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Kelly M. Horn

University of Wyoming, kellyhorn27@gmail.com

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Using the Ideological Model of Literacy to Approach

Early Childhood, Instruction, and Assessment

Kelly Horn

University of Wyoming

Abstract

This paper explores the ideological model of literacy as a means to perceive early childhood literacy development as well as inform instruction and assessment in the classroom. This model suggests that literacy and its uses are dependent on social contexts whereas the autonomous model views literacy as a set of defined skills to be mastered. Young children have developed as literate people before formal schooling begins because they have grown up observing the literate behaviors of adults. By becoming culturally- and socially-responsive, teachers can use this knowledge to advise their instruction and incorporate outside of school literacies into the classroom. An ideological approach to assessments would allow for teachers to utilize a variety of evaluative methods, some of which could be integrated into daily activities. This paper concludes with the argument that an ideological approach to literacy learning, instruction, and assessment would benefit students as well as teachers if the approach was done so holistically and intentionally.

Keywords: ideological, autonomous, literacy, early childhood, instruction, assessment

Using the Ideological Model of Literacy to Approach Classroom Instruction and Assessments in Early Childhood

Throughout my graduate studies, I became intrigued by the ideological model of literacy that pits itself against the more familiar autonomous model of literacy. The latter model typically informs the ways in which literacy is taught to students in schools as well as how assessments are administered. This view proposes that literacy is the key to social progress and critical thinking. The autonomous model indicates that literacy is a skill to be mastered and it is without social implications, which means that learning particular literacy skills leads to greater social attainment; this leads to an issue of power of one skill over another. It is the model most often utilized in today's education system. People are viewed as literate or not, often times with a biased viewpoint as to what it means to be literate. Brian Street theorized the ideas behind the autonomous model; he also has another idea as to what literacy means (Collin & Street, 2014). The ideological model of literacy argues that literacy is a social practice that is learned through social context and is situationally-dependent.

These days, it seems as though the autonomous model and the skills associated with it tend to be the focus of many schools because it – supposedly – helps prepare students for the academic rigors of standardized testing, which is linked to what many people value in terms literacy. However, the ideological model has shown to be a much more realistic way of viewing literacy because people are influenced by their social surroundings. The academic literacy utilized in schools does not readily transfer to real world situations. Literacy changes historically-speaking as well, which is encouraging for supporters of the ideological model. Moreover, this model argues that literacy is learned through varying social contexts as well as changing situations. People partake in various literacy events every day that engage them in

reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These events inform the literacy practices that tend to shape a society or community. These literacy practice patterns impact how people *do* reading and writing. These practices are based on social customs.

My main interest in the ideological model of literacy lies in the area of instruction and assessment in early childhood classrooms. I have found that the vast majority of assessments in existence for elementary schools fit under the autonomous model of literacy. This paper aims to explain how the ideological model can influence the way in which early childhood literacy, instruction, and assessment are perceived in a formal school setting. It also encourages a re-imagining of instruction and assessments to consider how literacy is a social practice rather than just a skill to be mastered. Many different contexts and situations impact literacy development. How can those contexts and situations influence the way in which instruction is informed and how assessments are created? Throughout this paper, I will explain the differences between the two proposed models of literacy and why the ideological model is significant for young children encountering school literacy; furthermore, I will determine how an ideological approach can be used to inform instruction and utilize assessments before offering conditions needed for the successful implementation of this model in schools.

Autonomous Model vs. Ideological Model

Several ideas exist that attempt to dictate how literacy is defined. Supporters of the autonomous model of literacy believe that “the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility” (Graff & Duffy, 2008, p. 1). Supporters of this model interpret literacy as the independent variable that leads to success and non-literate people are viewed as lacking intelligence. This autonomous view suggests that literacy develops separately from social

and cultural contexts. Many people have accepted this as a societal norm; therefore, it is accepted without disagreement. Throughout history, literacy has been viewed as a “precondition of intellectual, cultural, and social transformation” (Graff & Duffy, 2008, p. 3). Due to this conceptualization, literacy became a commodity of sorts and was controlled by the beliefs and values of those with social authority, or the hegemony. Nowadays, literacy is believed to be a marker of progress and success whereas people that are illiterate are viewed as incompetent or ignorant (Graff & Duffy, 2008).

