

THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION'S OUTSTANDING DISSERTATION AWARD, which has been given yearly since 1964, recognizes exceptional contributions made by doctoral students in reading or related fields. Candidates may be self-nominated or nominated by their dissertation advisors. Each submits a monograph based on the dissertation, which must have been completed during the previous academic year. These monographs undergo rigorous review by the Association's Subcommittee on the Outstanding Dissertation Award. The winner and other finalists are recognized at IRA's Annual Convention in April or May. The award also carries with it a monetary prize made possible by a donation from Silver Burdett & Ginn, Inc., a U.S. educational publishing house.

In 2001, three dissertations received this honor from among the finalists. The following summaries of the 2001 award-winning dissertations have been provided for *RRQ* by their authors.

Children who do not respond to early literacy instruction: A longitudinal study across kindergarten and first grade

Stephanie Al Otaiba

George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Researchers and educators have expressed concern about children who do not benefit from effective and well-implemented early literacy interventions (e.g., Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2001; Blachman, 1997; Torgesen, 2000). The purpose of this abstract is to summarize a study that tracked children's responsiveness to treatment (Al Otaiba, 2000). This 2-year perspective permitted identification of child characteristics that correlated with treatment responsiveness over time. Identifying these characteristics could improve screening measures and selection of children for early and intensive intervention.

Participants were selected from a larger study of 312 students (Fuchs et al., in press). Children were in one

of four groups: (a) treatment in kindergarten and first grade, (b) treatment only in kindergarten, (c) treatment only in first grade, and (d) a no-treatment comparison group. Kindergarten treatment included either Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (K-PALS) (Fuchs et al., 2001) and teacher-directed phonological awareness activities selected from Ladders to Literacy (O'Connor, Notari-Syverson, & Vadasy, 1998), or Ladders alone. First-grade treatment was First-Grade PALS.

At kindergarten, unresponsiveness to treatment was defined as performance in the lowest 30th percentile of growth on two phonological measures: segmentation and letter-sound naming. Treatment responsiveness, by contrast, was defined as performing at or above the treat-

ment mean. At first grade, unresponsiveness was defined as reading 40 words per minute or less (Good, Simmons, & Smith, 1999); responsiveness was defined as reading at or above the treatment mean. A total of 104 students were selected from the larger study and fit one of three student responsiveness categories: never, sometimes, or always responsive. Seven students received special education services for speech and language. There were no statistically significant differences between never, sometimes, or always responsive students in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, or Title I participation.

Because little is known about student characteristics associated with unresponsiveness, I selected a relatively large number of measures used in prior related research. These measures included phonological retrieval (rapid letter-naming), encoding of phonological information with (sentence imitation) and without syntactic information (word sequence), phonological discrimination (word discrimination), general verbal ability as measured on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test–Revised (PPVT–R), syntactic knowledge (grammatical closure), and attention and conduct (measured by the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment). Fidelity of treatment information was collected frequently to evaluate whether unresponsiveness to treatment was related to poor treatment implementation.

Only 7.05% of treatment students were unresponsive, compared with 25.36% of students in the no-treatment control group. Only 8% of students who were unresponsive in kindergarten were responsive in first grade. Always-responsive students were significantly better than never-responsive students on the following measures: Achenbach ($ES = -1.20$; lower scores indicate better performance on this measure), grammatical closure ($ES = 1.72$), PPVT–R ($ES = 1.60$), pretreatment rapid letter ($ES = 1.57$) and letter-sound naming ($ES = 1.23$), pretreatment segmentation ($ES = .66$), sentence imitation ($ES = 1.06$), and word discrimination ($ES = .94$). There were no statistically significant differences between never- and always-responsive students on word sequence ($ES = .58$). However, I found never-responsive students were in classrooms with reliably lower treatment fidelity scores for Ladders activities and for PALS during fall of first grade.

