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Who is Entitled to be a Literacy Expert? Category Entitlements of Parents and Professionals in the Literature on Children's Literacy Learning.

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyses representations of librarians, teachers and parents in texts pertaining to children's literacy development. Using Jonathan Potter's concept of "category entitlement," we discussed the ways that writers in both the library and information science (LIS) and education discourse communities represent particular groups of people as "literacy experts." We found that representations of librarians' and teachers' professional expertise may serve to devalue the work of parents and children, and that each profession's specification of an exclusive domain of expertise can support the construction of barriers to meaningful collaboration among librarians, teachers, and parents.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette communication analyse d'un oeil critique les représentations des bibliothécaires, des enseignant-e-s et des parents dans les textes qui se rattachent au développement de l'alphabétisation des enfants. Nous avons trouvé que les représentations de l'expertise professionnelle des bibliothécaires et des enseignant-e-s pourraient être au service de dévaluer le travail des parents et des enfants, et que chaque spécification de la profession d'un domaine exclusif de l'expertise peut soutenir la construction des barrières de la collaboration sérieuse parmi les bibliothécaires, les enseignant-e-s et les parents.

In this paper we critically analyse representations of librarians, educators and parents in texts pertaining to emergent literacy. According to Teale and Yokota (2000), the following assumptions are embedded within an emergent literacy perspective:

- Learning to read and write begins very early in life for virtually all children in a literate society.
- Literacy develops within social contexts.
- The term "literacy development" more appropriately describes emergent literacy than does the traditional term "reading readiness."
- Emergent literacy reflects a functional view of language use; language and reading are important for the purposes to which they may be put in an individual's life.
- Children become literate at different rates and take a variety of paths to conventional reading and writing. Instruction in letter recognition and phonics is just one element of literacy development. A broad range of knowledge, dispositions, and strategies is called into play as young children become readers and writers.

We focus on library and information science (LIS) and education texts about emergent literacy published since 1990. We discuss ways that writers in both discourse communities construct particular forms of authority for the professionals in their respective fields. We claim that “worked up” representations of librarians’ and teachers’ professional expertise may serve to devalue the work of caregivers, parents and children as they engage in literacy events in the domestic world. We further claim that each profession’s specification of an exclusive domain of authority supports the construction of barriers to meaningful collaboration among librarians, teachers, and parents.

Critiques of advice texts for pregnant women and parents (Marshall and Woollett 2000, Gardner 1995, Marshall 1991) claim that such texts represent parental and professional expertise in particular ways, and that they indicate preferred forms of interaction with professionals. Literature for professionals likewise carves out specific domains of expertise for parents and professionals, clearly indicating the extent of each (Hahn 1987). There is evidence that such representations are taken up in parents’ descriptions of their own and professionals’ roles with respect to pregnancy and childbirth issues (McKenzie 2001), elementary schooling (Griffith and Smith 1987) and literacy practices (Stooke 1999, Weinberger 1996). Our work builds on this evidence.

Our analysis draws on Jonathan Potter’s notion of “category entitlement.” According to Potter, “category entitlement” is the authority to speak about certain issues by virtue of membership in a specific group. He writes, “In practice category entitlement obviates the need to ask how the person knows. . .” (1996, 132). In the practice of discursive construction, category entitlements work to enhance or undermine the authority and status of information sources. For example, the authority of a radio broadcast is enhanced when a librarian is called upon to recommend the “best” children’s book titles for beginning readers or when a teacher is asked to comment on differences between boys’ and girls’ achievement on a literacy test. Authority is undermined when the category entitlement of a particular group is questioned, or when an individual’s right to membership in a particular group is questioned. Discussions in LIS and education literature about what counts as appropriate education for school librarianship and what role a school librarian should play within the school community (c.f. Haycock, 1999; Swigger, 2000) exemplify these processes and illustrate clearly the extent to which the power relations among groups who work with children influence the outcomes of such discussions.

