LITERACY FROM EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES•

Aysel TÜFEKCİ AKCAN**

Abstract

The study was conducted to explore literacy perceptions of elementary school principals and teachers. The research was conducted using interpretive methodology. The data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that participants placed greater emphasis on the academic and functional values of literacy than on its experiential value. In addition, they highlighted child-related and family- and home-life-related factors, touching only briefly on some of the larger institutional and socio-cultural factors contributing to literacy success/failure of their student

Keywords: Literacy Conceptions, Educators' Views, Elementary School, Interpretive Methodology.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Though written language has a long history, literacy started spreading to the masses around 17th century. Literacy in these early periods referred mainly to reading and was used for patriotic, religious, and moral education and teaching. Learning practices were influenced largely by religious instructional methods. Beginning with mid-20th century the notion of *functional literacy,* which refers to literacy skills necessary for one to be able to function in the society, became a major concern. The criteria for what constitutes functional literacy changed over time as society changed (de Castell and Luke, 1988; Kaestle, 1988; Resnick and Resnick, 1988; Scribner, 1988), but its relationship with *power* (Robinson, 1988; Scribner, 1988) and *school literacy* remained (Bartholomae, 1988; de Castell and Luke, 1988; Heat, 1988; Luke and Kale, 1997; Robinson, 1988; Scribner and Cole, 1988; Szwed, 1988).

A review of the literacy conceptions indicates two main approaches to literacy, neither of which alone is adequate for a complete understanding of young children's literacy experiences—(a) the *autonomous approach* (also called *technocratic, mechanistic, reductionist*), and (b) what Nicolopoulou and Cole (1999) call the *contextual perspective* (also called *sociocultural approach*). The *autonomous* approach (a) views literacy as a set of neutral skills having its own characteristics regardless of historical context; (b) situates literacy in the individuals; and (c) overemphasizes school literacy as the source of success/failure (de Castell and Luke, 1988; Keller-Cohen, 1993; Gee, 1990; Street, 1999). The *contextual perspective* views literacy as (a) composed of various elements instead of having a static and universal essence; (b) within the social, historical, and political contexts in which it is practiced; and (c) manifested both in and out of school (Cook-Gumperz and Keller-Cohen, 1993; de Castell and Luke, 1988; Erickson, 1987, 1988; Gee, 1990; Graff, 1988; Heat, 1988; Kaestle, 1988; Keller-Cohen, 1993; Kintgen et al., 1988; Luke and Kale, 1997; Moll and Diaz, 1987; Monaghan and Hartman, 2000; Resnick and Resnick, 1988; Scribner, 1988; Szwed, 1988).

These conceptions of literacy have significant implications for educational research, policy, and practice because the ability to read and write forms the basis of formal education system. Educators' concepts of literacy affect students' learning and performance, their concepts of literacy, and their self-concepts (Borko and Eisenhart, 1986). The consequences educators associate with literacy, then, need to be uncovered in order to understand their concepts of literacy.

Reviewing the literature on literacy conceptualizations, I suggest a model consisting of three categories of consequences, each of which points to the value of literacy from a different perspective: (a) *institutional consequences*—*the academic value,* (b) *social and cultural consequences*—*the functional value,* and (c) *personal consequences*—*the experiential value.*

Educators' implicit theories about risk factors for students' success/failure in literacy are important: "The criteria used to classify students as 'at-risk' by educators can impact their treatment and ultimately students' success" (Storer et al., 1995: 36). Based on a review of the literature on literacy success/failure, I also suggest a model consisting of four categories of factors that account for literacy success or failure: (a) *child-related factors*, (b) *family- and home-life-related factors*, (c) *institutional factors*, and (d) *socio-cultural factors*.

The aim of this research is to explore educators' conceptions of literacy. The research intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What consequences do educators associate with literacy?
2. What are educators' beliefs concerning the factors that account for students' success/failure in literacy?

2. METHOD

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from my doctoral dissertation research investigating a small group of good and poor readers' literacy experiences and their teachers' and school principals' conceptions of literacy. The research was conducted using interpretive methodology and framed by cultural psychology (Cole, 1998) and Erickson's (1987) notion of school success/failure, both of which emphasize the micro and macro contexts of schooling by drawing attention to the everyday lives of the participants in their classroom context; by considering the children's and teachers' actions as mediated in the immediate and larger contexts of schooling; and by viewing learning as co-constructed by the teachers and children.

