TRACING (DIS)CONTINUITIES BETWEEN CHILDREN'S LITERACY PRACTICES AT HOME AND IN THE KINDERGARTEN: A CASE STUDY[1]

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Abstract

Several studies have identified the central role of mass cultural and media texts in the shaping of young children's out-of-school literacy practices (e.g. Browne 1999, Marsh & Thompson 2001). Although it is often supported that early childhood educators need to take account of the home literacy practices of their students, they tend to be negatively disposed towards mass culture, expressing concerns about its content and educational value (e.g. Dyson 1997, Seiter 1999), and thus the sociocultural experiences which are closest to the child are rarely included in the literacy events he/she participates in the nursery (e.g. Dyson 2001, Marsh 2000a, 2000b). As a result, a dissonance between out-of-school and schooled literacy practices of children is often detected, with important consequences especially for those coming from the lower socio-economic strata. Focusing on the kindergarten of a socially unprivileged suburb of Thessaloniki (Diavata), we explore young children's (aged 5-6 years old) access to and use of mass culture and media at home and in the nursery as well as teachers' perspectives about the use of mass cultural and media resources in early childhood settings. Qualitative data were collected from a range of sources, including semi-structured interviews with children and teachers, questionnaires with parents and unstructured observations in the kindergarten classroom. Results indicate that children's literacy practices at home were focused on television, whereas in the kindergarten a focus was given on the reading of books with scientific, mythological or religious content. Teachers were found ambivalent about the inclusion of mass culture at school, while parents tended to under-report their children's use of mass cultural texts at home.

Keywords: mass culture, media, out-of-school literacy practices, early childhood education

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, technological developments have led to significant changes in the ways by means of which we communicate and undertake daily tasks involving reading, writing, and production of texts. The impact of this digital revolution on the lives of young children is rarely considered, although they are

engaged in the social practices of the 'new media age' (Kress 2003), along with the older children, adolescents and adults who surround them. Young children are immersed in practices related to popular culture, the media and new technologies from birth. They are growing up in a digital world and developing a wide range of skills. Moreover, they live in a media-saturated world in which texts have multiple connections with others, since their favorite popular heroes appear in a wide range of objects such as toys, books, comics, clothes, food packaging and others (Kinder 1991). Through their engagement with the media and technology from very young age, children develop 'media literacy', which refers to the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts (Ofcom 2004).

As a result, mass culture plays a central role in the shaping of young children's out-of-school literacy practices. Even at very young ages, children tune into programs that can influence their literacy development (e.g. Fish 2004, Marsh et al. 2005). If children are encountering these texts in a wide range of media outside school, then it makes sense for them to be able to analyze, understand, respond to and produce texts using these media at school. Watching educational content on TV typically relates to more positive outcomes for children, such as greater gains in academic skills and higher achievement. With respect to literacy in particular, educational programs drawing upon the media have been shown to positively impact specific early literacy skills, including letter recognition (Ball & Bogatz 1970), narrative skills (Linebarger & Piotrowski 2009), vocabulary, and other early literacy skills. Hence, some researchers have argued that the media should be viewed as a potential benefit to learning (Marsh et al. 2005, Robinson & Turnbull 2005). Alvermann et al. (2003) showed how educators who integrated students' everyday literacy practices and popular culture interests managed to teach successfully language arts concepts and critical literacy skills. For instance, a kindergarten teacher designed a course about animals based on students' rich background knowledge and keen interest on *Pokemon*, a cartoon and video game about animals with super powers which are enhanced by their users-'trainers'. These animals are similar to those living in the natural

world, and thus the teacher, building on the students' knowledge of *Pokemon*, used an interactive writing strategy to help them grasp the concept of comparing and contrasting and gain some knowledge about animals.

Although recent approaches to literacy studies have stressed the importance of children's out-of-school literacy practices in their literacy development in general and their school success in particular (Hull & Schultz 2001), educational institutions have not always valued the cultural practices of childhood (Dyson 1997 Marsh & Millard 2000). Pushed to the margin of the classroom life, popular culture and the media have been seen to pose threats to the educational attainment of children. Despite the fact that there have been few studies which have explored the attitudes and experiences of early years practitioners in relation to the use of popular culture, the media and new technologies, the limited existing research suggests that early childhood educators tend to be negatively disposed towards mass culture, expressing concerns about its content and educational value (Dyson 1997, Seiter 1999; for the Greek context, see Kyridis et al. 2006). Makin et al. (1999) found that although many parents expressed favorable attitudes towards their children's engagement with popular culture, teachers did not, by complaining that the media have a corrupting and negative influence on children. There has been a series of 'moral panics' (Cohen 1987) about the perceived negative impact of the media on children's emotional, social and cognitive development, in addition to worries about the way in which children are positioned as economic targets by multinational companies (Kenway & Bullen 2001). However, Arthur (2005) conducted a study and found that educators who have moved on and acknowledged the role that popular texts could play in the curriculum enjoyed the increased engagement in learning that they brought. It is vital that educational institutions respond to these wider social and cultural changes so that they offer children opportunities to develop skills, knowledge and understanding which will be of value in the new knowledge economy (Luke & Carrington 2002).