A small set of the variables were analyzed using discriminant function analysis to determine which combination of child characteristics in combination with treatment best predicted whether children would be never, sometimes, or always responsive. This combination (i.e., pretreatment rapid letter naming, Achenbach, PPVT–R, sentence imitation, and treatment) correctly identified 82.4% of never-responsive, 84.1% of always-responsive, but only 30% of sometimes-responsive students.

The findings add to the extant research literature in several important ways. First, although the proportion of no-treatment students who did not respond to classroom instruction was similar to percentages reported in reading research (i.e., 25–30%), the percentage of treatment students who were unresponsive (i.e., 7.05%) was lower than reported in studies in the literature that were conducted by adult tutors. This suggests that peer-mediated early literacy approaches may help reduce the number of students at risk for reading difficulties.

Second, the descriptions of child characteristics associated with unresponsiveness to treatment may provide a tentative set of markers for educators to identify children for more intensive early intervention. These markers include characteristics that are associated with learning disabilities including slow letter naming, poor verbal ability and phonological memory, and poor attention.

Third, the longitudinal design demonstrated that most children (i.e., 92%) who were unresponsive in kindergarten remained unresponsive in first grade. The study, therefore, may have implications for policy as unresponsiveness to treatment may provide an alternative to the discrepancy-based formulas currently used to identify students with learning disabilities. This would seem desirable because many students do not qualify for special services until they fall behind their expected reading achievement. Thus, many children do not receive preventive and remedial reading intervention at critical periods of development.

Fourth, these findings suggest that students who do not respond to kindergarten treatment may require more intensive and individualized intervention than is offered by classwide peer-mediated approaches or by large-group phonological awareness training. Some students may also need treatment with additional treatment components (e.g., fluency training, behavioral training, or vocabulary instruction).

Fifth, the study included large numbers of diverse students and used classroom teachers to implement treatment. The results also highlight the importance of conducting treatment with fidelity. Never-responsive students were more likely to have been in classrooms with lower treatment fidelity during teacher-directed Ladders activities during kindergarten and First-Grade PALS during fall.

Future research is needed to extend and replicate the findings from this study. Currently, participants are being followed to determine whether children never responsive to treatment will be identified for special education services for reading disabilities. Additional research should validate the salience of the tentative set of markers identified in this study. In order to explore interactions between characteristics and treatments, future studies should include larger sample sizes. Another

logical extension of this work would explore ways to further reduce percentages of unresponsive students either by training children earlier (i.e., in preschool settings) or by providing additional layers of intensive and individualized treatment.

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Family literacy environments and young children's emerging literacy skills

Pia Rebello Britto

Columbia University, New York, USA

The focus of this study (Britto, 2000) was on investigating the association between family literacy environments and the emerging literacy skills of low-income, African American preschool and school-aged children. In particular, the relative and differential association between three dimensions of the family literacy environment—language and verbal interactions, the learning climate and the social and emotional climate—and preschool- and elementary-school-aged children's receptive and expressive vocabulary, school readiness, letter-word identification, and comprehension skills were examined. The language and verbal interactions dimension was defined in terms of language children are exposed to at home, including decontextualized forms of language, rhyming and making up songs, conversations, listening to stories, and narrating fiction or real-life experiences. The learning dimension was described in terms of its structural and functional aspects. The structural aspect included the presence, availability, and access to printed matter in the home. Children's ex-

posure to and experience with printed matter mediated through parental modeling, teaching, and reading styles characterized the functional aspect of the learning dimension. Finally, the social and emotional aspect of the environment was described in terms of the social support, social interactions between parents and children, children's play, and the motivational warmth and emotional support in the home.

The sample in this study included 126 participants from the Newark Young Family Study (NYFS), which was an observational study embedded within the Teenage Parent Demonstration Program (TPD; a welfare demonstration program). All participants were welfare-eligible, African American, predominantly single mothers and their young children. Data were collected at four points, beginning when the children were 7 months of age and concluding when the children were 7 years of age. Principal methods of data collection were structured interviews, selected ability measures, and naturalistic and videotaped observations of mother-child interactions. Data collection at Times 1, 2, and 4 as part of the TPD

project primarily involved interview and survey-based measures. At Time 3 (NYFS observation) or when the children were preschool aged, data were collected during a 3½-hour home visit during which the data collectors administered an extensive series of demographic questions and a set of standard questionnaires to the mothers, evaluated several aspects of the children's development and the home environment, and coordinated several videotaped sections including a shared book-reading session and a puzzle-solving activity. Mother and child verbal interactions during the book reading session were transcribed and coded for several aspects of language use. The puzzle-solving task was coded for maternal quality of assistance and supportive presence.

