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Literacy Development of Rural Appalachian Five Year Olds

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"Grizzly Bear runned around the forest," Billy read to me from a paper on which he had written the letters in his name and drawn a picture of a tall, brown bear. Like many of Billy's stories, this one seemed to be grounded in his love of animals and interest in the natural world. Billy's home, located in a rural, mountainous area of North Carolina, provided a conducive setting for learning and imagining about creatures living in the wilderness. His literacy development reflected his interest in the natural world, as well as his community's dialect and storytelling tradition.

"They were sitting on a bank and Willdo fell off and bumped his head. They called the doctor. The doctor said, 'No more sitting on the bank.'" Amber's story combines her awareness of nature with her knowledge of a children's chant. Amber, who lived in the same community as Billy, included references to the outdoors, as well as both Appalachian dialect and standard English.

Both of these children were well on their way to becoming readers and writers when they entered kindergarten. They showed an interest in books and use of graphic symbols to represent their thoughts. While both children exhibited
great promise in literacy development, their approaches to the written word were very different.

As a teacher and researcher in a kindergarten classroom, I was interested in documenting the literacy development of several of the children in my class to determine the impact of the social and cultural environment. In the early 1980's, Heath (1983) researched the language and literacy development of three cultural groups in the Piedmont Carolinas. Her work revealed distinct differences in approaches to language and literacy among working class Anglo-Americans, working class African-Americans, and middle class Anglo-Americans. The observations discussed in this paper seek to ascertain whether there are unique approaches to early literacy among children reared in a rural Appalachian culture.

The reading and writing development of two children, Billy and Amber, will be described in this article. Throughout the study, I sought answers to the following questions:
1. How did these two children develop as readers and writers during the kindergarten year?
2. How did the physical environment, social context and rural setting of the children's homes and school influence their literacy development? (Heath, 1983)
3. How did family and cultural background influence the children's literacy development? (Heath, 1983)
4. How did the materials and structure of the kindergarten classroom affect the literacy development of these two children? (Morrow, 1993).

Appalachian culture is characterized by a love of the land and a strong sense of kinship (Klein, 1995). Family traditions, intergenerational ties, and the importance of place are valued in Appalachian communities. Successful school experiences for Appalachian children build on the traditions of
families and communities, unique language characteristics, and personal strengths of each child. Therefore, I will first describe Billy and Amber's community, then their family backgrounds, and finally the kindergarten classroom environment. This will be followed by an in-depth look at each child's literacy development and suggested strategies educators might use to acknowledge and support the distinctive reading and writing development of rural Appalachian children.

Community and cultural contexts

Billy and Amber live in a small rural community in the Appalachian mountains of North Carolina. The families in this community represent a range of economic backgrounds, but often share similar religious and cultural experiences. Traditional country music, dance, storytelling, and crafts, such as quilting and weaving, are familiar to most of the children and families through participation in community events.

Farming is a common occupation in this area and children frequently see cows, goats, horses, sheep, and wild turkeys as they are riding to and from school and while they are playing outdoors. Most children in the class have had pets, including horses, goats, dogs, cats, and gerbils. Children have many opportunities to feed, pet, and observe a variety of domesticated animals. Vegetable gardening, preserving, and canning food are also familiar family activities.

Many children in this community have the freedom to investigate the woods and creeks around their homes. This environment fosters many hands-on experiences with the outdoors and opportunities for observing, classifying, and communicating about the natural world. Upon entering kindergarten, Billy and Amber brought many experiences
from nature and from their families and cultural back-
grounds.

**Family background**

Billy, an only child, lived with both of his parents in a mobile home in a remote hollow where his father's family had lived for several generations. Other members of the extended family, including Billy's cousin Jason, lived in mobile homes on the same property. Both boys spent quite a bit of time outdoors exploring the woods, creeks, and nearby farms and playing with the animals on the property. Jason and Billy, who were born two weeks apart, were constant companions before they began school and continued as friends in the same kindergarten class.

Billy's father was a mechanic and played in a country music band. His mother was employed in a factory. Both parents worked seasonally in the local Christmas tree industry, his mother making roping and his father driving truck loads of trees to the northern United States.

Amber lived with her mother, father and younger brother in a large house overlooking one of the family's Christmas tree farms. Her father was a grower and her mother worked part-time in the family business. After school, Amber joined her mother and brother in the office of the tree nursery.

Amber's extended family had lived in the same county for several generations, and visited frequently. Amber's mother and grandmothers gardened, canned some of the family's food, and enjoyed craft activities. In the fall, one of Amber's grandmothers helped the kindergarten class make apple butter. Religion played an important role in the life of Amber's family. Amber attended Bible study classes one day a
week, and once shared her memorized verse with the class during show and tell.