Research Sites and Participants

The fieldwork took place in two distinctly different public elementary schools in two different cities in the Midwest. The Lincoln Elementary School (hereafter Lincoln) was located in Clinton and home to a major public university. The Douglas Elementary School (hereafter Douglas) was located in Dawson, a working class city[1]. According to the state *School Report Cards*, the two schools differed from one another in student background and student achievement profile. Clinton had few black students and few students from low income homes. Douglas had about the same number of black and white students, and a higher percentage of those were from low income homes. The percentage of children at or above state standards at Lincoln was higher not only than Douglas but also than other schools in its district. Although recent budget cuts affected both schools, they hurt Douglas at the staffing level whereas Lincoln was affected only at the materials and extracurricular activities level. Both schools had undertaken various initiatives to improve their students' literacy learning, for example, the use of literacy coaches, after school tutoring, programs for targeted students such as Reading Recovery, Reading First, and Enrichment.

For this report, the informants from Lincoln are Ms. King, the school principal; Mr. Hill and Ms. Baker, the 1st grade team teachers; and Ms. Jones, the 2nd grade teacher. The informants from Douglas are Ms. Phillips, the school principal; Ms. Smith, the 1st grade teacher; and Ms. Turner the 2nd grade teacher. Mr. Hill and Ms. Baker, both were trained in Reading Recovery, and Ms. Turner had over 20 years of experience. Ms. Jones and Ms. Smith had less than 10 years of teaching experience.

Data Sources

The findings presented in this report are based on questionnaires filled out by the teachers and interviews with school principals and with the teachers. Although participants' responses may not match completely the thought processes guiding their daily practices in the dynamic and interactive environment of their classroom and school context (Fang, 1996), the presented findings are based on the assumption that participants' responses reflect their perceived realities.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with school principals and with the teachers. I gave the list of interview questions to the participants a week before the interviews took place in order to give them time to reflect on the questions. Besides the prepared set of questions, I asked additional questions specific to their own context. The interviews were audio recorded and took between a half hour and an hour. Interviews with principals were conducted in principals' offices at a time chosen by them. The questions were constructed to gain insights into their schools, literacy education practices, and the challenges they faced. Interviews with teachers were conducted in their classrooms at a time chosen by them. The questions were designed to gain insights into their views of the participating children and their literacy perceptions and practice

The teachers were also asked to fill out a questionnaire. The purpose of using questionnaires was twofold. One was to gather background information about participating children and teachers. The other was to

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[1] Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participating individuals and the schools.

gather information on teachers' views about various aspects of children's schooling (e.g., skills, performances, social relations, etc.).

Data Analysis and Quality

The analysis of the interview data started with transcribing. After several readings, the data were content analyzed by coding the texts. Then I created an interview matrix which allowed me to have a comparative view of the data by participants such as first grade teachers versus second grade teachers; experienced versus non-experienced teachers; teachers responses versus principals' responses; and responses across the two school

The analysis of the questionnaires started by sorting out and groping the questions such as background information, perception, or about children's skills and performances. The responses then were grouped for good readers and for poor readers. Following the organization, I created a numerical coding scheme for each question (e.g., very good: 4, good: 3, poor: 2, very poor: 1) and entered the codes for each response in a spreadsheet. I calculated the averages for teachers' ratings for each group and did comparison across good and poor readers groups.

Data quality in interpretive research is ensured differently from more conventional research traditions. Reliability and validity measures of quantitative methods are less applicable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) list four trustworthiness criteria for interpretive research including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I used several techniques that Lincoln and Guba listed under these criterions to ensure trustworthiness. The techniques I used include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and presentation of thick descriptions. I collected data over two academic semesters. I used triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources (observations, interviews, questionnaires, classroom profile sheets, and students' journals) and by including the perceptions of multiple participants.

3. FINDINGS

Consequences of Literacy

Investing more than half the instructional time to teaching literacy, the participating educators placed great importance on literacy. During interviews all the participants talked, often, about the academic and functional values of literacy, while only two teachers briefly mentioned about its experiential value.