Three sets of results were obtained. First, based on bivariate correlational analyses, the learning dimension of the family literacy environment was associated with the language and verbal interactions dimension and the social and emotional climate dimension. Second, results from Hierarchical Linear Regression models indicated that children's preschool-aged literacy skills were more significantly associated with the family literacy environment than were their school-aged literacy skills. In particular, preschoolers' expressive vocabulary was associated with the language and verbal interactions and learning climate dimensions. Further, their school readiness skills were associated with both the learning and the social and emotional climate dimensions. Maternal education, an independent variable in all models, also emerged as a significant correlate of children's literacy skills both at the preschool and school age. Third, results from a cluster analyses technique conducted on maternal interactional styles, book reading, and teaching across the book-reading and puzzle-solving activities indicated that the quality of the literacy interaction appears to matter for children's emergent literacy skills. Preschoolers whose mothers' reading and teaching styles reflected all three dimensions in their interactions during book reading and problem solving, performed better on the school readiness test and demonstrated a greater expressive vocabulary.

In conclusion, beginning with infancy, the home environment sets the tone for lifelong learning. In terms of children's emerging literacy, several dimensions of the family literacy environment come together to weave a complex tapestry of activities, experiences, and opportunities to promote the acquisition of these skills. The

strengths of this study are noted across both conceptual and methodological areas. Conceptually this study differs from previous work in that several dimensions of the literacy environment were defined and subsequently examined from a multidimensional perspective.

Methodologically, survey, interview, and structured and naturalistic observation techniques were used to yield a rich corpus of data. Additionally, results of this study are based on a relatively large sample size ($N = 126$), advanced statistical models, and use of multivariate techniques to answer the research questions.

The limitations of the present study are noted in terms of the genre of book (i.e., concept book) used for the book-reading interactions. Concept books are not typically used in studying child language and literacy development as they are not particularly conducive for extended verbal interactions. Second, even though the low scores on the receptive vocabulary test obtained in this study are in accordance with other low-income samples, the restricted range of scores may have hampered the results. Third, the ratings of mothers' reading and teaching styles were based on a one-time (albeit long) observation in the home.

The results of this study bear potential implications for both future research and practice. In terms of research, the family literacy environment needs to be understood within the social and cultural context in which the family resides. Additional directions for future research include examining parental beliefs and attitudes towards literacy as potential influences on the family literacy environment. With respect to practice, given the strong positive associations between the different aspects of the family literacy environment and children's emergent literacy, parents and caregivers need to expose children to print in a variety of ways other than book reading. Also, given that specific aspects of the family literacy environment were associated with specific child literacy skills, interventions to improve problem areas in children's literacy development could target those specific areas of the environment associated with that specific skill.

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Matthew Effects in writing: The patterning of difference in writing classrooms K-7

Kathryn Glasswell

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Differential patterns of progress and achievement for high- and low-progress learners have been well documented in a number of curriculum areas. Several reasons for the existence of such differences have been suggested, including the ideas and instructional practices of teachers (Stanovich, 1986). The study outlined here examined the construction of between-student differences in writing in New Zealand primary (elementary) school classrooms. It provided description and explanation of the means by which expertise in writing was coconstructed by children and their teachers. The analysis and discussion focused on the ways in which qualitatively different developmental pathways were constructed for good and poor writers within a common context. Also examined was the role of participants' ideas in the construction process.

Recent theorising in the psychology of learning and development would support the examination of the role of ideas in developmental contexts (McNaughton, 1995; Valsiner, 1997). In such approaches the ideas of learners and those involved with them are considered to be an important source for their actions. In classroom writing environments, we can expect that teachers' ideas will be related to the activities they provide for learners and the ways in which they interact with them.