Jayussi (1984, 73) identified five types of criteria that people use in defining the “category incumbency” for particular groups. They are: perceptual availability (what group members look like); behavioural availability (how group members tend to act); personal avowals (claims to belong to a particular group); third person declarations (what people say about them); and formal credentials. Membership in categories such as professional librarian or certified teacher can be defined with reference to the credentials needed in order to practice in a particular setting but for some categories membership is a less straightforward affair. For example, Potter described how the category “community leader” was used in newspaper accounts of an inner-city riot. He observed that the criteria used to distinguish community leaders from other members of the community

were “diffuse” and “particularly complex” (1996, 136). Potter notes that what was most interesting about the category “community leader” was that neither personal avowals such as “I am a community leader” nor credentials were as important in establishing group membership as what a person did and how that person was perceived by other community members at the time. The authority to speak as a community leader was earned in complex ways and it was temporarily bestowed rather than permanently acquired. We contend that in texts pertaining to children’s literacy development the same is true for the implied category “literacy expert.” While membership in the categories of librarian, teacher and parent are fairly straightforward, the criteria used to construct the category “literacy expert” are as diffuse, complex, and context-dependent as those used to construct the category “community leader.” In Potter’s words, “What seems to be crucial is how the person acts and what other people say about them” (1996, 136). It follows, of course, that “what people say about them” depends on who is talking to whom.

A common claim in writing on emergent literacy is that support “must be shared by all of us who work with children.... Early childhood educators, parents, caregivers, and public librarians all have a responsibility to identify opportunities for early encounters with literacy and to make sure that all children have the chance to participate” (Kupetz 1993, 28). How, then, are the roles of these participants defined and how do the LIS and education discourse communities represent the category entitlements of each? First, we consider the criteria on which category encumbency depends and, second, we provide examples of the ways that the category entitlements of librarians, teachers, and parents are strengthened and disputed by placing one set of entitlements in contrast to another.

On what criteria does category encumbency depend?

Although there are important differences in the representation of literacy expertise in the literature for teachers and librarians, there are several important consistencies in the characteristics used in descriptions of the expertise of each of the three groups.

Librarians’ expertise consists of four areas of specialty:

- A love of reading and of children’s literature based on immersion in children’s collections:
- [W]ho better to instill the joy and love of reading in children of any age than a skilled and caring children’s librarian who can make a book or story come alive with music, fingerplays, puppets, dramatics, crafts, and all sorts of other exciting and fun activities? After all, “play” is an important element of language development, and it is the means by which children learn (Talan 1990, 30).
- An appreciation for the importance of reading aloud, and the skill for doing so effectively, derived from many years of public library programming for young children:
- Libraries have long been involved in family literacy-related activities. Public programs on parenting and child development, lap sits, read-alouds,

story times for toddlers, and a variety of other programs have been the mainstay of patron-centered services in libraries throughout our country for many years (Talan 1990, 31).

- Expertise in selecting and managing collections for children.
- Public librarians... can build their collections to include materials appropriate for children of all ages (including very young readers). They can make themselves accessible to parents and early childhood professionals who need guidance in book selection (Kupetz 1993, 30).
- Creation and management of the library as a child-friendly setting:
- Librarians can create literacy-rich settings and work directly with children to provide needed encouragement, nudging preschoolers toward literacy in planned and incidental ways (Teale 1999, 11).

Peterman and Kimmel (1990, 317-18) sum up the set of emergent literacy skills claimed for librarians in the LIS literature:

Librarians know about the importance of reading to children, and they know about books. They know which ones work with children of different ages. They know how to present them to children; how to read and share them; how to talk about them afterward.

References to public librarians in the education literature are sparse, and references to both school and public libraries tend to focus on the library as a place or a repository. Wisell (2000) explained how "I will also let the parents know that our school library is a place that they can use to check out books, and at any time, they can feel free to use our literacy reading lab to learn reading skills that are used to help our students improve their reading." The librarian, if mentioned, is described in relation to the collection.

Library programs provide access to books that all children need. We found that students whose teachers ensured they had a valid library card and who took them to the local public libraries at least once a week were more successful readers than students who did not visit the library regularly.... We also discovered that the staff at the local library were eager to establish programs with neighborhood schools. Many had already designed programs that matched children with appropriately leveled books and provided encouragement for wider reading. (Lapp, Flood and Roser 2000,185).

The expertise of teachers, on the other hand, is constructed by referring to the processes and techniques of reading (see, for example, Booth 1996). Teachers are also described as possessing specialized pedagogical knowledge. Librarians' professional literature acknowledges education research as the source of the best information about the process of reading: "The emergent literacy perspective has replaced the traditionally-held concept of reading readiness, the premise of which has been shown to be erroneous by a large body of research in early childhood education" (Dowd 1997, 347).

In the education literature the discourse of formal schooling is dominant (Callewaert, 1999) and school teachers' claims to expertise are constituted, in part, by their membership in the dominant educational group. Teachers' insider status in the educational system also allows them to become familiar with group norms and speak with the authority of government-defined standards for school literacy development (Babcock & Backlund 2000) note, "Teachers need to explain in a parent-friendly way exactly where the child is academically."