**The classroom environment**

The kindergarten classroom was organized around constructivist principles. An emphasis was placed on children's active exploration, experimentation, and decision-making. Children were encouraged to choose materials and activities, and solve their own social problems with adults in the classroom as facilitators. During large group times, the children and teacher discussed "personal news," weather, the lunch menu, and upcoming special events.

This was also a time for introducing new topics, shared book experiences, singing and movement, or introducing classroom guests. Weekly themes were planned to include community resources, families, and culturally relevant experiences. The themes included grandparents, families at work, farm animals, folk tales, and people with special needs. The theme content included self, family, neighborhood, and community, and supplied a developmental framework for the curriculum (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Children's literature served as a focal point for most of the themes.

The teacher, assistant, and classroom volunteers read to children individually or in small groups at various times of the day. Children always had access to a small library, consisting of about 200 books, housed in the classroom. In addition, 20-30 library books related to the themes of the week were rotated on a regular basis. There were many opportunities for children to explore books independently or with a friend. During center time children could also tell stories using flannel board or magnet board characters, or "write" stories using magnetic letters.
A writing center was located at one end of the room, near a chalkboard, which children sometimes chose for writing activities. The standard materials at the center included different sizes and colors of paper, envelopes, blank books, stamp pads, and felt tip markers.

Throughout the second semester, short periods of time twice a week were devoted to total group writing. The teacher occasionally modeled invented spelling to groups of children by taking a word a child suggested as a topic for writing and asking the group to suggest a way the word might be spelled.

For example, if the suggested topic was 'dinosaurs,' the teacher would pronounce the word slowly and then call on the children to offer letters. The children might call out the letters D-N-S-R-S. This encouraged the children to take risks with their own spelling. The teacher and assistant talked with children before and during the writing to show support of children's topics and writing processes.

Twice a week, the children read with their sixth grade buddies from the same school. Sometimes the older children read to the younger ones and other times the younger ones read or shared ongoing projects. The two groups corresponded with each other on several occasions during the year.

**Billy: Connecting literacy to the world of nature**

Billy was very quiet and observant at the beginning of the school year, waiting for the teacher and assistant to facilitate his choice of centers and to encourage him to participate in groups and work independently. He often requested one-on-one lap reading and enjoyed a variety of books. He was familiar with many of the classroom books and library books including folk tales and Mother Goose rhymes. One day he
told the teacher that he knew about *Corduroy* (Freeman, 1968) because he had that book at home.

Billy seemed to connect with reading and writing in several ways. One way was through his interest in copying favorite stories. A second way was rewriting familiar stories using invented spelling. A third literacy connection was his interest in animals and nature. Through these interests, Billy was moving from an oral language mode into the world of print.

A fascination with maps and globes led Billy to learn that Africa was a place on the globe and that water was represented by the color blue. One day, while looking at the globe, he pointed and said, "That says Pacific Ocean and I'll show you where they're fighting." One another occasion, he copied words from a globe. Apparently, this interest had been sparked at home.

Billy looked at books alone or with Jason for long periods of time. His interest in animals and nature was reflected in drawings, writings, and reading materials. Snakes, grizzly bears, dinosaurs, and turtles were among his favorite topics. After checking out a library book on turtles, Billy drew a picture of a turtle and wrote, "He's going to the water to take a swim," in pre-phonetic spelling (Figure 1).

During a unit on wild animals, Billy brought a set of animal picture information cards to school. At center time, he sat alone for thirty minutes studying and naming the pictures. He protected his cards by lying on top of them and shared them with others only when he was nearby to supervise. Early in the year, Billy drew large shapes and figures, typically centering his drawings on the paper and sometimes adding a
few letters. For most of the year, he wrote at the pre-phonetic spelling stage, using random letters to represent words.

Billy's artwork became more representational as his writing developed. By the second semester, he wrote pages of capital letters — sometimes copied and sometimes random letters — to represent the stories he was composing and writing. His art and writing often flowed together as he designed elaborate 'frames' and designs to border his stories.

![Figure 1](image.png)

*Sample of Billy's writing and drawing early in the kindergarten year*

During our second semester folk tale unit Billy decided to write a book about Rumpelstiltskin. He started around 8:00 a.m. and continued to write for over an hour during large group time and center time. Billy propped a copy of the book up on the rocking chair and proceeded to get up and down from the writing table to look at the pictures. When he
finished drawing the pictures, he wrote several pages of letters, many of them from his name (Figure 2), for the story.

In retelling stories, Billy used grammatical characteristics of Appalachian dialect, such as adding the suffix "s" on present tense verbs after plural nouns (they goes) and using the present verb on occasions when past tense would be used in standard English (eat, rather than ate) (Inscoe, 1991).

![Figure 2](image)

On another occasion, Billy and Jason decided to copy Tailypo (Galdone, 1984), one of their favorite stories. They asked the teacher to cut out a certain shape of paper and tape it to a bookcase. Billy wrote the letters as Jason called them out from the book, using the alphabet chart as a reference.

