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Contexts for Learning to Read

Young children acquire reading literacy through a variety of activities and experiences within different contexts. At fourth grade, children develop the skills, behaviors, and attitudes associated with reading literacy mainly at home and in school. There, various resources and activities foster reading literacy. Some of the experiences are very structured, particularly those that occur in classrooms as part of reading instruction. Others, less structured, occur as a natural and informal part of the child's daily activities. Both are critical in helping young children develop reading literacy. Moreover, each environment supports

the other, and the connection between home and school is an important element in learning.

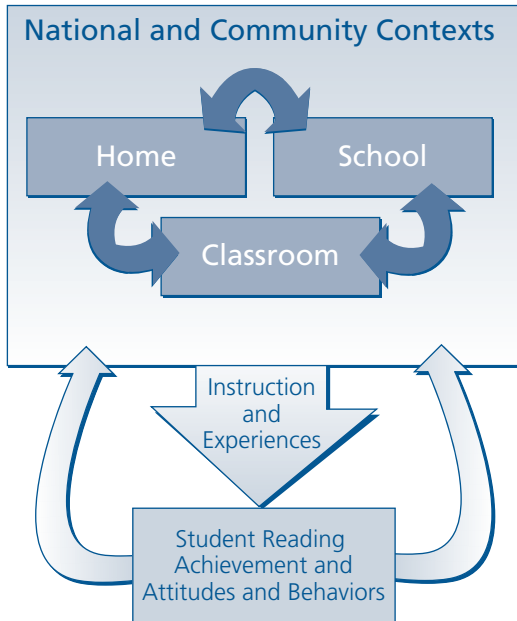
Beyond the direct home and school influences on children's reading are the broader environments in which children live and learn. Children's schools and homes are situated in communities with different resources, goals, and organizational features. These aspects of the community will likely influence children's homes and schools and thus their reading literacy. Even broader, yet as important, is the national context in which children live and go to school. The resources available in a country, government decisions about education, and the curricular goals, programs, and policies related to reading education will influence the school and home contexts for learning to read.

Figure 2 shows the relationships among the home, school, and classroom influences on children's reading development and how this interaction is situated within and shaped by the community and country. The figure illustrates how student outcomes, including both achievement and attitudes, are a product of instruction and experiences gained in a variety of contexts. Also, it is noted that achievement and attitudes can be reinforcing. Better readers may enjoy and value reading more than poorer readers, thus reading more and further improving their skills. Indeed, the model in its entirety can be viewed as a system of reciprocal influences as student outcomes also feed back into the home, school, and classroom environments to some degree.

To provide information about the national contexts in which children's homes and schools are situated, PIRLS 2001 published the *PIRLS 2001 Encyclopedia* (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Flaherty, 2002), a collection of essays on reading education in the participating countries. Expanding upon the structure of the 2001 encyclopedia, PIRLS 2006 will develop the *PIRLS 2006 Encyclopedia*. This volume will incorporate responses from a new curriculum questionnaire, which will focus on the national context for the support and implementation of reading curriculum and policy in a country. To gather information about the home, school, and classroom factors associated with

the development of reading literacy, PIRLS 2006 will use questionnaires completed by the students tested, their parents or caregivers, their school principals, and their teachers.

Figure 2
Contexts for the Development of Reading Literacy



National and Community Contexts

Cultural, social, political, and economic factors all contribute to the backdrop of children's literacy development within a country and community. The success a country has in educating its children and producing a literate population depends greatly on the country's emphasis on the goal of literacy for all, the resources it has available, and the mechanisms it can assemble for providing effective programs and incentives that foster reading and improve achievement.

Emphasis on Literacy. The value that a country places on literacy and literacy activities affects the commitment of time and resources

necessary for a literature-rich environment. A country's decision to make literacy a priority is influenced in part by people's backgrounds and beliefs about the importance of literacy for success both within and outside of school (Bourdieu, 1986; Street, 2001). Even without extensive economic resources, countries can promote literacy through national and local policies on reading education. Outside of school, parents and others within the community can foster an environment that values reading by inviting and sharing experiences with text.