When education is considered, the philosophy of the normal curve reinforces notions of the standards, aptitude, assessment, and curricula of the individuals (Simon & Campano, 2013). The normal curve in relation to the autonomous model hails individuals as particular types of students, which Simon and Campano (2013) further explain “can shape their self-conceptions as learners, their performances on various measures that claim to objectively depict their learning or competency, and ultimately their life chances” (p. 24). The ideology of the normal curve associates competency to a particular set of autonomous skills to be mastered in a school setting.

Schools typically adhere to the autonomous model to prepare students for the supposed rigors of the real world. Hall (1998) argues that “school literacy is treated as a neutral object to be studied and mastered” (p. 9). Literacy education has proven to be directed toward helping students reach a future state of competence and literateness that will benefit them later in life. These types of practices within the school system are typically accepted by teachers, students, and parents because we have been conditioned to believe that this is the norm; these are the practices and ideologies viewed by stakeholders in education as natural and inevitable (Hall, 1998, p. 9). Often times, students are observed as “empty vessels who passively and uncritically receive ‘deposits’ of information deemed valuable by experts” (Auerbach, 1992, p. 72). The vast

majority of schools currently operating within the United States continue to utilize past approaches when teaching literacy. Classroom instruction focuses on skills-based practices and pedagogies that view literacy as neutral and autonomous (Carter, 2006).

When viewing literacy through an autonomous lens, current instructional approaches are in danger of becoming irrelevant by ignoring the multiple modes of literacy that currently exist in society (Larson, 2006). Though it is important, school literacy is not always what is utilized outside of the classroom walls. Relying *solely* on the autonomous model of literacy alienates learners and puts them at a disadvantage for participating in current and future literate events as well as participating as functional participants in the global economy (Larson, 2006). For example, if literacy is viewed with a singular lens, then students are trained in only one way in which literacy can be used. If a multiple literacies perspective is utilized, then students would be afforded several opportunities to uncover how literacy can be used in the global economy. Often times, literacy is used in a traditional sense within a school setting. However, teaching literacy in *only* this way will put students at a disadvantage because how literacy is used in a rural community may be very different than how it is used in an urban community. Exposure to various modalities of literacy is critical in preparing students for future literacy events they *may* encounter. Societal norms have created a gap between those that are considered literate in the autonomous model and those that are considered illiterate; this gap continues to widen (Hull & Schultz, 2001).

One way to close the previously proposed gap is to take into account the ideological model of literacy. Hall (1998) described this model as involving “*literacies* rather than *literacy* and that the use of literacies creates engagement, involves wider networks, and is consistently related to the everyday lives of people in their communities” (p. 11). The ideological model

suggests that literacy is a social practice that pits itself against the normalcy of the autonomous model of literacy. Literacy learning becomes localized and is dependent on societal norms. Stewart (2011) suggests, “A social practice approach recognizes the limits of a focus on the autonomous skills of reading, writing, numeracy and language, to embrace... what people do with literacy, numeracy and language, with whom, where and how” (p. 45). Skills deemed valuable by the education system can and should still be taught, but an ideological approach can be taken in order to help students learn those skills and associate purpose with the skills being taught.

Practices involving literacy are not neutral and they are not autonomous, according to Simon and Campano (2013); they argue that research should be attentive to issues that encompass identity and varying worldviews. Therefore, through the ideological model, people believe literacy is shaped by social contexts that vary for everyone depending on cultural circumstances. This model also argues that literacy is *one* of the variables that influences the lives of people and any successes they may have (Graff & Duffy, 2008), unlike the beliefs behind the autonomous model. Graff and Duffy (2008) also suggest that “literacy is a product of the special circumstances of its acquisition, practice, and uses, and so reflects the ideologies that guide these” (p. 10). Furthermore, supporters of the ideological model reason that acquiring literacy is not a guarantee that one would have access to power because literacy itself is not empowering; it is circumstantial (Auerbach, 1992). To say that literacy itself is not empowering proves to be a bold statement; still, literacy does not equal power. The way in which people or societies utilize literacy can generate power. Literacy has not shaped society, rather, literacy has changed due to its environment; therefore, the ways in which literacy is taught need to be adapted to fit with current societal norms. The acquisition of literacy is dependent on social

contexts and cultural situations, which is why it is imperative that the notions involved with the ideological model be recognized.