By early spring, Billy began to spell phonetically. Some examples of his spelling included b-r for bear, t-e-r-t-l for turtle, and s-a-d for sand. At this time, he wrote
independently for longer periods while continuing his interest in copying from books and in writing familiar stories.

Billy brought books to school and often chose to look at books in the library center. He and Jason got together, often hiding behind a bookshelf or the piano, to pore over books, especially those about maps, dinosaurs and animals. One day, Billy checked out a library book on snakes. Instead of asking the teacher to read the book to him, he showed her the pictures, named the snakes, and pointed to the ones which were poisonous. Another day, the assistant asked what kind of animal he was painting. Billy said, "You know, you've seen it — it starts with 'H'."

Storytelling, a well-known mountain art form, was also a popular activity in Billy's kindergarten class. The following story told by Billy includes characteristics of the oral storytelling tradition, such as repetition of phrases, surprise, and the use of animal classifications as names ("Elephant", rather than "the elephant")

*The Tiger and the Elephant*

A tiger went for a walk and met up with an elephant. Elephant eat the tiger with his big long nose; eat him up. And the tiger scratched the elephant and the elephant died. And the tiger eat the elephant. The tiger took it home and share it with his cubs and friends.

In stories and conversations during play, Billy demonstrated other common characteristics of Appalachian dialect, including 'a' prefixing on such words as a-runnin' (Christian, Wolfram, and Dube, 1984) and double modals, such as "liketa" and "supposeta" (Wolfram and Christian, 1976).
Amber: Connecting home and school literacy

From the start of the school year, Amber easily selected from among the activities in the classroom, appearing very confident in her choices. Her most frequently chosen activities were art, sociodramatic play, reading, and writing. Amber was often chosen as a playmate by her peers and she played easily and cooperatively with many children in the class. During play, Amber demonstrated leadership skills and creativity.

Amber started the year using writing for many purposes. She wrote telephone messages in the housekeeping area, grocery lists, letters to friends, lists of names, and long imaginative stories. During the fall, Amber's writing included a combination of mock cursive and pre-phonetic spelling (Figure 3). She drew small detailed pictures and her letter formation was well-controlled.

Amber used pre-phonetic spelling when she wrote the Humpty Dumpty rhyme in her Mother Goose book. Amber wrote the rhyme in random letters, then read it back to her teacher. When she came to the end of the writing before she finished saying her rhyme aloud, she realized that her writing did not match the oral rhyme. She added more letters to the end of the rhyme. Then she reread the rhyme four more times, following the letters with her marker, and adding letters to the end each time until she was satisfied that the written and oral versions matched. This process took approximately twenty minutes.

Amber often wrote titles for her stories, or a first line in phonetic spelling, then the rest of the story in mock cursive. It seemed that, although she was capable of sounding out words and knew the sound-letter relationships, this process was too time-consuming to use for an entire story. By spring
her phonetic spellings included all salient sound features in words. Examples were: TRANSORS RX for Tyrannosaurus Rex, SMR for summer, and TLEPO for Tailypo.

Amber was frequently read to at home and school. In kindergarten she began to read first through memorization, then by recognizing initial letters and sight words. She identified alphabet letters and knew most sound-letter relationships before coming to school. Using this knowledge, along with her sense of story structure, Amber eagerly engaged in new reading experiences. Within the first few weeks of school she learned to read the names of all class members.

Figure 3
Sample of Amber’s writing from early kindergarten year

During the pet unit, Amber arranged words the teacher had written on strips of paper and read sentences such as
"Cats have cat food. Cats have fur. Horses have four legs. Dogs have bones." She read poems and sentences from chart paper, pointing to words as she said them. In early April, Amber read the poem Boa Constrictor (Silverstein, 1974) to herself, asking for very little help from her teacher.

A verbally fluent child, Amber told long stories using the language of books and imaginative expression. She used familiar book themes and characters when composing and telling her own stories. Amber often adapted book language in her storytelling, as she did in the following story, "The Little Train," written in January.

Once there was a little baby train. She couldn't move her wheels so fast. She would have to have training for herself and the little train said chug-chugga and that was because she was a little train. And she knew that every train of her family hated her and laughed at her. And she sung a song, Chugga, chugga, chug and she cried and she cried.

Later in the year she wrote a series of Cinderella stories based on the Disney movie and printed versions of the fairy tale (Figure 4). The following is an example of one of Amber's Cinderella stories, as read to the teaching assistant.

