100 Children Turn 10: A longitudinal study of literacy development from the year prior to school to the first four years of school

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The study 100 Children Turn 10 took place in five geographically and socio-economically diverse research sites in three states. The Wattles was situated in a low socio-economic area in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. Riverside, an inner urban school site in South Australia was chosen because of its cultural diversity. The site known as Gibbs Crossing was a remote Aboriginal community on the edge of the Western desert in Western Australia. The Hillview school site was situated in an economically advantaged, well-established suburb in Perth. The Sweetwater school site was a suburban area in a large Victorian regional centre with a predominantly Anglo-Celtic school population.

To download the report go to http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2002/100childturn10

What did the study find?
This national research study explored children’s literacy trajectories from preschool through the first four years of school. The study found there was substantial growth in literacy for most children. By their fourth year of school most children were able to read elaborated episodes, extended descriptions and literary or technical vocabulary. Most children were able to produce extended written texts at or above the national writing benchmark for Year 3. However, within this general picture of growth, two key features stood out. First, progress in literacy cannot be generalised across groups: there was a broad range of performance on various dimensions of literacy among children at each site. Second, those children who are not achieving are overwhelmingly from schools serving families living in poverty.

This article explores particular issues for teachers, for educators involved in professional development and for policy makers.

What teaching made a difference to children’s literacy development?
Teaching that made a difference involved gathering data in various ways and responded to what the children knew and needed to know. This form of teaching is dynamic and does not rely on a narrow set of teaching strategies or prepackaged curriculum content. For example the teacher that made a difference at the Indigenous site focused on children’s success and broke learning tasks down into small achievable steps with highly explicit instruction because this was how the particular child at the time achieved success. This teacher respected the local community and participated in community activities.

At an urban site, a child’s physical disabilities were considered and a computer was used to make access to literacy successful. This teacher also knew a lot about this focus child’s out-of-school experiences and adjusted the learning activities to suit what he required. In another case the teacher introduced a program of close and critical reading of texts because she perceived that the students could all decode well but were not understanding nor engaged in what they read. This teacher engaged the students socially and intellectually by using popular culture and by challenging the taken-for-granted meanings of what was read outside school.

Using data-driven responsive teaching
This study showed the importance of teachers who used data-driven diagnostic and responsive teaching. These teachers focused very closely on children’s textual practices. In other words, the teachers responded explicitly to what children said, read, wrote and drew. In their responses they referred to specific words, phrases, ideas and techniques the child was using or attempting to use in their reading, writing, speaking or acting. These teachers responded in great detail to children’s words with profound and sustained concentration. This allowed them to analyse what children could do and were trying to do. Such pedagogy went beyond familiar routines and strategies and the profession would benefit from observational study and discourse analyses of the talk of such teachers during literacy events.

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Several schools used a whole-school approach to literacy which allowed teachers to undertake targeted literacy instruction with individuals or small groups. Some schools were committed to a vision of improvement and shared innovative ways of monitoring what children were learning, and provided creative supplementary instruction when required. In these schools teachers did not take for granted the skills often acquired in the early years of school. In order for observation, diagnosis and responsive teaching to take place, schools required well-resourced programs and perceptive knowledgeable teachers in the early years and also in the continuing years of primary school.

Do late starters catch up?
For the case study children who were late starters there was considerable pressure on the children, their families and their teachers for them to ‘catch up’. Some children had access to different opportunities for literacy learning and play at home which made a difference to what they were able to take up and make use of at school. Some children in the preschool were engaged and learning from books. Some children learnt to crack the alphabetic code later, in school, but they attended to texts like a reader and a learner, rather than seeing texts as alien or uncomfortable objects. These late starters already know how to make texts work for them (even if they still needed a parent or teacher to mediate). There were other children, however, who were also late to crack the code, but who had not yet found ways of connecting to text-based forms of pleasure, learning and work. The research suggests that catching up on the literacy ladder is a privilege reserved for those children who are already socially and economically advantaged in terms of access to print culture. In this report we have used the concept of economic and cultural ‘capital’ to assist our analysis of this sort of social difference. ‘Catching up’ is not easy, especially if one’s life circumstances are difficult, but it is possible when teachers, parents and children make it a priority.

What is the relationship between family poverty and achievement in literacy?
It was clear that the lowest performing children were overwhelmingly located in schools serving families living in poverty. While these schools also contained some children who were able to demonstrate high achievement, and there were some children in all five research sites who did not perform well on our assessment tasks, the relationship between family poverty and lower levels of achievement in school literacy remains problematic. Alleviating lower levels of literacy performance for children living in poverty remains a major educational and social challenge for governments and educators.