Teachers' claims to literacy expertise are summarized by Rich (1998, ix):

Teachers are professionals who make decisions about curriculum and instruction in their classrooms. They develop and select their own instructional resources from a number of sources in various media. Teachers are more than mere technicians who implement curriculum and "teach the textbook."

Parents derive their expertise about children's emergent literacy by virtue of their everyday access to and their specific interests in the development of their own children. Parents are consistently represented explicitly or implicitly as their children's "first teacher" by both discourse communities. As Crain-Thoreson and Dale (1999) write, "In many ways parents are the ideal facilitators for their children. They are motivated to help their children, interact with them in many settings, and spend much more time with them than a clinician could." A similar description appears in the LIS literature:

Concerned, even anxious, parents are powerful allies. They care about their children; they care about their success in school; they care about books and reading. They may not know it yet, but they already have all they need to insure their children's reading success (Peterman and Kimmel 1990).

However, in the absence of the materials or technical expertise held by librarians and teachers, parents are presented by both discourse communities as needing professional instruction or direction. Placing parents in the role of facilitator of emergent literacy enables the professional literacy experts to make judgements on whether parents are adequately performing their requisite functions, and to provide instruction on how parents should interact with their learning children. Although Trelease (1995, 49) points out that "none of this is complicated. Anyone who can read can do it with a child," he asks, "How then do we reach those parents who aren't doing the job?" Support of emergent literacy is therefore a part of a parent's "job," one that is not always done to the satisfaction of others.

The use of comparisons in the representation of literacy expertise

The LIS and education discourse communities have neatly carved up the universe of literacy expertise into three domains (expertise about materials, pedagogical knowledge, access to and knowledge of specific children), over which each constituent group can claim primary expertise. The allocation of these domains of expertise is not for the most part disputed between the discourse communities. What is disputed, however, is the value of each domain to emergent literacy.

Potter (1996, 107) claims that people use devices like category entitlements in conjunction with other discursive techniques to make particular kinds of claims, such as to construct one version as factual or one class or group of person as legitimately claiming a category entitlement. Offensive (ironizing) rhetoric undermines authority or category entitlement, while defensive (reifying) rhetoric works to enhance both. Offensive and defensive rhetoric can work together to reinforce the category entitlement of one group at the expense of another. In this way, the literature of each discourse community uses comparisons between candidates for membership in the “literacy expert” category to carve out a specific and superior domain of expertise for its particular constituents.

Parents and librarians

In the LIS literature, librarians are called upon to guide and teach parents about book selection and use, about the services of the library, and even about parenting. As Cerny (2000, 27) observes, “Over the last decade there has been a subtle shift in services offered to families by our children’s librarians. Parents are welcomed, even required, to attend programs with their babies and toddlers.” Although parents may be recognized as motivated and well-meaning, their interactions with their learning children come under the scrutiny and judgement of the librarian.

Implicit in every program, activity, or learning area is the understanding that the one-to-one relationship that exists most often between a parent and his/her young child is particularly well suited for fostering and stimulating learning. All programming is primarily a way to show parents/caregivers what materials can be used with young children and how they can be used (Feinberg and Feldman 1996, 42-3).

The following advice is the beginning of a lengthy direction to librarians giving presentations to “disadvantaged families.”

Start the presentation with a 5- to 10-minute explanation of why reading aloud to preschool children is important and fun to do. You can, for example, begin by discussing the emotional benefits – how the physical closeness of reading aloud and the exclusive time spent with the child can strengthen the relationship between parent and child. Mention that books can be important for fostering communications within families; how

reading aloud provides an opportunity to actively talk together, which is much better than watching television, a passive activity (Towey 1990, 150).

In the LIS literature, parents' support of emergent literacy is very strongly tied to public library use, with literate children providing a new pool of library users.

If we reach one teacher, one parent, or one child we would have otherwise never reached, our success is manifold. That person will demonstrate to others what they learned and, in so doing, will further our goal of making all children and the adults who shape their lives library users and active participants in the learning process (White 1997, 218).

White's ordering of "library user" and "active participant in the learning process" are noteworthy. By tying parents' support of emergent literacy to public library use, LIS writers can cite failure to use the library as evidence of a dereliction of parental responsibility.

[I]t has been my observation that parents and caregivers are often too busy today to find time for the library, even when offered a free gift... in return. If library visits fit into their schedules they will bring home books and share them with the children. But if borrowing books requires one more stop at the end of a long and tiring day, library books may not be part of their children's experience. (Bagley 2000, 18).