Demographics and Resources. The characteristics of a country's population and the national economy can have a tremendous impact on the relative ease or difficulty of producing high rates of literacy among its people and on the availability and extent of the resources required. Countries with a large and diverse population and few material and human resources generally face greater challenges than those with more favorable circumstances (Greaney, 1996). Nationally and locally, the diversity of languages used, levels of adult literacy, and other social and health demographics can influence the difficulty of the educational task. Changing populations due to migration within and across country borders also may affect priorities among literacy-related issues in education policy and require additional resources. Having economic resources enables better educational facilities and greater numbers of well-trained teachers and administrators. It also provides the opportunity to invest in literacy through widespread community programs and by making print materials and technology more readily available in community or school libraries, classrooms, and in homes (Neuman, 1999).

Governance and Organization of Education System. How educational policies are established and implemented can have a tremendous impact upon how schools operate. Some countries have highly centralized systems of education in which most policy-related decisions are made at the national or regional level and there is a great deal of uniformity in education in terms of curriculum, textbooks, and general policies. Other countries have much more decentralized systems in which many important decisions are made at the local and

school levels, resulting in greater variation in how schools operate and students are taught.

The way students proceed through school (also referred to as “student flow”) is a feature of education systems that varies across countries. Particularly relevant for a study of fourth-grade reading achievement are the age of entry to formal schooling and the age when formal reading instruction begins. Students in countries that begin formal schooling at a younger age do not necessarily begin to receive formal reading instruction in their first year, due to the cognitive demands of reading. In addition, for a study of children at this level, the type of school that students generally attend during the early years and whether students will eventually move into a tracked or comprehensive program of study are of interest.

Curriculum Characteristics and Policies. Curricular policies are shaped in many different ways. At the highest level, they may be established in some detail by government and jurisdictional requirements. These may range from policies that govern the age or grade in which formal reading instruction begins to those that prescribe the types of material and the methods to be used in teaching reading. Even where external control over the curriculum is strong, the way the curriculum is implemented may be affected by local school characteristics and practices. Curricular aspects and governing policies particularly relevant to the acquisition of reading literacy include standards or benchmarks established for reading development, testing and promotion practices, policies for classroom assignment or grouping, instructional time, methods and materials, and ways of identifying students in need of remediation.

Home Contexts

Much research has provided insight into the importance of home environments for children’s reading literacy. Long before children develop the cognitive and linguistic skills necessary for reading, early experiences with printed and oral language establish a foundation for learning (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1995; Holdaway, 1979; Verhoeven, 2002). Particular home characteristics can create a climate that encourages children to explore and experiment with language and

various forms of texts. Parents and other family members impart their own beliefs about reading that shape the way that children are exposed to and experience text (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996; Cramer & Castle, 1994). As young children engage in more challenging and complex activities for play and recreation, both alone and with peers, the time devoted to literacy-related activities becomes critical. Throughout a child's development, the involvement of parents or caregivers remains central to the acquisition of reading literacy. The following discussion highlights some of the major aspects of the home that contribute to reading literacy development.

Activities Fostering Literacy. Central to the home environment are the literacy-related activities that parents or caregivers engage in with children or encourage and support (Gadsden, 2000; Leseman & de Jong, 2000; Snow & Tabors, 1996; Weinberger, 1996). As children develop their capacity for oral language, they are learning the rules of language use. This knowledge will be translated into expectations for printed language as well.

Perhaps the most common and important early literacy activity involves adults and older children reading aloud to young children. When children are read aloud to and encouraged to engage in the text and pictures in books, they learn that printed text conveys meaning and that being able to read is valuable and worthwhile.

Other encounters with print also help to establish children's awareness of and familiarity with text. Writing activities such as writing names or forming letters reinforces young children's developing awareness of text. Drawing, especially in connection with stories and storytelling, may also promote literacy. Research also indicates that children's play with books and other print material helps to lay the foundations of reading literacy (Taube & Mejdning, 1996). Moreover, early associations of enjoyment with printed text establish a positive attitude toward reading that will motivate young readers (Martin, Mullis, & González, 2004).

Languages in the Home. Because learning to read is very much dependent on children's early experience with language, the language or

languages spoken at home, and how language is used, are important factors in reading literacy development. Children whose knowledge of the language used in formal reading instruction is substantially below that expected of children of that age are likely to be at an initial disadvantage. In addition, use of different languages or dialects at home and at school may cause problems for young students learning to read.

Economic Resources. As children mature, the support and guidance provided at home contributes to literacy development in many different ways. An important aspect of the home environment is the availability of reading material and educational resources. Research consistently shows a strong positive relationship between achievement and socioeconomic status, or indicators of socio-economic status such as parents' or caregivers' occupation or level of education. Research also shows that ready access to various types of printed material is strongly associated with literacy achievement (Purves & Elley, 1994). Homes that make such material available convey to children an expectation that learning to read is a desirable and worthwhile goal.