In sites where teachers were under stress related to living with little support in remote communities or working in classrooms with many students with compounding problems of poverty learning difficulties and family tensions, the teachers often focused on control rather than finding ways to engage children in learning. Some children had so much time out in not attending or being placed in ‘timeout’ that they missed a lot of instruction time.

Yet the picture in socio-economically disadvantaged schools was by no means uniform or bleak. The research team witnessed several teachers whose delight in students’ thoughts, ideas and potential led to high expectations and high achievements. Often their good humour and the related emotional security of their classrooms were a reflection of a whole-school approach to a shared vision about high expectations and peer support and at times it was particular teachers who provided children with an emotionally safe space to develop and grow. Humour was one observable feature that was hard to miss! Such relational aspects of pedagogical practices and their effects require further study.

Do early assessment procedures always predict the future?
The detailed case studies of focus children revealed that children’s literacy development was not always predictable, linear and sequential. At least one focus child’s later high reading performance could not have been predicted from early literacy assessment. One focus child’s later relatively low reading performance could not have been predicted. Some focus children achieved high letter knowledge scores in 1996, and superior reading and spelling scores five years later. Other children achieved a reasonable letter knowledge score in 1996 but five years later achieved at only a little above the 25th percentile reading assessment. Another child who was identified as at risk at the point of transition from preschool, had very little letter knowledge in 1996 but later scored above the 90th percentile on the assessment of reading.

The differences between some of the focus children’s trajectories and the trajectories that might have been predicted is a powerful reminder that early assessments may imperfectly predict the future. There were some early starters who lost their way, and some late starters who were able to overcome poor early scores with a fortunate combination of good teaching and/or substantial family support.
How do differences in families’ social and cultural capital play out?

Families and communities in this study had differing views about schooling. At the Hillview site many children were fortunate to have parents with the social and cultural capital to monitor their progress very carefully. The parents expected clear communication between school and home. If their children did not get the help that the parents believed they needed then the parents sought private tutoring and assessment. In many cases the language, social and textual practices of the home and the school were similar, creating an easy connection between home and school values and attitudes. For some children these connections did not exist, making it difficult for them to fit easily into established ways of behaving, speaking, and interacting with the sorts of texts that are valued in school. This is what we are calling ‘school literacy’, in an attempt to acknowledge that other forms of literate practice, although not valued in school, are perhaps not so difficult for some children to learn in other contexts.

Some parents who were dealing with difficult life circumstances such as poverty and ill-health mistrusted the school's diagnosis of children with learning difficulties or disabilities and feared teachers’ judgments about poor parenting. Across our research sites, some parents felt themselves unwelcome in the school setting, because of the unspoken valuing of certain forms of cultural and social capital more highly than others. In the Gibbs Crossing site, for instance, while the Indigenous parents were welcome they were not employed in any of the more powerful roles at the school. Those children whose parents have the educational background and social capital to monitor progress carefully, to provide extra support when necessary and to engage in an ongoing dialogue with teachers and schools about their children’s progress were most likely to end up succeeding in school literacy.

We found too that particular ways of behaving in school may be interpreted differently according to gender, and a child’s ability to comply easily with classroom routines. For instance while several focus girls demonstrated a passive lack of engagement in learning, this often went undetected because their compliance with routines enabled them to appear to be making reasonable progress. In contrast, several focus boys were quickly observed to be having trouble complying with school routines. Some boys disliked not having opportunities to select their own tasks and move around the room at will, so rapidly found distractions and were constructed as ‘naughty boys’. Several children’s behaviour worried other children in the class while it prevented them from focusing on the specific literacy practices and knowledge they needed to acquire. It was apparent that the literacy curriculum did not suit the knowledge, skills and dispositions that several boys brought with them to school.

Some teachers did offer programs that engaged all students, not just those academically inclined. The problems with disengaged students, both girls and boys, cannot solely be blamed on the school. Indeed it needs to be understood as a consequence of broader social change affecting families and communities and in particular those living in poverty.

Summary

This study built on the key findings of the of the study 100 children go to school which explored the literacy development of children moving from the year prior to school to the first year of formal school. In the year prior to school there were clearly identified differences between those children who were performing at high levels in terms of measurable literacy proficiencies and the children performing at lower levels. The study of 100 children turn 10 found that some children at least partially bridged the gap, but for others it increased dramatically. This finding requires attention and action. Action does not mean more of the same but rather the need for all teachers to create and share knowledge about good early years literacy teaching and appropriate early intervention. In addition there is a need for a second safety net at 8-9 years of age for children who do not have automatic and independent literacy strategies and repertoires needed to reach their learning potential in primary school. Good first teaching, effective early intervention and a second safety net requires teachers who are knowledgeable and energetic, and practise culturally responsive literacy teaching.

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