Significant Factors in the Ideological Model

When the topic of literacy is discussed, it is important to speak of practices, activities, events, ideologies, identities and discourses, both in school and out (Hull & Schultz, 2001). The way in which students utilize literacy outside of school often varies greatly from the way literacy is used in a school setting because literacy practices are contingent upon perceptions of social contexts and what successful participation in them looks like. Teachers must be able to recognize the impact that social and cultural factors have on literacy in the lives of their students in order to understand how their students will use literacy in their everyday lives. It is also necessary to recognize that many curricula and assessments nowadays have the same expectations for students despite what type of cultural, economic, or social factors are involved in students' lives; this philosophy fits the autonomous model (Simon & Campano, 2013). The ideological model has much more flexibility than the standard curricula and assessments utilized by most schools currently in operation. Simon and Campano (2013) also argue that "what is constituted as normal varies from context to context" (p. 22). Therefore, a curriculum that integrates itself into one particular school setting may not be the best fit for another school setting with children of different backgrounds. Normal is exclusively normal for those that are involved in that particular social context.

Today's society has accepted the normalcy that the same standards and expectations have been applied to large populations of students (Graff & Duffy, 2008). This is a rather autonomous way of thinking about literacy. Larson (2006) suggests that multiple literacies occur in a variety of activities each day "in multiple contexts and at different times" (p. 322). Viewing literacy in

this way allows one to acknowledge the communicative competencies displayed by various people in their everyday lives (Hull & Schultz, 2001). An unfortunate reality though is what does not get recognized by those involved in the education system, the use of literacy within the lives of learners – or the non-school literacy (Hall, 1998). Literacy needs to be regarded as learner-centered or child-focused; therefore, what educators observe as literate practices should be based on the lives of their students.

The utilization of the ideological model in a school setting is beneficial because it allows for educators to be more authentic in their instruction and the curriculum they use. Authentic assessments and curriculum fit the needs of the students. When those involved in a school system think of literacy with an autonomous mindset, literacy becomes a skill that must be mastered in order to achieve success later in life; these skills are very academic in nature. What is being ignored, however, is the logic that the literacy experiences of people expand into a much wider community than school, which requires them to explore literacy in a variety of social contexts (Hall, 1998) and with a variety of lenses. Using an ideological mindset can help teachers engage students in literacy tasks and experiences that tap into their tacit knowledge about the culture that surrounds them outside of school (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Making tangible connections between home and school will benefit young children in their literacy development.

Young Children Encountering Schooled Literacy

Literacy activities are part of the everyday lives of all people. Strickland (2004) notes that young children learn through observing adults partaking in reading and writing events throughout their daily lives. Thus, literacy activities include reading a menu at a restaurant, writing a grocery list, and observing traffic signs, among other things. The daily observations of others made by children teach them the importance of print and how it is utilized to accomplish

daily tasks. Children acquire the critical components of literacy practices through daily activities that involve their peers as well as the adults they observe, which indicates that learning is social (Strickland, 2004). This claim is supported by Cambourne (1995) when he states that children learn through engagement and by Larson (2006) who declares that learning is accomplished by children through authentic participation in societal practices.

The early childhood years can also be described as the years in which children begin to build a foundation of learning that serves for all future learning (Goldstein & McCoach, 2011). Young children are sponges and soak up the literacy events around them, which in turn socializes them into particular literacy practices. They observe adults' involvement in literacy events and those observations lead children to experiment with various literacies. Larson (2006) illustrates this when she writes,

A key emphasis in critical literacy in early childhood and elementary classrooms is the view of children as critical agents who bring insights on their world to the classroom and who do not first need to acquire a reductive set of print-based literacy skills and knowledge before they can engage in critical literacy practices inside and outside of school (p. 323).