Social and Cultural Resources. Society and culture are inherent influences on the perceived importance of reading for academic and personal success. Parents and other family members convey their beliefs and attitudes in the way they teach their children to read and to appreciate text. Parents and caregivers engaging in many literacy activities fosters children's positive attitudes towards reading. For most children, the home provides modeling and direct guidance in effective literacy practices. Young children who see adults and older children reading or using texts in different ways are learning to appreciate and use printed material. Beyond modeling, parents or other caregivers can directly support reading development by expressing positive opinions about reading and literacy.

Home-School Connection. Across all of the home factors associated with acquiring reading literacy, parents' or caregivers' involvement in children's schooling may be key to literacy development (Christenson, 1992). Research shows that students who discuss their school studies and what they are reading with their parents or

caregivers are higher achievers than those who do not (Mullis, Martin, González & Kennedy, 2003). Involved parents or caregivers can reinforce the value of learning to read, monitor children's completion of reading assignments for school, and encourage children through praise and support.

Students' Out-of-School Literacy Activities. As children continue to develop reading literacy, the time they devote to reading and other recreational activities becomes significant. The child not only enjoys reading for recreation but also practices skills that are being learned. Reading for fun or to investigate topics of interest is the hallmark of lifelong reading. Thus, children may choose to spend their out-of-school time reading books or magazines, looking up information on the Internet, or going to a local library to read or take out books (Shapiro & Whitney, 1997).

Independent reading and discussing reading can be an integral part of the ongoing activities in the home. Children's parents and caregivers can encourage them to balance the time spent on literacy-related activities with that spent on perhaps less enriching pastimes such as playing video games or watching excessive amounts of television (National Reading Panel, 2000). Some research indicates a negative correlation between time spent watching television and reading achievement, while time spent reading for fun is positively correlated (VanderVoort, 2001).

Young readers and their friends also can be encouraged to take advantage of extracurricular activities promoting literacy skills provided through school and local libraries or other venues. The influence of peers can be helpful in making it desirable to participate in such activities. For example, students can share experiences and interpretations of text by going to see plays, joining book clubs, or performing their own skits. Discussing reading with their families, friends, and community members gives children the opportunity to participate in one or more communities of readers. These social interactions strengthen young readers' abilities to gain meaning from text and understand how different readers can make different interpretations.

School Contexts

Although the home can be a rich environment for developing reading literacy, for most children school remains the main location for formal learning and educational activities. By their fourth year of formal schooling, most students have acquired basic reading skills and are beginning to read more complex material with greater independence. This is due in part to the changed curricular demands placed on students at this level. At this point, children are transitioning from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Chall, 1983). Students’ educational experiences may be especially significant at this point in their reading literacy development.

Many factors in school affect reading literacy acquisition, directly or indirectly. Some of the main school factors that contribute to the acquisition of reading literacy are discussed below.

School Policy and Curriculum. Literacy-related policy and curriculum at the school level establishes the context for the formal reading instruction children receive from the beginning of formal schooling. Such policies may include decisions about the emphasis on reading instruction in relation to other content areas. They also may include preferences of instructional approaches to be implemented at various stages of language development. In turn, such decisions help to shape the environment within the school and the resources that are required (Belanger, Winter, & Sutton, 1992).

School Environment and Resources. The school environment encompasses many factors that affect a student’s learning. The sense of security that comes from having few behavior problems and little or no crime promotes a stable learning environment. School-wide programs that provide for the basic needs of students and their families (e.g., before- or after-school child care programs) may also be important. Other school-wide programs, which focus specifically on reading and literacy development, may directly support the acquisition of skills and attitudes toward reading literacy. The school environment is also enhanced when staff members show positive attitudes toward

students and collaborate in curricular and extracurricular activities that foster learning.

The extent and quality of school resources are also critical. These may include resources as basic as trained teachers or adequate classroom space, as well as less essential but beneficial resources like comfortable furniture and surroundings. The presence of a library or multi-media center may be particularly relevant for developing reading literacy. In addition, a reading specialist or language arts curriculum director can be important in strengthening the reading curriculum.