Bagley admonishes that "a parent's and caregiver's lack of free time should not deprive a child of essential exposure to books and reading" and suggests that the librarian's appropriate response is to select and provide "the best possible materials in the most convenient way possible;" in this case, an accessible off-site collection "for the large numbers who would like to come but cannot (or will not) fit library visits into their schedules" (2000, 18). Bagley and others (cf. Fehrenbach *et al.* 1998) have begun to target daycare and preschool caregivers as surrogates for the absent parent.

Parents and teachers

In the education literature, increased recognition of the importance of "home" literacy practices leaves parents and parenting in the early years vulnerable to the colonizing reach of "school" literacy. If parents are their children's first teachers then they must be made aware of the needs of the school and recast as supporters of teachers rather than as teachers themselves. Writing for elementary teachers, Wisell (2000) advises that

Teachers need to take leadership roles to teach and mentor parents in how to help their children to become better readers. For example, teachers can acquaint parents with the emergent model of reading, in which reading is seen as part of a continuum toward becoming an independent reader. . .

Within this framework what the classroom teacher is trying to accomplish can be doubled if parents become involved in the process.

Even parents who feel confident as literacy teachers for their preschool children tend to relinquish claims to expertise once their children enter formal schooling (Weinberger 1996, Stooke 1999). Reaching out to parents is construed as providing direction. As Whitty, Nason and Hunt (2000) observed, given their strengths as educators, teachers sometimes focus on educating parents rather than supporting them. For example, in a text for early childhood educators Goldberg (1997, 49) proposes that:

Parents should be taught to read to babies as soon as they are born and to provide a continuing stimulating language environment. (They) should be taught to fill a home with much talk, many books, and eventually writing materials. . . (They) should be taught to be free to help their children develop reading and writing skills . . (They) should be taught to model high-quality literacy behaviour . . . There are certain activities that all parents should know.

The assumption that parents will be interested in learning about teachers' techniques and one teacher's substitution of the word "student" for "child" is telling, however, and suggests that parents may well be cast as educational assistants.

One way that I am going to reach out to parents is to get them involved is to talk with them briefly about the reading and writing techniques that I have learned and make sure that parents read to their students every day for at least 15 minutes (Wisell, 2000).

As in the LIS literature parents who fail to conform to professionals' expectations are portrayed as derelict in their duties as parents. Hockenberger, Golstein & Haan (1999) describe a program in which they modelled story sharing strategies for parents living in poverty. In commenting on the fact that parents only changed behaviours during the intervention period, they observed, "When parents were asked to read to their children they did little more than read." But worse yet, the parents did not comply with the rules of their study.

Four of the seven mothers participated as requested throughout the project. They returned their tapes weekly, met with the research assistant on a regular basis, and took responsibility for the book reading sessions. However, even those mothers sometimes missed appointments without cancelling or forgot to turn in their audiotapes. One mother had numerous personal problems that interfere with her participation. When things were going smoothly she fulfilled her responsibilities.

The above example illustrates the extent to which parents who live in poverty are represented as deviant, even dangerous. Certainly demographic variables such as socio-economic status are correlated with children's reading achievement (Evans, Shaw & Bell,

2000) but some preservice texts for teachers oversimplify the relationship and appear to attribute reading failure to parents.

Lack of parental involvement in reading may have significant impact on young children's learning throughout their schooling. Both a child's future literacy and the child's subsequent success in school depend on the parents' ability and willingness to provide their child with thousands of planned and spontaneous encounters with print. . . . [I]t is our responsibility as educators and child advocates to help parents fulfill their role as their child's first and most important teacher. Christie, Enz & Vukelich (1997, p.419).

When parents are described as absent, other caregivers may take on the parenting role. Neuman & Celano (2001) describe a program designed to enrich the lives of economically disadvantaged children in child care settings. Trainers (both teachers and librarians) went out to child care centres and "found that some providers were so focused on teaching preschoolers the alphabet that they had no time – and no patience – for indulgences like storybooks."

Neuman and Celano's trainers acknowledged that the child care workers were "hardly empty vessels waiting to be filled by expert knowledge. . . . What they were teaching was based on their instincts, values, beliefs, and sense of what was right for young children." Mustard (2000) similarly advises that support is not about labels or about handing out expert knowledge and understanding to caregivers and acknowledges that "practitioners can learn from parents."

Librarians and teachers

In distinguishing librarians from teachers, writers in the LIS community emphasize the teacher's focus on the technical aspects of literacy learning and the fact that children do not begin formal schooling until they are well into the emergent literacy process. The preschool years, while a lost opportunity for teachers, are the stage in children's lives when librarians claim the strongest contribution to literacy learning.