Children bring in various cultural and social experiences that should be embraced within the classroom. These experiences help them develop critical awareness when reading, writing, speaking, and listening, which encourages them to form personal connections with particular texts (Alvermann & Hong Xu, 2003). Unfortunately, when using an autonomous approach, these experiences get pushed aside to focus on the rigorous academic skills pertaining to literacy. The ideological approach accepts these experiences and allows for students to be literate in a variety of ways.

Children and youth are constantly engaging in literate activities outside of school (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Due to this constant engagement with literacy, it is imperative for teachers and parents to encourage students to make connections between their home lives and their school lives. Children begin to experience literacy early in life and should be viewed as literate people when they enter formal schooling. For the reasons previously discussed, it is clear that the ideological model should be used within the early childhood classroom to not only instruct children in how they can use literacy but also when assessing their literacy prowess. By using the ideological approach, teachers can help students engage in developmentally- and culturally-appropriate literacy tasks.

When walking into an early childhood classroom, one will observe children engaging in a variety of literate events. In my experience, I have witnessed children writing detailed stories, however, the words they write do not truly say what they are dictating to me. I have witnessed students making up the words in a picture book while still advancing the overall plot based on visual clues. This participation in literacy happens before students have mastered the autonomous skills deemed necessary for reaching an acceptable level of literateness. These everyday observations have encouraged me to consistently ask the question, why do children engage with literacy in the way that they do? Young children do not need formal, print-based literacy skills or knowledge before engaging in reading and writing practices both inside and outside of school (Larson, 2006). Often times in the early childhood years, students will utilize literacy in the way that they see it being done outside of school, informed by social and cultural contexts. When encountering school literacy, young children bring their experiences from outside of school into the classroom. Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand how children see literacy being done in a non-school context to inform instructional decisions.

Typically, schools emphasize the autonomous view that supports the idea that basic skills and functional literacy are the valued commodities deemed necessary for children to learn (Auerbach, 1992). However, as students enter school, there is much that teachers do not know or understand about them, especially in terms literacy practices. Hall (1998) argues that what is considered “school literacy” is presented to students as the correct pathway to understanding the “right” kind of literacy (p. 8). Herding students down that aforementioned pathway discourages their uniqueness and does not address the cultural and social contexts relevant in their lives. Simon and Campano (2013) argue that this type of constricted viewpoint narrows a teacher’s notions of the literate abilities of students. Young children are impressionable and will adapt to the way in which literacy is presented to them. An ideological approach to literacy in school will aid children in making connections between their school lives and their home lives.

An Ideological Approach in the Classroom

There are many steps to be taken in order to implement a more ideological approach to teaching in the classroom. However, it all begins with the teacher adapting to educate *in response* to his or her students. Teachers must actively search for ways in which “to identify particular cultural discourse patterns in which literacy is embedded and incorporate them into school literacy instruction,” which means that instruction needs to be centered on the reality of learners as it relates to a broader social context (Auerbach, 1992, p. 77-79). It is critical that teachers focus on the lived realities of their students. When teachers instruct in response to the needs of their students, they are being culturally- and socially-responsive. For example, when a teacher takes the cultural factors of their students into account when planning instruction, it allows for deeper and more meaningful engagement. This type of teaching encourages home-school connections in literacy instruction be made for culturally and linguistically diverse

students (Alvermann & Hong Xu, 2003). This idea of being responsive to students relates to other factors that include, for example, socioeconomics, aptitude, and geographical location.

In order to begin instructing in response to students, Simon and Campano (2013) suggest that teachers re-envision the normal classroom as an “intersection of students’ multiple worlds of culture, language, experience, and potential” (p. 23). This ideological approach allows for an authentic space for learning to occur (Larson, 2006). When classroom pedagogies are informed by the experiences and knowledge of students within the classroom, then teachers can better help students see and understand their literacy development and how it relates to a larger context. Hull and Schultz (2001) argue that when teachers draw on what students know then “funds of knowledge can be used to bridge communities to classrooms” (p. 34-35). This notion highlights the significance of employing the use of what children already know when they come into a classroom environment.