Consequently, home literacy practices are rarely included in schooled literacy practices, since, as we move closer towards the child's

inner circle, fewer literacy practices are underlined (Dyson 1998, 2001, Marsh 2000a, 2000b, Kenner 2000). As a result, a dissonance between out-of school and schooled literacy practices of children is often detected, with important consequences especially for those coming from the lower socio-economic strata, who tend to be closer to mass culture and more distant from schooled literacy practices (see also "the home-school mismatch hypothesis" proposed by Luke 2004).

In light of the above, in the present study we attempted to map young children's everyday literacy practices at home in comparison with their literacy practices at school, with the aim to explore potential (dis)continuities between children's practices at home and in the kindergarten. Specifically, we investigated young children's (aged 4-6 years old) access to and use of mass culture and media at home and in the kindergarten, as well as teachers' perspectives about the use of mass cultural and media resources in early childhood settings. Being part of a larger project, in the present paper we report the findings of a case study, which took place in a socially unprivileged suburb of Thessaloniki (Diavata).

2. Methodology

The sample consisted of children attending the kindergarten of Diavata, as well as of their parents and teachers. Specifically, 28 children aged 4-6 years old participated in the study. From them, 60.7% were boys and 39.3% were girls, 60.7% were Greeks and 39.3 % were immigrants (54.5% originating from Albania). Moreover, 28 parents were surveyed. The majority of the respondents were high-school graduates (82.1%), women (85.7%) and housewives (75.0%). Their general low socio-economic and educational status could be explained by the location of the school in which the study took place, while the predominance of the female gender of respondents was due to the fact that mothers were the ones who came to the school more frequently. Finally, the two female teachers being appointed on a tenure track to the kindergarten also participated in the study. The one was 45 years old, was graduated from a two-year Pedagogical Nursery School, and also served as the principal of the school. The

other teacher was 35 years old and was graduated from a four-year Department of Early Childhood Education.

For the aims of the present research, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected by using a variety of instruments, i.e., semi-structured interviews with children and teachers, questionnaires with parents, and unstructured observations in the kindergarten classroom. Therefore, we were able to investigate how children perceive their literacy practices related to mass culture and the media and compare them with their parents' views. On the other hand, through teachers' interviews, we had the opportunity to explore their perspectives on the use of mass cultural texts at school, while our own observations were able to shed more light on how children engage in mass culture and to what extent (as well as in what terms) mass culture is exploited in the kindergarten.

Interviews with children and questionnaires with parents referred to the following common topics:

a. Views on children's literacy practices related to mass culture and the role of the family (e.g. ownership and access to media)

b. Views on children's patterns of mass culture and media use (e.g. preferences related to books/ comics, TV, advertising, theater and cinema)

Children's interviews also explored their ideas about their literacy practices in the kindergarten (e.g. book readings, references to mass culture).

Teachers' interviews covered the following topics:

1. Views on children's literacy practices related to mass culture at home (e.g. preferences to TV, books/ comics etc.)

2. Views on children's literacy practices and use of mass culture in the kindergarten (e.g. book readings, educational use of mass culture)

3. Views on (dis)continuities between children's home and schooled literacy practices (e.g. whether the curriculum makes/ should make references to mass culture)

Unstructured observations in the kindergarten were made by the first researcher

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(Katerina Maroniti), who worked at the time as kindergarten teacher in the particular school. Hence, the researcher had a daily contact with children and could systematically observe their discussions about mass culture, as well as the involvement of mass cultural texts in their play and the artifacts they made. Moreover, an inventory was constructed containing a list of the books found in the shelves of the school and of the technological equipment (e.g. television, computer, DVD player) being available and employed in the kindergarten.

Interview data were analyzed through the use of qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994). On the first level of data reduction, interview transcripts were classified into smaller units according to the conceptual framework and the research questions of the study. Next, sentences and clauses that expressed a certain meaning were grouped together. In this way, codes carrying an operational definition were derived. On the second level of reduction, codes were grouped together for the formation of broader thematic categories, depending on the research aims of the study. Finally, categories were classified into much broader common thematic strands. Questionnaire data were processed quantitatively. The Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2) test was used, in order to detect significant differences in the parents' responses according to their ethnic origin (i.e. Greeks vs. immigrants).