Cinderella was a really sad girl because she didn't like her sisters or her mother. Cinderella was very, very, very mad because she was the oldest and her sisters thought she was a mean, mean little girl. She went to the palace that night. She was going to the palace 'til her mother saw her. Then her sisters saw that she had Anastasia's beads and Druzella's ribbons. And the two sisters thought that the two mean little mice got the ribbons. And Cinderella started to cry and met this Fairy Godmother. The Fairy Godmother said, "I will
"turn you into a very pretty girl. Bibbity, Bobbity, Boo. Clock one, Clock two, sang."

Although by spring she was competent as a beginning reader, Amber read word-by-word and did not use much expression. She seemed to concentrate on matching written and oral words and page turning. When reading Bears on Wheels (Berenstein, 1969), she paused between words and did not make comments about the story or pictures.

In contrast to her beginning reading, Amber's storytelling was vibrant and expressive. Her lengthy stories included characteristics of Appalachian dialect, such as drawing out some words and repeating others. She developed plots which included dilemmas and elements of surprise in a logical sequence. Family characters, religious themes, and fairy tale motifs such as death of a parent, kidnapping or desertion,
were prevalent in her storytelling. Here is an excerpt from her story of Picky the Whale.

And the whale always, always, always got in trouble. But his momma, Marilyn, knew a lot of things about Picky. "Picky, Picky," said Marilyn, "Where are you?" "Here I am, Mother. I went to see out, to explore the sea. Oh and it was fun but up ahead was something terrible happened. There was killer whales in front of me, and millions of them! God, I couldn't believe how many killer whales that I ran and got some friends of mine! . . ."

And one day, some killer whales came up to the house, of Marilyn’s house, and they captured Picky’s mother. "Picky, Picky, Picky!" hollered Marilyn. But they wouldn’t let her talk. She talked for a minute, but they wouldn’t let her talk. The killer whales took Marilyn to the killer whales’ boss. The killer whales’ boss said "If you don’t come in to me, I will blast off your head!" And she didn’t and they blasted up her head. And Picky went and got some of his friends. Sixty, I mean, a hundred and hundreds of millions. Except Picky always wanted to explore but he couldn’t; he knew he had to save his mother . . . Then they got to the cave and they knocked on the door and the killer whales’ boss said, "Let me in before I blast up the door!" "No!", said the boss of the killer whales. "I'll blast up the door with one hour." So they blast up the door in one hour. They found their mother dead. So, that was the end of her.

Said Picky, "I guess I don’t have no more mother. I'll have to live with one of my friends." Then he lived with one of this friends. Oh, it was fun! And next week it was church time. And on Saturday they buried Picky’s mother. And it was too hard for Picky to get along by hisself.
In telling this story Amber demonstrated several characteristics of Appalachian grammatical structure: adding the suffix -ed to a regular verb form to make it past tense (knowed, rather than knew or known), using "done" as an assertion ("I done it"), and irregular pronoun forms (hisself) (Wolfram and Christian, 1976).

Conclusions

By the end of kindergarten, Billy and Amber were both enthusiastic about their beginning reading and writing abilities. They had developed unique styles and approaches to literacy, stemming from home and cultural influences, as well as a kindergarten environment, which supported their personal approaches to reading, writing, and storytelling.

Amber was encouraged in her oral fluency and storytelling when both the teacher and assistant took time to listen to her, videotape her stories and encourage her to share her stories with others. Her invented spellings were supported by the teachers who helped her by slowly sounding out words and modeling invented spellings for the class. Amber's dialect and storytelling style were honored as her authentic approaches to literacy.

The approach with Billy was different. He seemed to need more time to bring important pieces of information from home and connect his interests with the kindergarten curriculum. Billy's chosen topics for literacy expression (nature, animals) and the settings of some of his stories conveyed the impact of the Appalachian culture on his literacy development. The adults in the classroom encouraged his sharing of items from home and incorporated his books and picture cards within the daily routine. Billy's copying style was also supported with plenty of paper, writing implements, and time for writing in various places about the room. His
needs for privacy and extended time for writing were respected.

Both Billy and Amber progressed well in a flexible, supportive kindergarten environment. Through their creativity and imaginations they were making sense of their literary worlds. As they joined literacy activities with play, they made meaningful connections and developed their understanding of the purposes of reading and writing (Newman and Roskos, 1990).

Within a constructivist, whole language classroom, these children were able to build their own language using adults and other children as assistants in their learning processes. The adults who worked with the two children at school tried to take into account the dynamics of their home and cultural contexts, as well as their understanding of story and print (Pellegrini, 1991). Billy was not forced to come to the rug for group time when he was immersed in writing Rumpelstiltskin, nor was he told to use standard English in his storytelling. Amber was encouraged to take time she needed to complete her writing of Humpty Dumpty without being pressured to move on to another activity.

The gifts of time and adult interest encouraged Billy and Amber to pursue their individual approaches to literacy. Both children applied their experiences, cultural backgrounds, and knowledge of the world to literacy events, interpreting those events in ways that were understandable to them.

Children's Books Cited in Article

References


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