Institutional consequences (academic value of literacy)

Because classroom instruction is literacy-based, the participants said, lack of appropriate literacy skills has negative effects on children's overall schooling: *"If they are not able to read at grade level they start to be left behind in all subject areas, not just in reading"* (Ms. Jones). Educators held the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) responsible for increased literacy-based instruction and raising standards: *"Basically with the No Child Left Behind and the standards that we have to meet every year…. we have to keep pressing onward and upward to try to make sure our children achieve that goal"* (Ms. King).

Social and cultural consequences (functional value of literacy)

Educators talked also about social and cultural consequences that placed literacy at the center of schooling and everyday life outside school in today's America:

> *Everything around us, there is something to read. When we go to the mall, just reading the numbers or how much something i When we go to a restaurant we have to read the menu. When you even on the computer, a lot of resumes are on the computer, you just have to be able to read the questions. So I think it's very important in this world today… In America I think we need to be successful good readers to be successful in any area because in every job it is there.* (Ms. Smith)

Personal consequences (experiential value of literacy)

Ms. Turner and Ms. Baker pointed out that literacy can broaden one's experiences and provide personal satisfaction:

> *Satisfaction with life in the way they learn about life. There are so much more open to children... Even if they can't go to Europe, they can read about it, they can broaden their world and read about the world. But if they can't read, that's not going to happen. So I do think it's a huge factor in their success and in their happiness.* (Ms. Baker)

From an experiential value stand point, literacy is a means for one to share in the collective human knowledge and experiences. Thus teaching children to learn to read and write is not just about getting them to learn discrete skills, but, as Mr. Hill put it, it is about getting them *"hooked on learning"* (Mr. Hill). The participants' responses to the questionnaire and interview questions, however, indicate greater emphasis on the academic and functional values, suggesting that these are predominant in their concepts of literacy. This finding supports a central theme in the literature indicating that school literacy is narrowly defined (Cook-Gumperz and

Keller-Cohen, 1993; de Castell and Luke, 1988; Luke and Kale, 1997; Robinson, 1988; Scribner and Cole, 1988; Szwed, 1988).

Factors Account for Success/Failure in Literacy
Child-related factors

The teachers and principals mentioned intelligence and ability level, previous educational and life experiences, school attendance, and other child characteristics.

Intelligence and ability level: Participants highlighted intelligence and ability level most among the child-related factor

> *I think IQ comes in there too. I mean, like we have children in there – man, they are just working with all the gut. Well, that's all you can ask. Some children, obviously are brighter than others, just natural sort of smarts. And that's a factor too.* (Mr. Hill)

During the interviews the teachers used cognitive terms such as *smart, intelligent, creative,* and so on frequently when talking about the good readers. When talking about the poor readers, however, they made references to effort rather than ability. I found the same pattern in teachers' questionnaire responses where they were asked to write three words for each participating student describing them as students and three words describing their personality. I grouped these terms into the following categories: (a) intellectual or cognitive traits; (b) attitude or dispositional traits; (c) performance or behavioral traits; and (d) social/emotional traits. The cognitive traits (e.g., smart, creative, intelligent, etc.) were used exclusively for the good readers; and the effort-related (e.g., hard worker, tries hard, works hard, etc.) and affectionate traits (e.g., lovely, sweet, caring, etc.) were used exclusively for the poor readers.

Graham (1984: 93) suggested, "In achievement context, sympathy is elicited when another's failure is perceived as caused by uncontrollable factors." This argument provides an explanation for why the teachers used affectionate terms only for the poor readers. The teachers, from this perspective, viewed poor readers' failure not due to lack of effort, a controllable factor, but due to ability, an uncontrollable factor.

The finding that the teachers made *cognitive* references for the good readers and *effort* references for the poor readers intrigued me to look deeper. Research framed by cultural psychology found, consistently, that causal attribution beliefs are culturally embodied (Fryberg and Markus, 2007; Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama, 1999; Holloway, 1988; Li, 2003; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Okagaki, 2001). This literature reports that Americans attribute success and failure to ability. This explains the cognitive references made to the good readers, but it does not explain the effort references made to the poor readers. Although Americans tend to attribute school performance to ability in case of success, they may feel uneasy to do so in case of failure as it sounds, culturally, like an insult. As a result, lack of effort becomes a euphemism for lack of ability when talking about school failure. Ms. Jones's statement about Katie, a good reader, *"is a smart child and can be successful at anything she wants"* and about Olivia, a poor reader, *"would be at grade level if she worked harder"* illustrates this argument.