After teachers begin to take an ideological approach to classroom instruction and are able to teach in response to their students, literacy learning can become more localized for students. Cambourne (1995) suggests that one key condition in literacy learning during early childhood is engagement; if students are not engaged in language or other means of literacy, then learning cannot occur. One way to engage students is to use their own knowledge and experiences to inform instruction. For example, one can use landmarks within the local community in his or her instruction. Students then have something concrete to which to relate literacy practices. When children are able to make tangible connections, then learning becomes more meaningful. An ideological approach in the classroom would encourage teachers to be more focused on the “language and literacy practices going on beyond the school walls in order to move past disconnection to meaningful use of those practices in ways that do not simply pedagogize them”

(Larson, 2006, p. 321). Using outside-of-school literacy practices allows for teachers to utilize a broader framework to help children dig deeper in their understanding of literacy.

It is important to note that an autonomous view is not wrong, and it is itself an ideological approach to literacy; however, it should not influence the sole definition of literacy. The academic literacies emphasized in the autonomous model can be taught while simultaneously providing students with the understanding and use of literacy practices that are often done outside of a school setting (Larson, 2006). For example, modeled writing proves to be an effective way to incorporate academic literacies, like proper usage of conventions, while also accomplishing a broader goal of writing to real audiences and with real purpose based on socially-relevant norms. When out of school literacies are incorporated into instruction, then students have many avenues in which to understand how literacy can be used in a social context. Hull and Schultz (2001) advocate for this idea by recommending the allowance of multiple starting points for learning and many pathways to progress.

An ideological approach to instruction enables teachers to provide a wide variety of literacy opportunities to their students. Within the classroom walls, teachers can provide students with print-rich environments that incorporate writing areas; a cozy place for children to read and feel comfortable; functional signs and symbols that are integrated into daily activities; and literacy-related play areas that involve memo pads, recipes, cookbooks, and other commonplace items that assimilate print in natural ways (Strickland, 2004). Children should be encouraged to explore various literacy practices that involve concrete places and events located in their communities as well. Hall (1998) suggests that one way to combine literacy learning in the classroom along with the local community is through sociodramatic play because it is a highly-engaging experience for children that demonstrates a sense of authenticity. Simply stated,

sociodramatic play allows young children an opportunity to use their tacit knowledge in a meaningful and engaging way.

Incorporating a social dimension within literacy instruction is typically a successful way to help children develop their knowledge of literacy events and practices (Cambourne, 1995). The ideological approach views literacy as highly dependent on how people use it within a social context. For a teacher of children in their early childhood years, this means that literacy learning can be successful as a social event. Strickland (2004) encourages the use of small-group activities to engage students in reading, writing, math, and other disciplines; interactive instruction where teachers ask students questions and utilize discussions; and interactive meal times – when possible – to engage children in natural conversations when participating in everyday activities.

Indeed, it seems as though these types of literacy events happen naturally, however, they require careful planning because the instruction must build on what is familiar for students. If teachers are socially-responsive to their students, then this type of meticulous planning is an evident possibility. When teachers breach the classroom walls and use literacies found outside of school alongside academic literacies, students will learn in more complex ways that prepare them to participate authentically in the global economy (Larson, 2006). Furthermore, if an ideological approach to instruction is taken to develop the literacy experiences of young children, then assessments should be adapted to evaluate progress in response to students. In early childhood, assessments should be used to guide teaching and learning; therefore, these assessments should reflect the students that are actually being taught in a particular environment (Goldstein & McCoach, 2011).

An Ideological Approach to Assessments

Needless to say, standardized assessments have proven to be a popular topic in the current American education system. Supporters of the ideological model suppose standardized tests as “not only inappropriate but largely unethical in that they privilege particular contexts, identities, and knowledge while marginalizing all others” (Carter, 2006, p. 98). The way in which assessments are administered is primarily autonomous; therefore, assessments must be re-envisioned in order to address the varying cultural and social contexts so present in the lives of students today (Simon & Campano, 2013). School districts across the nation teach literacy programs with fidelity which can lead to a perceived crisis in the results of standardized literacy assessments. This crisis is perceived because standardized assessments are not created with all types of children in mind. Often times, traditional assessments are laden with underlying autonomous values and ideas that dictate what literacy is and, therefore, how it must be evaluated (Larson, 2006). Standardized assessments emphasize the importance of traditional school literacy while out of school literacies remain unaddressed.

