social identity is constructed by primary Discourse, and is the foundation for all other Discourses. In contrast, we start learning secondary Discourses when we come into the contact with the outer world. For example, languages used in churches, schools or offices are secondary discourses. To be a member of any Discourse community, one must know social and cultural practices, along with the appropriate use of the language itself. Gee uses discourse with small 'd' to mean language use. The notion of Discourses is helpful to interpret EAL parent and mainstream school teacher perspectives on literacy pedagogy.

The following two sections discuss key findings from previous studies, which have investigated EAL parent and teacher views on school literacy practices.

Parent perspectives on literacy pedagogy

The available research on EAL parents' understandings of literacy teaching/learning (Bernhard & Freire, 1999; Li, 2006, 2007) suggests that EAL parents prefer a traditional approach in literacy pedagogy and they complain about the existing teaching/learning practices at their children's schools. For example, one mother in Bernhard and Freire's (1999) study, located in Canada with Latin American parents, said that the teachers in her son's school did not teach her son to memorise the alphabet from a book, instead they focused on painting and playing. Most of the parents in Li's (2006) study conducted with Chinese parents in the USA stated that their children should have been taught sound-letter relationships before reading a text.

They preferred a skill-based traditional approach in teaching writing. In another study (Li, 2007) conducted in Canada with Chinese parents, a mother named Mei mentioned that she demanded more homework from her Grade 3 son's teacher but this demand was not met. She said, "They told me they would consider my suggestions, but they didn't" (Mei in Li, 2007, p. 13). EAL parents in some studies (Bernhard & Freire, 1999, Huh, 2006) report that teacher support is lacking in terms of feedback given to children's homework, close attention to individual students, and whether they are learning. The teachers were only focused on their programs. These studies in fact reveal that parent understanding of literacy pedagogy relates to overall understanding of schooling and learning.

Teacher perspectives on literacy pedagogy

Teacher perspectives can be understood either by observing teaching practices inside the classrooms or by teacher interviews. For example, Topping's and Ferguson's Scottish study (2005) based on classroom observation and teacher interviews revealed that teachers used interactive shared reading between the teacher and students or between students and students to teach literacy. They were also observed using scaffolding, questioning, and language games. Teacher emphasis was on students' gradual progress. They were found to be giving students feedback. Teachers believed in independent learning and they provided students with various learning opportunities by organising class work, group work, and individual work.

In a US study (Sleeter, 2008) a primary school teacher, Juanita, was observed helping students to do assignments using computers. In fact, her students were assigned a project work to write a biography of a person that they chose, for which they were asked to do some online research to find photos and information about the person. Their assignment was to write a page about that person's life and to insert his/her photo. Juanita said to the researcher, "So much of the skill-based instructional program was boring" (p. 212). Teachers in an Australian study emphasised that students' creativity could be developed by reading a range of authentic and worthwhile texts (Warhurst, Crawford, Ireland, Neale, Pickering, Rathmell, Watson & Ewing, 2010), but not by following a specific textbook.

In another US study teachers valued parents reading to their children at home as a useful literacy activity (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Teachers in a Canadian study disagreed to assign excessive amounts of homework to students because this would not allow them to spend quality time with their families (Peterson & Ladky, 2007). These studies show that teachers mostly believe in student-centred constructivist teaching approaches which mainly include discovery learning, task-based learning, scaffolding, and independent learning (Rowe, 2006). In the context of Victoria, teachers follow guidelines expressing these principles, given in the curriculum document, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* (VELS, 2005), to teach literacy.

None of the studies reviewed above however has made an explicit comparison between parent and teacher perspectives. My doctoral study (Sharma, 2011) makes this comparison and presents results, thus offering a new contribution to the field of TESOL research. This article discusses the differences between the EAL parent and mainstream primary school teacher perspectives on English literacy teaching and learning.