3. Results

3.1. Children's results

From the analysis of interviews, 98 codes emerged, which were grouped into 14 categories and classified into 4 thematic strands. According to their responses, children have access to a wide range of media and technologies. The overriding majority of children watch TV on a daily basis (96.4%). Except for cartoons (100.0%), the majority of them claimed that their favorite TV programs are adult ones, such as commercials (96.4%), TV series (78.6%) and films (71.4%). It is noteworthy that children mentioned that they watch TV with their parents' permission.

Most children are exposed to printed media, since they answered that their parents read newspapers and magazines (71.4%), while there are books in most of children's houses (85.7%). Moreover, they have their own books and answered that their parents (mostly their mother) read them some book (89.2%) before they go for sleep. According to their responses, their favorite books are fairy tales (71.4%). According to their responses, these mainly include classic fairy tales (e.g. *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) and illustrated books with pop cultural heroes, such as Barbie.

Most of the children claimed to have access to a computer (78.5%) and an Internet connection (60.7%). They also answered that they use computers with their parents' permission (64.2%), mostly during their leisure time (e.g. weekends).

In the question if they discuss at school about their favorite films, TV series or pop cultural heroes, 64.2% of children answered that they never discussed about these topics. Only 21.4% of them responded positively, but they couldn't give any concrete examples.

On the other hand, according to the responses of immigrant children, some of them have access to books written in both L1 (i.e. mother tongue) and L2 (i.e. Greek) (36.4%), while others possess only Greek books (36.4%). Similarly, they claimed that their parents read them either in both L1 and L2 (45.45%) or exclusively in L2 (36.4%). It is noteworthy that none of them responded to have or be read books only written in L1. Considering television, though, the majority of them answered that they watch TV programs in both L1 and L2 (81.8%).

From the qualitative analysis, some tendencies were observed in terms of the gender and the ethnic origin of children. More specifically, immigrant children and girls seemed to have more limited access to computers and the Internet than Greek children and boys. On the other hand, gender differences were observed regarding children's favorite pop cultural hero/ine. Boys tended to refer only to male characters, while girls mostly to female ones. Specifically, boys preferred well-known superheroes (e.g. Superman, Batman) and "masculine" cartoon characters (e.g. McQueen), while girls opted for heroines inspired by their dolls (e.g. Barbie) as well as for "feminine" (e.g. Tinker Bell) and more "gender-neutral" cartoon characters (e.g. SpongeBob).

As emerging from our own observations, children's interest in popular culture was intense. We noticed that children tried to relate their activities in the kindergarten to what they saw on TV. They played roles from ads (e.g. "Kitsos & Tassoula" by Vodafone ads), they sang songs from popular culture (e.g. "ai se tu pego"). It is noteworthy mentioning the following incident: girls were interested in Disney's princesses, so they connected a book (its content related to a princess) with their interest and they called it "the book with Disney's princesses". As a result, children tended to link their out-of-school to their in-school literacy practices.

3.2. Parents' questionnaires

All parents declared that they read fairy tales to their children (100.0%). Moreover, Greek parents tended to also read them some encyclopedic and educational books (68.75%), whereas immigrant parents to read them some comics (57.1%).

When asked about what kind of books best reflect the interests of children in the kindergarten, Greek parents mentioned fairy tales and educational books (93.75% and 68.75%, respectively), while immigrant parents reported that only fairy tales represent children's interests (92.9%). Comics were rejected by both (but especially by Greek) parent groups as non-appropriate material for the classroom (rejected by 93.75% Greek and by 64.3% immigrant parents).

Moreover, all parents claimed that their children mostly watch cartoons on TV. Interestingly, compared with their children's responses, parents (and especially immigrants) under-reported adult TV programs to be watched by their children (62.5% of Greeks and 14.3% of immigrants referred to these programs), such as TV series, while they (but especially Greeks) over-reported documentaries (50.0% of Greeks and 35.7% of immigrants reported this program).

3.3. Kindergarten

Mapping the media equipment in the kindergarten, we found that children had limited access to mass culture and new technologies. According to our inventory, we observed that TV, DVD-player and CD-player were rarely used by teachers. TV and DVD player were locked in a big closet, ignoring their existence. Throughout the whole school year, these media were never used by the teachers. CD-player was rarely employed by the teachers, usually when there were school celebrations. There was only one computer, located in the principal's office. Emphasis was given on reading books with scientific, mythological or religious content. Fairy tales were clearly limited and the lack of comics was visibly noticeable.