Strickland (2004) argues that the documentation and demonstrating of improvements in literacy in the early grades rests on quality assessments; however, there prove to be several complexities involved in assessing young children because their literacy development is ongoing and should be evaluated over time. Young students must be assessed in order to track and understand their literacy development. Strickland (2004) also marvels that the problem with assessment is ensuring a clear purpose and using appropriate, ethical ways in which to assess young children from a variety of social contexts. In my experience, assessments are not necessarily for assigning grades; instead, they are used as formative means to advise instruction and should not evaluate one particular set of autonomous skills. These are assessments *for* learning, which is the shift that Stiggins (2007) deems appropriate over assessments *of* learning.

Stewart (2011) argues that standards used to create large-scale assessments are blind to the varying backgrounds of students, and that the sole requirement of these assessments is for a student to demonstrate competency in the standards. Assessments should consider not just curriculum-based literacy concepts and skills, but they should involve ways in which to measure the literacy practices of students both inside and outside of school.

Therefore, the question remains, how does one evaluate the literacy development of young children while keeping both school and non-school literacies in mind? Larson (2006) recommends using multiple assessments that are guided by distinct values and beliefs about childhood, literacy and learning that include standardized assessments, observational and documentary assessments, and responsive-listening assessments. Multiple data points can help teachers evaluate what children do with literacy, which could lead to assessments that depend on social contexts that evaluate progress over achievement. The use of multiple assessments also supports the aforementioned idea to provide children with various starting points to learn and to show progress in their literacy development. It is vital to note that young children often are able to show what they know in regards to literacy rather than to tell or write about what they can do. This is why observational and documentary assessments serve importance when evaluating what children do with literacy. Responsive-listening assessments provide children with a chance to generate their own method of evaluation by offering their knowledge and understanding to a teacher without being asked to do so. Consequently, several methods of assessment also provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways. Standardized assessments alone are not accurate measures of student understanding in the realm of literacy (Larson, 2006).

Although using multiple forms of assessment is an effective way to incorporate the ideological model of literacy into the classroom, the involvement of students in their progression is of the utmost significance. As previously mentioned, assessments should be used to inform learning, but they can also be utilized to inform students of their literacy development. It is critical for students to determine how to do better next time, or how to continue to improve. When teachers are willing to share achievement targets with students and use immediate feedback when assessing children, then students become involved in their learning progression and a partnership flourishes (Stiggins, 2007). Learning becomes social when this partnership exists, which in turn supports the ideological model of literacy in a classroom setting. The feedback aspect of assessment is imperative because children learn literacy through adult responsiveness (Cambourne, 1995).

Furthermore, allowing students to create their own opportunities for assessment is a factor that can help guide the evaluation of their literacy development. In reality, schools will not disregard standardized tests as a means to assess autonomous literacy skills. Instead, they should be used as one method of assessment as discussed previously. Standardized tests are considered obtrusive assessments because instruction must cease in order for them to be taken. The integration of unobtrusive assessments – like observational, documentary, and responsive-listening evaluations – can help teachers find a balance between assessing with an autonomous approach and an ideological approach. Young children come to school with very divergent learning experiences. When assessments are embedded into commonplace activities for young children to do, then students will have been afforded the opportunity to demonstrate their literacy understanding in a more authentic way (Strickland, 2004). This can help children build confidence as it pertains to confirming their literacy development. It also encourages students to

determine the value between academic literacy and the literacies they encounter outside of school, which further establishes home and school connections.