Methods

This comparative qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) was conducted in a suburban government primary school in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Paterson Primary School (name changed) was chosen as a research site because 65% of the total students were from an EAL background (*Paterson Primary School Information Handbook*, 2009). Six EAL parents from four different countries and five school teachers volunteered as research participants. Data were drawn from a questionnaire, semi-structured group and individual interviews, classroom observations, audio recording of lessons, and fieldnotes. They were analysed using 'thematic coding' (Creswell, 2008; Roulston, 2010).

To select the parent participants, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2008) was used. The selection criteria were that (1) their stay in Australia was from six months to two years, (2) their children were in Years 3 to 6, and (3) the participants were able to communicate in English. EAL parents, whose stay in Australia was not more than two years, were termed "newly arrived" parents in this study. Parents of Years 3 to 6 children were chosen because these children would have had exposure to school literacy practices in their home countries. Thus, their parents could make a comparison between school literacy practices in their home countries and in Australia. Among the six parents, five were female and one was male. This gender imbalance resulted from the fact that mothers mostly came to the school and were available participants. Table 1 (featured at the end of the text) shows parents' countries of origin, their pseudonyms, and their mother tongues. A short introduction to them, including their academic qualifications, socio-economic status, and purpose in coming to Australia, is given below.

Dewita and Lily were PhD students in Australia at the time of data collection, Binod had a Master's degree, Sharon and Tara held Bachelor's degrees, and Nita had passed Year 12. Even though Binod, Sharon, and Nita were working in Australia at the time of interview as manual labourers, they had previously worked in relatively high-status jobs in their home countries. These parents had come to Australia for different purposes. Dewita and Lily wanted to earn their PhD. Binod and Tara had accompanied their spouses who were doing a PhD. Sharon's family had migrated from the Philippines looking for better opportunities. Nita said that her family simply wanted to escape from the social pressure to have a son. Though she had two daughters, sons were more valued in her society. Nita and Sharon were permanent residents, whereas others were temporary residents.

At the time of data collection, there were composite classes at Paterson Primary School, with three groups of Years 3/4 and three groups of Years 5/6. Four teachers, three from Years 3/4 and one from Years 5/6 were selected as research participants. Among them, three were female and one was male. All of them described themselves as monolingual speakers of Australian English. The school principal was also invited to take part in the study, to provide insight into school policies and administration. Table 2 (see p. 18) shows staff participants' pseudonyms in the alphabetical order, with qualifications and experience, along with the Year level they were teaching at the time of data collection.

It was interesting that all the female classroom teachers had taught in London during their teaching career, while Andrew had not worked abroad. All teachers taught middle and upper grades. Amber and Ann were more experienced than Alice and Andrew in terms of the duration of teaching years that they had spent at Paterson Primary School.

Hema, the school principal, had spent a considerably longer time in the Victorian government primary school sector. During her 29-year career she had taken on different roles in different schools, as a classroom teacher, leading teacher, vice principal, and finally as a principal. As she said:

> I was very keen to get a job in Paterson Primary School because for the previous five years I noticed it. I knew the current principal and she used to tell me about the multiculturalism at school and that was the way I wanted to work (Hema, Interview, p. 5)

Hema had firsthand experience of being a migrant student, because her family had migrated to Australia from Sri Lanka when she was 13 years old and was aware of cross cultural literacy teaching issues.

Disparities between parent and teacher perspectives

The data show that the parents and teachers were found to be in disagreement about various aspects of literacy pedagogy. The main differences of opinion were on issues of curriculum, classroom teaching approaches, and the role of parents to support their children. These are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

Textbooks and curriculum

All parents interviewed emphasised that their children used to have prescribed textbooks in their home countries. In contrast, children in Australia did not have textbooks. As a result, the parents said, they did not know what their children were learning at school. Except for Dewita, all parents expressed their frustration about how helpless they felt at not knowing the actual content teachers taught inside the classroom. The following quote serves as an example:

> I don't know what exactly my daughter is learning at school because she doesn't have any textbooks. When I don't have any books, what do I refer to teach her? (Nita, Interview, p. 18)

These parents considered textbooks as essential, in fact as a curriculum which would help them to navigate their children's learning. Teachers, on the other hand, had a different perspective regarding textbooks. During the interviews, they emphasised catering for individual student needs, which was a focus of *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* (VELS, 2005), and said they did not follow any prescribed textbooks. According to the school principal, a book suitable for one student may not be suitable for the other. The lesson observations also revealed that teachers used authentic texts on different topics including a variety of books, websites, and newspaper articles. Their main focus was to teach students reading strategies. The

parents' views on textbooks reflected their need to understand the curriculum, while the teachers' views reflected their philosophy on learning.

In comparison to the South East Asian parents, Dewita, Lily, and Sharon, the South Asian parents, Binod, Nita, and Tara showed particular concern about the lack of curriculum guidelines. They felt unable to tell what exactly their children were learning at school. According to them, what they got from the school's information night at the beginning of the year was too general to understand what the curriculum was and how it worked. As Binod said, "Teachers were just briefing. And they were presenting the whole year program quickly. I didn't understand many things" (Interview, p. 11). In fact, the teachers had an extensive curriculum document, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* (VELS). Although the curriculum and much other school-related information were readily available on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) website, no parent mentioned this website during the focus group or individual interview. This may mean that they did not know about this website or their awareness of the curriculum relied entirely on the school as in their home countries.

Classroom teaching approaches

In terms of classroom teaching approaches, three themes emerged from the data: (1) lesson content, (2) homework, and (3) assessment. To the question, "Do you know what your children learn in reading and writing lessons at their school?," all parents replied, "No!" They drew attention to the uneven development of skills in classrooms. Sharon, for example, said that her daughter borrowed books from the library, so she could listen to KC reading, but she did not see much writing being practised. In the question, "What is your child learning in reading at school?," all six parents mentioned books from the library, but that they did not know what and how teachers were teaching reading. Similarly, they were unaware about the resources that were used in teaching writing.

Contrary to parents' responses, observation data showed that teachers taught reading and writing systematically. They used a range of materials as mentioned above to teach literacy. They taught particular writing genres accompanied by appropriate grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. For example, in Amber's and Andrew's combined class, they were teaching 'report writing.' During the lesson, they told students that they had to use the simple present tense to describe animals and they had to use the past tense in historical reports, for instance, on Ned Kelly. They pointed out students should not use first person pronouns in their report. In the course of reading lessons, teachers drew students' attention to vocabulary and grammar. They were also observed teaching figurative language, alliteration, onomatopoeic words, and tenses. They tried to encourage students to use them in their own writing and to make students aware of these language items while reading different sorts of texts. The teachers were observed to organise whole class activities, group work, and individual work.

All the parents interviewed showed a great concern regarding homework. They mentioned that they did not see any regular reading or writing homework given, except project work. They said, although the children borrowed two books from the school

library every week they would not read these books every day. There was no compulsion to read, and teachers did not punish students who did not. In such a situation, according to Nita, only “God-gifted children” could excel, not all children. Except for Dewita, all parents wanted some regular work done at home with the name “homework.” Binod, Nita, and Tara were frustrated to see their children having a lot of free time at home, most of which they spent in front of the computer or television. The parents saw this as wasted time.

