Preschool Children’s Literacy Development

Eiko Kato-Otani

未就学児の Literacy の発達

加 藤 映 子

Abstract

This observation study examines what kind of literacy experiences middle-class American children have during preschool years. I observed three- to five-year-old classes at a middle-class American preschool once a week for three months. The purpose of the observation was to study the class materials, literacy events, and literacy environment. Children at this preschool are educated in a rich literate environment, and one could see a shift in literacy development from the three- to four-year-old class and a shift from the four-year to five-year old class. In addition to a weekly observation, I interviewed teachers to learn how they view their pupils’ literacy development. It was interesting to find that the teachers I interviewed emphasized that children’s emotional and social development is more important than their literacy development.

Key words: literacy, preschool education, emotional and social development, observation interview

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抄録

本研究は、アメリカのあるプリスクールにおいて3歳から5歳までの子どもたちがどのような literacy の環境で就学前の教育を受けているかを、週1回3ヶ月にわたって調べたものである。各年齢別クラス観察の結果、3歳児から4歳児、そして4歳児から5歳児のクラスにおいて、文字の量、用途、目的に明確な違いが生じていることがわかる。また、先生方に対するインタビューから、指導者は literacy の発達よりも、子どもの社会的、感情的な発達を望んでいることが理解された。

キーワード：リタラシー、幼児教育、社会的、感情的な発達、観察、インタビュー

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Children learn many things through various activities at preschool. They draw pictures, work on blocks and puzzles, play games, listen to stories, tell stories throughout the day. Play helps children’s emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development (Hall, 1991). In contrast to these developments, literacy does not happen to children. It has to be taught (Hall, 1991). Hall (1991) points out that children explore the emergence of literacy by engaging in a cognitive activity which promotes more complex cognitive activities like literacy. He also states that children come to understand a system of written language through symbolic behavior in play. In addition, when literacy materials are presented, children act in literate ways. How young children develop literacy skills during preschool years is an important area of study because the development of emergent literacy is related to their later school success (Heath, 1982). However, the children’s preparedness for literacy varies across families, social classes, and communities (Gee, 1996). Harste, Woodward, and Bruner (cited in Hall, 1991) point out that children’s literacy development is based on their experience with literacy interactions. Clues to what kind of literacy experiences American preschool children have had can be found in preschool activities and materials and their class environment.

Before I begin to report my observation findings at a preschool, below I summarize the recommendations made by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) for children’s literacy development.

**Statements of IRA and NAEYC**

IRA and the NAEYC (1998) provide guidance to teachers of early childhood programs and schools. Both organizations are committed to helping children learn how to read and write for their own enjoyment, information, and communication. They point out that children should receive adequate literacy experiences before they begin formal schooling. They also point out that the broad range of language and literacy knowledge and skills has to be taught in their early childhood settings to foster the foundation of high levels of reading and writing. To do so, they state that all teachers need to have an understanding of language acquisition (including second language acquisition), of the process of reading and writing, and of early literacy development. They also need to understand that there are diverse literacy experiences at home. Some children grow up in rich literacy home environments, and others grow up in less privileged literacy home environments. Thus, teachers need to know what children already know and can do to provide necessary knowledge and instructions for different children (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). This can be possible by involving preservice teachers in literacy rich preschool settings. Young & Romeo (1999) found that preservice teachers in such settings gained an understanding of children’s emergent literacy processes.

IRA & NAEYC (1998) point out the importance of reading books to children. Previous book reading studies indicate that reading books to children is related to children’s vocabu-
lary development (Ninio and Bruner, 1978), and level of language development (Debaryshe, 1993). Reading to young children at home has been also theoretically linked to early literacy skills and to school success (Goldfield and Snow, 1984). Types of questions parents raise also affect children's vocabulary growth (Ninio, 1980). Book reading during preschool years is important because children can develop concepts about print by being exposed to books (Teale, 1984).

It is also important to point out that book reading styles affect children's emergent literacy. Reese & Cox (1999) found that a describer book reading style (a reader which focused on describing pictures) benefits children's vocabulary and print skills. A performance-oriented style (a reader who introduced the book and discussed the story meaning and comprehension) was also beneficial when children's initial skills were considered. This study indicates how preschool teachers should read books to children in class. It is, however, more difficult for teachers to focus on books when they read to a number of children as it was found that they devoted their talk to managing children's behaviors during book reading (Beals, De Temple, and Dickinson, 1994). Also, Martinez and Teale (1993) found variation in kindergarten teachers' reading styles, indicating the book reading experience could be very different for kindergarten children.