The Ideological Model in a Kindergarten Classroom

After learning about the ideological model of literacy in a graduate course during the fall at the University of Wyoming, I was inspired to utilize an ideological approach to inform how I was instructing my students in the area of literacy. My principal had encouraged me to utilize the practices and instructional techniques that I was being introduced to in my graduate studies within my Kindergarten classroom. Before truly integrating this approach into my daily instruction, I first had to learn more about my students and the literacy events present in their lives – both in school and out of school. To begin, I sent home an inventory with several questions for parents to fill out (see Appendix A for more information on the inventory sent home to parents). Parents were asked about literacy practices at home as well as community landmarks that their children were familiar with. After compiling the information received from parents about the students, I was then able to plan a learning unit that focused on relevant literacy practices and geographic locations within the community. This aided me in developing an authentic unit of instruction that would encourage personal connections for the students.

Once the data were organized from the student inventories, I was able to decipher which locations within our community my students were most familiar with, like the bakery, grocery store, and fire station. Hall (1998) suggests that ideological literacy “draws its meaning and use from being situated within cultural values and practices” (p. 11). For that reason, I chose the aforementioned locations to utilize throughout the literacy unit because they were places that the children had actually been in. The inventories also included information about the various types of literacies used at home. Students observed literacy being done in the form of reading recipes

to help bake cookies; writing grocery lists; and reading birthday or greeting cards as well as writing them, among many other literacy events. With this wide array of literacy practices, I was able to draw from many different forms to use within the classroom walls.

For me, it was important to not just teach my students about the wide variety of literacies they could potentially be exposed to within our community. I felt that it was critical for local businesses and community members to be as involved in this unit as possible. Therefore, I recruited several people in helping me accomplish the goals of this extensive unit. For example, the local bakery was a location that my students were very familiar with. One day, we took a short walk to the bakery in order to hear from the owner/head baker as to how she uses literacy every day. She showed the children her book of recipes and emphasized the importance of being able to read a recipe or else her cookies would not taste very good. She also showed them other forms of literacy in her shop that included price tags, menu items, and even the numerical literacy needed to operate the cash register. The students were exposed to several types of literacies and were able to grasp how literacy can be used in a bakery or restaurant.

After the short visit to the bakery, the students had a lot to say about their own personal experiences with reading recipes. They had a rich discussion about how they use recipes at home to help their parents cook or bake. This enthusiasm led to another literacy-related task – to make a class cookbook. Students were to bring the recipe for one of their favorite foods to school in order to make a cookbook. They even practiced writing their own recipes (which went into the class cookbook as well) after I modeled how to do so. The modeling provided me with an opportunity to address the autonomous approach to literacy by teaching both phonetic and high frequency word spelling, conventions, and spacing. After making observation and documentary assessments of my students, I realized that this literacy unit successfully combined the

ideological and autonomous approaches. The skills needed in order to read and write were still taught; however, they were taught in a way that encouraged students to make meaningful connections with the types of literacies being utilized.

Throughout the unit, the students were exposed to the literacies present in a variety of locations. We started to take short walks around the small town once a week to uncover literacies and how people used them throughout the day. These walks became known as “literacy laps.” The Kindergarten classes at our school had been hosting a “Community Helpers” program for several years and it was yet another great way for the students to understand how literacy can be used in all career fields. Different community members would come in each week to discuss their jobs or hobbies with the children and each time, one of my students asked how that person used reading and writing in their job. Depending on the community member and their profession or hobby, they also offered how to use literacies in non-traditional modalities, like email, computer programs, etc., as well. After the students were exposed to more and more types of literacies, I began observing them being used and discussed in their sociodramatic play during free-time. Connections were being made.

These were the experiences that the literacy unit contained. With these experiences, students were able to make meaningful connections to what they were learning in school with what they were exposed to in their community. Although this was only a four-week unit, it was incredibly powerful for the Kindergarten students. The way in which they talked about literacy and how it was being used on a daily basis was inspiring because they were beginning to recognize that literacy was much more than reading and writing in school. This is a way of instructing that takes dedication and patience. A teacher must be dedicated in understanding who their students truly are in order to teach in response to their needs and backgrounds. Instructing

young children with an ideological approach benefits them immensely because they are taking the autonomous skills they are explicitly taught in school and using said skills to inform their use of literacy in their community. This makes learning meaningful and authentic.

Conclusion and Implications

In this paper, I have discussed the implications of employing the use of the ideological model of literacy to inform instruction and assessment in the early childhood years.