3.4. Kindergarten teachers' interviews

From the analysis of the two interviews, 53 codes emerged, which were grouped into 8 categories and classified into 3 thematic strands. According to their responses, it seems that both educators were facing the use of mass culture in the kindergarten with caution, or even with hostility. Specifically, both teachers reported to mostly use in their classes books with scientific and mythological content, as well as fairy tales, while they claimed to use mass cultural texts such as songs, magazines or newspapers very limitedly. Also, both early childhood educators did not use any films.

When asked what criteria they choose to the texts they read to their pupils, the responses of the two educators differed considerably. The older teacher claimed to select them based on the proposals of the school counselor, through bookstore lists, but also depending on the desires of children. In contrast, the younger educator answered to select books based on the front page, the illustration, the topic, and to some extent, on the wishes of children.

With respect to the question as to which mass cultural texts they consider to be more useful for the development of children's communicative skills, both teachers responded that all texts are useful as forms of communication for children, although they put a particular emphasis on the educational value of fairy tales. Moreover, the younger educator mentioned children's newspapers and the animated films of Disney.

Nevertheless, the educators were found ambivalent about the inclusion of mass culture to schooled literacy practices. The younger educator answered that mass culture should be used, because it helps children's socialization and literacy development. In contrast, the older teacher was negative towards the use of mass culture at school because of its low educational value and children's over-exposure to such texts

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at home.

Consequently, the two teachers held conflicting views on whether they should discuss about popular cultural texts with children. The older educator answered that she systematically refrains from discussing, since she considered that children are over-exposed to such texts at home. The other teacher responded that she tries to discuss about such texts with children, but always with the stimulation of children. Moreover, she showed a preference for informational rather than entertaining genres, such as documentaries, news and weather forecast. On the other hand, she admitted her ignorance about many of the favorite popular cultural characters of children.

Regarding the potential (dis)continuities between children's home and schooled literacy practices, their views were also diverging. The older teacher argued strongly that the school provides higher quality literacy practices than those children are exposed to in their homes. Conversely, the other teacher expressed the belief that there is a convergence between schooled and home literacy practices, and even she claimed that this is mainly achieved through the institution of lending library.

4. Concluding remarks

This case study revealed that young children are immersed in literacy practices related to popular culture (mostly TV), media and new technologies from birth. They are growing up in a digital world and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of the world. Parents seemed to support their children's interest in popular culture through the provision of resources and interactions with children (e.g. reading of fairy tales). They tended to under-report, though, that their children are watching adult TV programs, such as TV series, and to over-report the watching of documentaries.

The present study also revealed some differences in children's digital literacy practices depending on their gender and ethnic origin. Gender differences in computer access and use could be explained by the so-called digital divide thought to exist between men and women (e.g. Bimber 2000, Livingstone & Bovill 2000). On the other hand, the ethnic differences in the techno-literacies of children could be justified by the

Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1990), according to which the divergences observed in the ownership of types of media between social groups cannot be simply explained by income. Hence, families with high income and level of education are more likely to own more books and have access to the Internet than other families with the same income but lower education, who are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of ownership of screen entertainment media (Marsh et al. 2005).

On other hand, the present study confirmed that the kindergarten tended to neglect children's cultural capital brought from home, since children's interests in popular cultural were largely excluded from the educational process. Specifically, it was observed that the preference of children for popular culture was not taken into account by the kindergarten teachers, but instead remained untapped. In this way, children experience more intensely the incompatibility of home literacy practices at school. Instead, as previous studies (Dyson 1997, Marsh 2000a) have indicated, allowing children to bring popular culture from their home experiences to the classroom can have an electrifying effect on children and orient them to schooled practices, since they feel that their interests are recognized as important.

The exclusion of mass culture from the kindergarten could be partly explained by the views teachers held about the role of mass culture and the media at school. Both teachers expressed concerns about the content and educational value of these texts. Also, they seemed worried about the perceived amount of time children spend on these activities. Even though the younger teacher expressed the view that mass culture should be included to the curriculum, she attempted to direct children's interest to more "educational" and "useful" texts, such as weather forecast or documentaries, namely to texts which children seem to prefer the least. Despite the fact that she recognized that fairy tales and popular Disney's films could help children's communicative competence, in fact we observed that she never included such texts to her teaching. In conclusion, the teachers of our study expressed, more or less, the dominant view, also detected in other studies (Dyson 1997, Kyridis et al. 2006, Seiter 1999), that popular culture is

detrimental to children's literacy development and that the school should provide them with higher forms of culture (Alvermann et al. 2003).

As a case study, the present research poses certain limitations regarding the generalization of the findings. In the future, an attempt will be made to map children's literacy practices on a larger scale, in order to trace in a more systematic way differences in terms of the gender, the ethnic and the social origin of children. Further attention should be also paid to the needs of early years teachers with regard to the development of content and pedagogical knowledge about the use of mass media and culture.

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