Phonemic awareness is also important for children's reading development (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). IRA & NAEYC (1998) recommend activities which promote children's sensitization of sound similarities and help children develop awareness of sounds in the English language. In Chaney's longitudinal study (1998), she found that the metalinguistics skills and print awareness that three-year-old children acquired were significantly related to later reading development. This implies that preschool activities which promote phonological and print awareness are important.

IRA & NAEYC (1998) also point out that writing can help children acquire a working knowledge of the alphabetic system. For example, invented spelling shows children's understanding of the sounds of words they hear. Teachers can also involve children in the process of writing for real purposes. For example, with teacher's encouragement children begin to label their pictures, talk about stories based on the pictures, and write stories. These activities will help them to understand that writing can be used for real communication.

The Study

Research questions

This study describes what kind of literacy experiences middle-class American preschool children have by focusing on the following research questions.

1) What materials were provided and utilized for literacy development at this preschool?
2) What types of literacy events are conducted at this preschool?
3) What provisions were made in the class environment for literacy development?

**Data collection: setting and sample**

The preschool I observed is located in a university town and is affiliated with a university. Eighty per cent of the parents are affiliated with the university, but the preschool is also open to public. I observed three-year-old, four-year-old, and five-year-old classes once a week for three months. Most of the students were upper middle class Caucasians. Within the preschool, I visited different age groups to see age differences in terms of literacy development. Also, I collected materials regarding literacy skills such as posters hung on the wall and written information addressed to children and parents. Finally, I interviewed teachers in the three-year-old and five-year-old classes about their perspectives on children's literacy development.

**Findings**

**Written materials used in classes**

I took digital pictures of written materials in the three-year-old, four-year-old, and five-year-old classrooms during my observations (see Appendix A for photos). To protect participants' confidentiality, materials with children's photos were not captured, but written down in my field notes. Table 1 on page 5 shows the absence or presence of literacy oriented written materials in each classroom. By examining the written materials in each class, one could see a shift from the three- to four-year-old class and a shift from the four- to five-year-old class. For example, a job chart was not displayed on the wall in the three-year-old class. Although there was a job chart displayed in the four-year-old class, it used icons and students' names (see Figure 1 in Appendix A). In contrast, jobs were written along with icons in the four-year-old class (see Figure 2 in Appendix A). They also used a calendar in which numbers, days, and month were written.

Students' engagement with written materials was also different across the three age groups. For example, after a child finished a collage in the three-year-old class, the teacher wrote down the student's name on the sheet. However, in the five-year-old class, children's hand written names were found on their art projects (see Figure 18 in Appendix C). Also, in the four- and five-year-old classes, explanations of the projects were displayed along with them (see Figures 12-15 in Appendix B).

Labels were used in all three classes, but they were used for different purposes. In younger classes, labels were used for organizing materials for teachers, but in the five-year-old class, labels were used for students as well as for teachers. For example, because bins and
Table 1  Literacy oriented written materials in classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3-year-old class</th>
<th>4-year-old class</th>
<th>5-year-old class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cubbies</td>
<td>name labeled</td>
<td>name labeled</td>
<td>name labeled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job chart</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>names labeled</td>
<td>names, labeled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>colors</td>
<td>day, number, month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects’ display</td>
<td>children’s names</td>
<td>children’s names</td>
<td>children’s hand written names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>arts or crafts</td>
<td>arts or crafts</td>
<td>arts or crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>written explanations</td>
<td>written explanations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom utensils</td>
<td>labeled for teachers and students</td>
<td>labeled for teachers and students</td>
<td>labeled for teachers and cabinets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Square carpet Seat</td>
<td>child’s picture</td>
<td>child’s picture and name</td>
<td>name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>teacher’s dictation of children’s stories papers lined papers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

drawers which contain class supplies such as papers, pens, pencils, and markers were labeled along with icons, children could place them in the correct place by looking at the icons. At the same time, children looked at the words next to the icons. In the five-year-old class, students’ pictures were used with their names for their cubicles, but their art cubicles were labeled by their names only and each child could identify his/her art cubby.