The study was conducted in two phases and employed a cross-sectional design across three levels of the primary school. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The first phase provided detailed description of 96 New Zealand primary school teachers' ideas about writing, writers, and classroom activities. An open-ended

questionnaire survey was used to tap teachers' ideas (Kindergarten, Year 4, and Year 7). Post-hoc analysis of responses revealed complex relationships between teachers' aims for their classroom writing programmes, their goals for particular activities, and their reported teaching foci. Telling contrasts were evident in their ideas about the competencies and needs of good and poor writers. Initial analysis seemed to reveal a mismatch between teachers' ideas, their reported practices, and their goals for certain learners. Drawing from research focused on the role of ideas in teaching and learning interactions (Cazden, 1988; McNaughton, 1995; Valsiner, 1997; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), I argued that apparent mismatches in ideas and practices are more productively viewed as differences in the ways teachers prioritize learning goals for certain activities. Teachers held multiple and simultaneous goals (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989) for writing activities, only some of which were met through direct teaching. Other instructional goals were met by indirect means as activities were imbued with information about writing. It was proposed that different learners would integrate and reconstruct the available information in ways that would both reflect and construct their experiences as writers.

The following phase was an intensive nine-classroom observation study, which related teachers' ideas to detailed descriptions and analyses of the range of organizational and interactional patterns provided in their writing programmes. These were, in turn, related to children's ideas about themselves as writers and to their conceptions of what writing is. Case-study data from three classrooms highlighted variations in a complex patterning of differen-

tial outcomes for high- and low-progress writers. A quantitative analysis of data from all nine classrooms identified common patterns of teacher practices for “good” and “poor” writers within and across different levels of the school. Tutorial interactions around writing between teachers and children (writing conferences) were the focus of an extended, multilayered analysis.

Throughout this work, building on the idea that there may be multiple planes of activity (Rogoff, 1993), a view of classrooms as providing multiple sites for development for learner writers is developed theoretically and upheld methodologically. As teachers worked with writers in joint (modelling and conferences), independent (writing time), and ambient (sharing and airing writing) activities, data from multiple sites were collected and integrated to inform the analysis and were used to develop a view of Matthew Effects (Stanovich, 1986) as co-constructed (Glasswell, 1999).

A focus on the experiences of 27 good and 27 poor writers in the activities provided by their classroom writing programmes illustrated a complex patterning of cumulative influences on different learners’ developmental pathways. Analysis of the attending behaviours of good and poor writers indicated differential patterns of engagement in the activities of modelling and sharing. Analysis of collected work samples revealed differences in the word production of the two groups. Conference timing means indicated differences in time allocated to good and poor writers and differences in the number and duration of interruptions to their conferences with the teacher. An innovative conference analysis framework devised in the course of this study was used to track conference interactions on the two dimensions of text and participation. Detailed transcript analysis of conference interactions revealed differences in participation routines and in the intellectual work undertaken by the two groups. Interviews with children provided evidence that good and poor writers’ understandings of classroom activities and their conceptions of writing were often different. Differences between the ideas, actions, and interactions of the two

groups were more marked at Year 7 than at Kindergarten.

The view advanced here is that teachers’ ideas were, via activity, a significant source for the ideas and expertise that children developed. As teachers and children worked together in classroom activity settings, systems of learning and development (McNaughton, 1995) took shape. For good writers these systems functioned well and gave rise to productive understandings and expertise. Poor writers’ systems were limited and limiting, affording them fewer opportunities to develop into self-regulating and self-improving learners. Thus, ideas, actions, and interactions within and across classroom writing activities set up mutual, reciprocal, and cumulative patterns of influence on engagement in activity and on development. A patterning of differential outcomes occurred as the two groups of learners were set in opposing spirals of achievement where the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Implications for interventions for closing achievement gaps include a recommendation for a focus on a systems approach to understanding the coconstruction of between-student differences in writing.

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