Traditionally, the autonomous model is reflected in schools because literacy is viewed as a particular set of skills to be mastered by students in order to be successful. Standardized assessments further support the values of this model by evaluating students based on precise criteria deemed “correct” in the vision of the hegemony. On the other hand, the ideological model proposes that literacy is dependent on social and cultural contexts; therefore, literacy varies and changes based on societal norms and even geographic locations.

Young children enter formal schooling with knowledge already as to how to use literacy based on what they have observed. Using what students are familiar with during classroom instruction will help teachers incorporate this model into a school setting. An ideological approach to assessment and instruction would encourage students to demonstrate their understanding of how to use their literacy knowledge through a variety of modalities that exist both inside and outside of school. Through the incorporation of instruction influenced by the ideological model and assessments that evaluate what students do with literacy, the varying social contexts that exist for children can begin to be taken into account by teachers in schools.

Additionally, I argue that the ideological model of literacy would be an approach that would not only benefit schools and teachers, but it would support students in their literacy development. Authentic spaces for learning and assessing can be created for children to foster

understanding of literacies to be encountered both inside and outside of school. However, in order to successfully implement the ideological model into schools, there are two conditions that must be considered. First, a paradigm shift in a holistic sense must occur. It is not enough for one teacher to incorporate the ideological model into their early childhood classroom. This way of thinking needs to be integrated across grade levels in order for it to be fully successful. Second, the use of this model in instruction and assessment requires time. In order for it to benefit students, teachers and schools must be dedicated in incorporating the ideological model in their instructional and assessment practices. Sustainability is a key component in the success of a paradigm shift.

Future Directions

Shifting the way in which literacy is approached within a traditionally autonomous school setting often sparks controversy. Pushback from stakeholders, like parents, school board members, and even other teachers, is a very real possibility. Change is a challenging task for all involved. Due to the research I have done regarding the ideological model of literacy and how it can be used to inform instruction and assessment, I have re-evaluated the way in which literacy is viewed in my classroom. I have been able to take the social and cultural factors involving individual students into account when planning instruction, as detailed in a previous section about a literacy unit created in response to my students and the community we lived in.

It has proven to be a more challenging task to integrate an ideological approach in creating assessments that fit the social contexts my students encounter inside and outside of school. Creating an assessment that evaluates the literacy prowess of students would require flexibility as well as the realization that even students that live within the same community encounter different forms of literacy outside of school. Evaluating literacy development reliably,

validly, and fairly would require careful planning. With these thoughts in mind, I have considered many questions that provide me with the desire to complete further research in order to come to possible conclusions about the ideological model of literacy and its use in assessments. Is there a way to evaluate how perceptions or interpretations of literacy impact a child's approach to schooled literacy? Can an assessment be created that reliably evaluates how a child uses literacy? How do children acquire literacy in the social context of the classroom? These are some of the questions that inspire me to further my understanding of how the ideological model can be used by teachers to address the vast literacy knowledge that students bring with them to school each day.

Furthermore, I would like to continue my growth as a professional by fostering my knowledge on the ideological approach pertaining to assessments in early childhood. The questions posed previously have encouraged me to search for answers. Currently, the vast majority of assessments utilized by public schools are autonomous in nature, meaning there are few ideological assessments being used to inform instruction. I would like to conduct a longitudinal research study to determine what the effects of an ideologically-based assessment would be on the literacy development of young children. In order to do this, I first must work with experts in the realm of educational assessment in order to develop a reliable, valid, and fair assessment to be used to authentically evaluate children's literacy development. I would also need to have access to a district that would allow the intermixing of the ideological and autonomous models when helping children develop their literacy understanding in a variety of social contexts.

After doing much of my own research, I have found that there is little to no research regarding this topic. An ideological approach in the classroom is commonplace; however,

ideological assessments that can reliably assess the literacy development of young children – or students of higher grade levels – are far and few between. If afforded the opportunity, it would be my professional plan to develop an assessment for young children that fits within the ideological approach. Then, I would conduct research to determine the effectiveness of said assessment. This research would be a starting point to provide guidance as to whether the ideological model of literacy can effectively be intertwined in developing assessments for students in their early childhood years.

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