Classroom Contexts

Even though the curricular policies and resources of the school often set the tone for accomplishment in the classroom, students' day-to-day classroom activities are likely to have a more direct impact on their reading development than the school environment. The instructional approaches and materials used are clearly important to establishing teaching and learning patterns in the classroom, including the curriculum, the strategies employed to teach it, and the availability of books, technology, and other resources. The teacher, of course, is another very influential determinant of the classroom environment (Lundberg & Linnakyla, 1993). This can include his or her preparation and training, use of particular instructional approaches, and experience in teaching reading. Finally, the behaviors, attitudes, and literacy level of classmates may influence the teacher's instructional choices, thereby affecting a student's reading development (Kurtz-Costes & Schneider, 1994).

Teacher Training and Preparation. The qualification and competence of teachers can be critical. Much has been written about what makes a teacher effective. One issue is the nature, amount, and content of teachers' training and education. For example, whether or not a teacher has been extensively trained in teaching reading may be especially relevant for students' acquisition of reading literacy.

The extent of teachers' continuing education and exposure to recent developments within the field of teaching reading is also important. Professional development through seminars, workshops,

conferences, and professional journals can help teachers to increase their effectiveness and broaden their knowledge of reading literacy acquisition. In some countries and jurisdictions, teachers are required to participate in such activities. Moreover, it has been suggested that the profession of teaching is one that requires lifelong learning, and that the most effective teachers continue to acquire new knowledge and skills throughout their careers.

Classroom Environment and Structure. Young students spend many hours each day in one or more classrooms. Classroom environment and structure have a significant influence on reading literacy development. The classroom can vary greatly, from highly structured and teacher-centered to more open and student-centered. One fundamental characteristic that may dictate how teachers approach instruction is class size, or teacher-to-student ratio. Some research has indicated that smaller class sizes during the early years of schooling may benefit students' reading development.

Also related to reading development is the interaction among students, informally and in classroom discussion of reading and literacy-related activities (Baker, 1991; Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Gambrell & Almasi, 1997; Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999). Classrooms that encourage language development and establish a supportive environment for talking about reading may be especially effective.

Instructional Materials and Technology. Another aspect of the classroom that is relevant for reading literacy includes the extent of the reading material available to students. The reading material and technology that teachers use in reading instruction form the core of students' reading experience in school. The material can range from a single textbook or "reading series" containing a variety of text types, to several books and other print materials compiled by the teacher.

The presence of a classroom library or a special place for independent reading may foster positive reading habits and attitudes, in addition to giving students ready access to a wide variety of texts and text types. The use of electronic texts and other technologies is

emerging as an important part of students' literacy learning (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000; Labbo & Kuhn, 1998; McKenna, 1998). Reading "on-line" is becoming an essential literacy skill as more and more diverse types of texts and information are made available to students through the Internet and other electronic modes of communication. Regardless of format, research has indicated that the students' exposure to a variety of texts and text types is associated with achievement in reading.

Instructional Strategies and Activities. There are innumerable strategies and activities that teachers may use for reading instruction (Creighton, 1997; Langer, 1995; Stieror & Maybin, 1994). Much research has been devoted to investigating which are most effective. Most educators and researchers agree that using elements of various approaches may be best, particularly when teachers tailor them to the needs of their students (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991).

The activities most relevant for reading literacy development include those that pertain to word recognition, comprehension, cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies, writing activities such as story construction, and integrating all of the language processes – reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Shanahan & Neuman, 1997).

Homework and Assessment. Homework is a way to extend instruction and assess student progress. The types of homework assignments assigned in reading classes regularly include independent reading, comprehension questions about what students have read, or some combination of the two. The amount of homework assigned for reading varies both within and across countries. In some countries, homework is assigned typically to students who need the most practice – those who tend to have the most difficulty reading or understanding what they have read. In other countries, students receive homework as enrichment exercises. Time spent on homework generally has an inverse relationship with achievement. Those students for whom reading is difficult require more time to complete the assigned homework.

In addition to homework, teachers have a number of ways to monitor student progress and achievement. Informal assessment during instruction helps the teacher to identify needs of particular individuals, or to evaluate the pace of the presentation of concepts and materials (Lipson & Wixon, 1997). Formal tests, both teacher-made and standardized assessments, typically are used to make important decisions about the students, such as grades or marks, promotion, or tracking. The types of question included in tests and quizzes can send strong signals to students about what is important. For example, teachers can ask about a variety of textual information, such as facts, ideas, character motivations, and comparisons with other materials or personal experiences. Teachers also can use a variety of test formats ranging from multiple-choice questions to essays.