Although children look at books during individual project time, the types of books displayed in the book corner were also different. In the three-year-old class, books about shapes and colors, cars, and babies were displayed in the book corner (see Figure 9 in Appendix A). In the five-year-old book corners, books which were related to their projects were displayed (see Figure 21 and 22 in Appendix C). In addition, the use of books was different in this class. At the beginning of circle time, children picked a book and looked at it. I do not believe that they were really reading but they looked at pictures. This gave children an opportunity to choose books based on their interests. This approach also worked for class management because children needed to shift from individual activities to group time, which required them to sit still and listen to others. Also, in this class, they worked on a group project in circle time. For example, when they worked on a fruits taste project, books about fruits were displayed in the book corner. Children could look at these books after the project and talk about the fruits they tested. In this way, children could see how books can help them learn.
Although writing activity was not observed in the three-and four-year-old classes during my observations, some children in the five-year-old class wrote their names on pieces of papers. Teachers in the five-year-old class wrote down every single word of children's stories and shared the written story in circle time.

**Literacy oriented interactions between teachers and students**

In the three-year-old class, literacy oriented interactions between teachers and students were seen during book reading time because much of the time children were engaged in art oriented or toy oriented activities. In addition to circle time in which teachers read books to children, whenever children wanted to be read to during individual play time, teachers would read to them. It was interesting that a girl showed me her books from home and asked me to read. A three-year-old class teacher said:

"Throughout the day, children come over and ask, 'Will you read this with me?' I can probably read a total of, maybe, five to ten books a day."

Another teacher in this class also commented:

"We read throughout the day whenever they want it. We do have special times, but we always read."

In the four-year-old class, one of the teachers, who is Spanish bilingual, read a story written in Spanish to the students. She chose this book because one of the students whose home language was Spanish brought it to her. Even though most of the children did not understand Spanish, they were very attentive to the story because the teacher had previously prepared objects which appeared in the story such as shoes, shirt, pants, socks, and hat. These objects attracted the students' attention. She finished the story time saying, "I will read this story in English during the nap time." This shows children that print can present language besides English. Also, the home language is valued at school.

In the five-year-old class, book reading was used to support students' learning. When the students worked on making a brew juice just before Halloween, the teacher read a Halloween story called, Beneath the Ghost Moon. After the brew juice project, The Spice Alphabet Book was displayed in the corner of the circle time area. Books about nature were also displayed in the nature discovery corner. This showed that books can enhance one's knowledge.

In contrast to the three-year-old class, written language interaction between teachers and students often occurred in the four- and five-year-old classes. For example, teachers made a big farewell card with children's comments for the student teacher who was leaving. They jotted down what each child said when they made the card. In this way, children could see that spoken language can be presented in written language. In the five-year-old class, child-
ren used markers, pencils, and pens freely during play time. Although teachers did not teach them how to write their names, children wrote their names. A teacher commented:

"I didn't exactly teach them. Individually, sometimes yes, when they would say how do you make a G, how do you do this?"

Another teacher in this class also said,

"I think, my personal belief is, I've done both. Um, I have actually taken a pencil and shown a child that this is the way you make the A. It works for some kids. And other kids, you use more of whole language, labeling, and everything, showing them that way. I think you need to use both methods because some kids learn better, and one way is opposed to another."

The five-year-old class started their circle time by checking the day's student jobs. The students could recognize each others' names written on the job chart and the interaction between the teacher and students went like this:

Teacher: "Who's the bell ringer?"
Child: "Sarah."
Teacher: "Who is our line leader?"
Child: "Michael."
Teacher: "Who is our weather person?"
Child: "John."
Teacher: "Who is our calendar person?"
Child: "Lisa."

The name collector picked up the name tag and gave the name tag basket to the teacher. Then, the teacher checked the calendar:

Teacher: "What color day is today?"
Child: "Blue day."
Teacher: "What's blue day called?"
Child: "Friday."
Teacher: "What number is today?"
Child: "Ten."
Teacher: "What does 10 look like?"
Child: "1 and 0"
Teacher: "Today is Friday, December 10th, 1999."
Teacher: "What is special about today?"
Child:  "Hanukkah".
Teacher:  "What is the weather like today?"
Child:  "A little bit cloudy and need a jacket."
Teacher:  "Good weather report."