Talan highlights the librarian's category entitlement by emphasizing the distinction between the librarian's claim to a love of reading and the teacher's technical expertise (what Teale, 1999 refers to as the "will" and "skill" components of literacy learning) to the extent that they appear to be mutually exclusive. She achieves this description first by situating herself as an educator, presumably without a stake in promoting librarians as literacy experts,

As an educator myself, I am only too aware of the differences in the ways teachers and librarians approach reading. Few of us, if any, learned to love reading in school. We might have learned the skills of reading while attending our classes, but the joy of reading was almost always learned outside the classroom. Teachers tend to become so caught up in the

“skills” and “techniques” of reading that they forget to spend time each day just sharing and enjoying a good book with their classes. I’m not convinced that all teachers themselves love to read, but I know all librarians do! (Talan 1990, 30)

and second, by calling on the testimony of a successful reader:

Walter Anderson, editor of *Parade* magazine, recently addressed a group of librarians at the Martin Luther King Library of the Washington, D.C. Public Library. In talking about his own early experiences with reading he described what for me is the main reason libraries should be involved in family and adult literacy. Anderson summarized his discussion of teachers, librarians, and literacy by stating that the real problem he had with learning to read was that school was never a safe or fun place to explore reading for pleasure. As he noted, “Teachers judged me; librarians encouraged me.” Anderson dropped out of school and spent his free time reading at the library! (Talan 1990, 30-1).

The very emphasis on “emergent literacy” rather than the more technically-focused “reading readiness” allows writers in the LIS community to highlight the importance of librarians’ work with young literacy learners, and in many cases to present teachers as “mere technicians,” in sharp contrast to the ways that teachers describe their own role with regard to literacy (See Rich 1998, ix quoted above).

While references to public librarians are hard to find in the education literature, the category entitlements of teacher-librarians, school librarians and teachers are debated in both the LIS and education literature. Haycock (1999) clearly presents a hierarchy of entitlements:

The school must examine its own program in order to determine the type of service that it requires from the resource center. If the only concern is the circulation of materials, then parent volunteers or a clerical assistant may be sufficient. If selection and organization warrant increased attention as well as children’s and young adult services and programs then a library technician or librarian should be employed . . . If the utilization of learning resources through valid, planned experiences leading to independent learning is of prime importance then a master teacher with advance education and training in teacher-librarianship is required.

Leonhardt (1998) represents teachers as resistant and recalcitrant students who must be enticed, like parents or literacy learners, into doing what is good for them.

Teachers are experts at resisting new curriculum initiatives but will often try something for a friend. . . So invite everyone to library breakfasts. Eat lunch with various groups around the school. Order books and magazines you know individual teachers will enjoy. Visit classrooms and be

generous in your praise of projects you see and teaching practices you hear about. Ask about your colleagues' families and special interests. In short be a good friend.

CONCLUSION

The characteristics of the category "literacy expert" are multifaceted and are manipulated in different ways by the different discourse communities. No one, for example, disputes the librarian's claim to expertise in collection development. Rather, claims of category encumbrance are achieved by differentially emphasizing the importance of specific elements of the category entitlement at the expense of others.

Two important absences are noteworthy. First, LIS writers have acknowledged the importance of the family context in emergent literacy (cf. Feinberg and Feldman 1996). However, despite the contentions of the emergent literacy perspective that "the child (rather than the... adult) has the primary role," (Dowd 1997, 347), there is little in the LIS literature to describe the learning child's entitlement to expertise in relation to her or his own literacy. This omission warrants serious attention if LIS researchers and practitioners are to create child-centered literacy practice. Second, although much early parenting work is undertaken by mothers (Griffith and Smith 1987), there is little acknowledgement in the literature for either library or education professionals of the gendered nature of emergent literacy work.

Professionalization as a strategy for improving the status of those who work with young children has been described as a "two-edged sword" (Cannella 1997, 137). Ten years ago, Harris (1992, 1) pointed out that attempts to associate librarianship with high-status professions such as law may well succeed in further devaluing children's library work which is easily associated with the domestic sphere and the work of mothering. More recently, educational researchers have argued that teachers' need to maintain their expertise fuels conflict between teachers and parents (cf. Biklen 1995, 128). Harris and Biklen each concluded that while the activity of caring may be undervalued in the workplace, the answer for the "caring professions" is not to care less.

Being sensitive to the ways that category entitlements are worked up and undermined can help both LIS and education researchers and professionals to focus on what it is that all stakeholders contribute to literacy development. Critically examining our understandings of one another's practice and of parents', caregivers', and children's contributions is an important step toward effective collaboration.

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