The school, in contrast, had a clear homework policy, according to which every child was expected to do 30 minutes of homework every day except for weekends and holidays. All teachers were against worksheet-based repetitive types of homework, which, however, parents wanted to see. According to the teachers, such repetitive activities could not improve learning further. For them daily homework was to read 15 to 20 minutes and to do about 10 minutes of maths. Students were also expected to further research project work at home after school. Hema explained clearly what homework meant to Paterson Primary School as follows:

> We don’t encourage parents to take their children home after school and give them mountains of academic work to do. I find homework for the sake of homework is not beneficial in any way. Homework is, whether the child actually goes and extends on the work that they’ve learnt or maybe explores skills that they’ve learnt at school or collects research materials or works on a project. Or if they have a particular English problem or maths problem, then go home and practise in it, it’s all right but not continued homework day after day. (Hema, Interview, p. 9)

Her view clearly differs from what parents expected as homework. She accepted that it was a big challenge for the school to make migrant parents, especially from an Asian background, understand exactly what homework means in the Australian context. This was because, according to her, “these parents come from very traditional backgrounds from Asian countries where keeping the child busy for hours after school is accepted as normal” (Hema, Interview, p. 10). The outcome, in spite of a clear school policy, which teachers could explain, was that parents felt uninformed about what homework their children were supposed to complete, and they wanted to see a lot more.

Regarding tests, parent and teacher perspectives similarly did not match. The parents thought their children should take tests on a regular basis so that both parents and children would know what they had achieved and in which areas they needed improvement. Because of the lack of such tests, the parents were unable to know where their children stood among their peers. Binod, Nita, and Tara added that since their children did not need to sit for any examinations, the children did not have a feeling of competition and obligation towards studies. As a result, they did not pay much attention to their studies and were not achieving what they used to achieve. Unlike parents’ expectations of “scores,” students’ achievement was rated in an A to E scale (from A “Well above the standard expected at this time of year” to E “Well below the standard expected at this time,” DEECD, 2010) in a school report card. This was seen by parents as unhelpful in terms of estimating their children’s position among their classmates. This was because they could not see ‘numbers,’ for instance, 80 out of 100 to make a comparison between children.

It was true that teachers did not use examinations to rank students, they did however, continuously evaluate them in a formative way, according to the teacher interviews. The teachers also said that they did a lot of diagnostic tests at the beginning of each year and grouped students of similar abilities into “high level ability group,” “medium level ability group,” and “low level ability group.” Throughout the year they evaluated students and when they found improvement in a student, they changed the group for that student. Teachers always tried hard to support every student to reach their full potential in all areas. Thus, while it was true that the school did not rank students against parents’ expectations, assessment was carried out informally without the parents being aware of it. However, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) conducted every two years in Years 3 and 5 was an exception.

Parents’ role

From the parent responses during the interviews, it was clear that they were actively involved in supporting their children to complete project work and to encourage them to read different sorts of books. However, they did not feel they were helping their children much to develop literacy learning. Except for Sharon, all other parents said that they had been more involved in their children’s learning when they were in their home countries, because they needed to help their children complete homework every day. They expressed the feeling that their parental role in Australia was not strong enough. For example, Lily volunteered that she was fulfilling only 25% or less of her responsibility. However, the parents generally were doing what teachers expected. The teachers suggested parents could support their children in three areas. Firstly, they could encourage children to read every night for 15 to 20 minutes. Every teacher, including the principal, emphasised that reading a variety of books was very useful to develop children’s literacy learning. Secondly, parents could help children do their project work. As Amber said, “If we are doing a project or something like that, we might be researching something, so I guess helping them with research at home will be helpful” (Interview, p. 15). Thirdly, they could do what was suggested in their children’s report card. In fact no parent, except for Sharon, mentioned they did what was suggested in their children’s report card. Yet all of them agreed that they supported the children in home reading and projects. Even so, they still thought their role as parents was weak. This was because their prior experience was different from what they found in Australia.

Discussion

Coming from different cultural backgrounds of schooling, parents and teachers in the study were found to have different understandings of certain aspects of literacy pedagogy. This group of newly arrived EAL parents came from a traditional literacy teaching background, where literacy was understood as an “autonomous model,” in the words of Street (1993). This understanding is underpinned by a theory of literacy as a cognitive ability, activated when all children learn the same content, usually

prescribed in textbooks. Therefore, the parents believed in a one-size-fits-all type of literacy pedagogy as mentioned by Street (1993). This perspective did not match that of mainstream Australian teachers. These teachers considered literacy as a social practice and believed that literacy teaching/learning materials were better found in real texts available in real society. Furthermore, teachers believed that textbooks could not cater for individual students' needs. Disparities in other areas such as lesson content, homework, assessment, and the role of parents also resulted from different social norms, values and beliefs in home and school Discourses (Gee, 1996, 2011), which are discussed below.