The children seemed to like having the job assignments and looked proud when the name collector collected each student’s name plate at the beginning of circle time. They used the name of colors such as blue day and brown day instead of Monday and Tuesday for their class calendar. This is probably because it is easier for children to remember what color day it was. For example, blue day was the end of school week indicating a sad feeling.

In addition to these teacher-student interactions around literacy, I was also hoping to observe literacy oriented interactions between students. Unfortunately, I did not come across them during my observations.

**Coordination with parents**

Parents were welcome to stay in their child classes when they dropped them off. I observed a parent who interacted with her child and other children in the five-year-old class. She encouraged her son to write his name when she saw other children writing their names.

Mother:  "Everybody is writing his name today. Why don’t we write your name together?"
Son:  (grabs the pencil and begins to write his name).
Mother:  "Write K. Write O. Do you remember which letter is next?"

After he finished writing his name, the boy began drawing a castle and the mother began telling a story based on the picture her son was drawing. Two girls joined the story telling and pretended they were dragons in the story. This interaction occurred very naturally, which indicated that they had experienced similar literacy oriented interaction at home.

Teachers also commented about the parents’ interests in literacy and children’s home literacy environment. One of the five-year-old teachers said:

“Literacy is there, even if just a matter of the fact that they have printed materials all over the house. I think these kids have been read to from the time they were in uteri. So, there is already a love of books and they are already recognizing. I have children who already write. I’m sure that four-year-old class has children who are there, almost there. ”

The three-year-old class teachers also mentioned parents' interests in children’s literacy development:
"I've seen them read books to their children in the classroom. They've read even to the other children when they come over."

"A lot of parents read and borrow books, ah, from here to read at home at night."

It is also important to note that there was a check out list at the book corner in each classroom, and the record showed that many parents had checked out books from school (see Figure 23 in Appendix D). Also, there were many written board messages for parents inside and outside classes (see Figure 16 in Appendix B, Figure 19 in Appendix C, and Figure 25 in Appendix D).

**Children's learning experiences (demonstration, lessons, projects, etc.)**

Children in the four- and five-year-old classes worked on projects in circle time. In the project called "What's Inside?" in the four-year-class, children were engaged in guessing what was inside. For example, children found pictures of animals inside plastic eggs in a scavengers hunt (see Figure 14 in Appendix B). After the activity, teachers displayed the report as shown in Figure 14:

> "On a scavenger hunt we found plastic eggs with pictures of animals inside. We then took turns using creative movement to become all the different animals."

The report not only shows the record of the activity, but also children could see how their activity was presented in written language. The same thing was observed in the five-year-old class. The teachers wrote down students' comments about the tastes of the fruits on the sheet which was later displayed on the wall in the hall way. Parents could see what their child said about the fruits and develop a conversation with their child.

**Physical and affective environment**

The physical environment of each classroom was spacious and attractive. Displays of student work were shown in classrooms as well as in the hallways. Teachers were calm with children when disciplining them. For example, when children became excited, a teacher said, "Inside voice, please." Also, When a child requested "more milk" at snack time, a teacher replied to him,"More milk, please."

**Teachers' perspectives about children's literacy development**

I found that the teachers whom I interviewed in this preschool believe that social and emotional development is of primary importance to literacy for their students.

When I asked what the most important thing children were learning this year was, the
five-year-old class teacher said:

"How to be with each other in a group, to be able to express their own needs, and also be respectful of the other people that they are with."

Another five-year-old teacher also said:

"It's not literacy. How to be nice and how to care for other people."

Three-year-old class teachers commented that three year olds are still young for literacy development. One of the three-year-old teacher commented:

"NOT ACADEMICS. Not letters and numbers and stuff, of course, you know, if a child is interested in that, we go on, but I think the biggest growth area is social and emotional stuff."

Another three-year-old teacher also pointed out the importance of children's social development:

"It's pretty much different for every child as far as specific goals. But we do try to help them master their body control as they are growing and their self-help skills. Because ultimately it is their classroom, so learning just how to manage themselves, their relationships with each other, and then caring for their classrooms and friends. Very social oriented at this age."

**Discussion**

Although the teachers in this preschool believe that social and emotional development is of primary importance to literacy for their students, there was rich literacy environments for children in this preschool. There were various activities and situations which promote literacy in this preschool as recommended by IRA and NAEYC. A broad range of written materials such as books, project reports, and labels were provided for children.

The physical environment of the classroom was well designed for children's literacy development. Morrow & Rand (1991) point out the importance of the physical environment in the learning and teaching of early literacy. Field (cited in Morrow & Rand, 1991) found that children's verbal interaction, fantasy play and cooperative play were facilitated in the small partitioned spaces. Nash (cited in Morrow & Rand, 1991) also found that children showed more creative productivity and complex shape, color, and number patterns, and made more use of oral language in organized classrooms compared to randomly arranged classrooms. In addition, Pellegrini (cited in Morrow & Rand, 1991) found that children used more explicit language and depended less on contextual assumptions when they played in the dramatic
play area compared to their language use in the block corner.

The parental involvement I observed in this preschool indicated that these children live in a rich literacy home environment. The teachers also stated that parents read stories when they dropped off their children. Morrow & Rand (1991) point out the importance of adult guidance during play. Adults can model literacy behavior which children first observe and perform in a collaborative way. This natural interaction is promoted by adults’ modeling and scaffolding. Parents also borrow books from school. Robinson, Larsen, and Haupt (1995) found that taking books home affects children’s interest in books and reading exposure. In addition, Robinson, Larsen, and Haupt (1996) found that the number of books and the amount of time spent reading significantly increased when children from low socioeconomic status and middle-class families selected and took books home.

Taking books from school is important as found in the study by Robinson, Larsen, Haupt, and Mohlman (1997). They found that both preschool children (four to five year olds) and kindergarten children (five to six year olds) from low- and middle-class families chose modern and traditional fantasy books over realistic, informational, alphabet-number books. They also selected familiar books and books with one to five lines of text per page instead of books with more text. This study indicates that the class library should have a wide selection so that children can choose based on their preferences. Robinson et. al (1997) also suggest that books should be displayed showing the cover of books so that children can see them. Thus, the book selection has a positive impact on the children’s home book reading experience. In the preschool I observed, books were categorized (see Appendix E) in the class library and some books which were related to students’ projects were displayed (see Figure 22 in Appendix C). This enabled children to select books easily and stimulated the students’ interest in books.

Concluding remarks

Teachers in this preschool were not very concerned about their students’ literacy development. This makes me wonder about a different setting with less privileged children. The teachers said that they would have a different focus if they were teaching in a different preschool like Head Start. One teacher commented:

"Children here have things like play dates and they go to the museum. In contrast, children in Head Start that whether they have food on the table is what the issue is. Basically, these children come in three and four never having had a play date. So, you have the emphasis on how to be in school. You don’t have the time to teach them the academics. You try, but that’s not where the emphasis is.”
It would be meaningful if I conducted the same research in a Head Start preschool. How teachers view the children's development would be important to examine, as well as what materials are provided and utilized for literacy enhancement. I would like to observe how children are engaged in literacy activities taking place in this setting. Also, I would like to observe preschools in Japan to examine how literacy is developed and viewed in Japanese preschools.

References


Appendix A

Figure 1. Job Chart

Four-year-old class

Figure 2. Job Chart

Five-year-old

Figure 3. Classmates List and Name Tags

Four-year-old class

Figure 4. Classmates List and Name Tags

Five-year-old class

Figure 5. Calendar

Four-year-old class

Figure 6. Calendar

Five-year-old class
Appendix B
Projects (four-year-old class)

Figure 12. What's your favorite meal?

Figure 13. What's inside?

Figure 14. What's inside?

Figure 15. What's inside?

Figure 16. Communication board
Appendix C
Projects (five-year-old class)

Figure 17. Nature discoveries

Figure 18. Painting

Figure 19. Fruits taste project

Figure 20. Label for parents

Figure 21. The Spice Alphabet Book

Figure 22. Books display: Nature Discoveries
Appendix D

Communication with Parents (five-year-old class)

Figure 23. Class library check out list

Figure 24. Conference Schedule

Figure 25. Activity label

Figure 26. Potluck Breakfast