A main finding of this study is that parents' preference for a skill-based, traditional approach to literacy teaching aligns with the findings of previous studies (Bernhard & Freire, 1999; Li, 2006, 2007) discussed in the literature review section. The findings related to the teachers are also mostly similar to the findings of other studies considered earlier, which include: 1) the teachers' use of a variety of authentic texts (Warhurst, Crawford, Ireland, Neale, Pickering, Rathmell, Watson & Ewing, 2010), 2) their emphasis on interactive learning, scaffolding, questioning, students' gradual progress, and independent learning in different contexts such as class work, group work, and individual work (Topping & Ferguson, 2005), 3) teachers' belief on parents reading to their children at home (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), 4) their value placed on project work (Sleeter, 2008), and 5) disagreement about giving a heavy load of homework to students (Peterson & Ladky, 2007).

Considering Gee's secondary Discourses (p. 2), it can be assumed that the school staff were full members of the school Discourse and they expected parents to participate in the school community. For this, according to the principal and teachers, different opportunities were provided. Since they were members of the dominant community and more powerful, it can be argued that they did not need to learn about other secondary Discourses to which EAL parents belonged. Instead, they wanted the EAL children and parents to fit in the school Discourse. As one group were new and partial members of the school Discourse and the other group were full members, effective communication was not always easy, and there were many misunderstandings.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that although teachers taught systematically, followed a curriculum, assessed children's improvement throughout the year, and aimed to cater for every single child's needs, parents were unaware of these practices and therefore felt their children were learning "nothing." This shows that the existing communication system, which was essential to strengthen home-school partnerships, was not sufficient to inform the new EAL parents. Therefore, the most urgent issue to be addressed is to help newly arrived EAL parents become aware of the approaches to literacy pedagogy in Australia. It should be noted that, broadly speaking, the group of EAL parents in this study was educated enough to analyse literacy teaching/learning practices in their home countries as well as those in Australia. In addition, they all were familiar with English language teaching. Binod's, Nita's, Sharon's, and Tara's children even had English as a medium of instruction in their home countries. However, these

parents still did not know what and how Australian teachers teach in the classroom. For educated parents who can communicate with teachers in English, it should be relatively easy to establish collaboration with teachers, despite initial cultural expectations. However, what can the situation be for those EAL parents who are not educated or educated solely on their first language? Without English language proficiency and knowledge of the new school Discourse it is hard for them to collaborate with teachers.

The gap in understandings between new EAL parents and primary school teachers can be addressed in a number of ways. These could include classroom observation for parents, a dedicated section of the school newsletter for new EAL parents, explicit invitations to become parent helpers, and to attend a special session at the school curriculum night.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in Victoria provides a set of guidelines about literacy pedagogy. The recommendations of this study could be considered by state departments of education in Australia to strengthen relationship between primary school teachers and newly arrived EAL parents. This will make existing literacy programs more effective.

Table 1: Six ESL parents

Mother tongue	Parents	Country of origin
Punjabi	Nita	India
Marathi	Tara	India
Indonesian	Dewita	Indonesia
Indonesian	Lily	Indonesia
Nepali	Binod	Nepal
Tagalog	Sharon	Philippines

Table 2: Five school staff

Year level taught during data collection	Teaching/working experience	Qualification	School staff
5/6	4 years	BSc and BEd	Alice
3/4	9 years	BEd	Amber
3/4	3 years	BEd	Andrew
3/4	7 years	Bachelor of Primary School Teaching and Human	Ann

		Movement	
X	29 years	MEd	Hema

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