Cultural attribution theories affect student outcomes, as Holloway (1988: 328-329) claims, through deeper messages that the teachers convey:

> Because adults in the U.S. think effort and ability are inversely related, individuals who try hard are seen as compensating for lack of ability. Thus, adults, who suggest to low-achieving youngsters that they can succeed if they try hard may be communicating the notion that the children must make unusual efforts to compensate for insufficient ability.

These messages, according to motivation theory literature, in turn, shape students' attribution and self-efficacy beliefs and their attitudes towards school. Mueller and Dweck (1998) argue that such messages have negative implications, for both the good and poor readers, especially when they faced with a challenging task. Children's causal attribution beliefs, extensive research in motivation suggests, affect their achievement through (a) shaping their affective and cognitive responses to tasks; (b) constraining their choices, persistence, effort, and risk taking behaviors; and (c) influencing their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1993; Bar-Tal, 1978; Onatsu-Arvillomi, Nurmi, and Aunola, 2002).

Previous educational and life experiences: Questionnaire and interview responses indicate that educators view children's previous educational experiences as a critical factor in their later schooling. The literature supports this view. Previous educational experiences provide basis for students' learning and skills, they foster motivation (Coles, 2000; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; McDonald et al., 2005; Wigfield et al., 2004) and shape students' attitudes and beliefs about themselves and schooling (Aunola et al., 2002; Clay, 1991; Denton and West, 2002; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

Three teachers commented also that overall life experiences, a factor closely related to family income, play a role in students' academic performance. The literature supports the claim that lack of certain life experiences contributes to children's failure. Research framed by social capital theory suggests that low income and minority children start school with lower academic, social, and emotional competence due to low social, cultural, and emotional capital that they inherit from their families (Dumais, 2006; Gillies, 2005; Hughes et al., 2005; Leonard, 2005; Reay, 2005).

School attendance and other child characteristics: The teachers also mentioned briefly the impact of school attendance, literacy related sub-skills such as decoding or vocabulary skills, and children's health and habits on their school success or failure. Although the literacy literature covers some other child-related factors, including personality; self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem; social competence and classroom behavior; and causal attribution and achievement strategies, the teachers and principals did not mention these as factors influencing children's success/failure.

Family- and home-life-related factors

The teachers and principals talked about various aspects of family and home life including single parenting, parent involvement, home literacy environment and practices, parent's knowledge and experiences, and so on. I present here, however, the most emphasized factors: parent involvement, emotional support, and family structure.

Parent involvement: All the principals and teachers used the same phrase "parent involvement," but when I asked probing questions about what they meant, I found that parent involvement meant different for different respondents. Overall, parent involvement meant that parents (a) come to school, (b) communicate and cooperate with school, and (c) provide their children with educational support. Ms. Phillips, Ms. Baker, Ms. Jones, Mr. Hill, and Ms. Turner used parent involvement in reference to parents' coming to school for parent teacher conference meetings, visiting or volunteering in their child's classroom, and participating in extracurricular events. Respondents from both schools said they encouraged parents to participate in extracurricular activities, to get more involved with their children's schooling, and to provide children with experiences that they otherwise may lack. Despite the efforts of school administration and staff, the participants complained that some parents never got involved. Some attributed poor parent involvement to the underlying psychological effects of low income, particularly to the differences between the world of parents and that of school, and to parents' own, often unsuccessful, educational experience

Whereas parents' educational support might be shaped by their personal experiences, self-efficacy beliefs, their expectations for their children, as well as their life circumstance, only Ms. Jones pointed out the role of parents' expectations, "*I think the expectations at home play a big part.*" Both Ms. Jones and Ms. Turner believed parental involvement and support motivate children. This claim is supported in the literature (Entwisle et al., 2005; Judge, 2005; Räty, 2006; Serpell et al., 2002). Ms. Turner said, "*Children's lack of motivation goes hand in hand with parent support. If the parents don't care, the children don't care.*" Ms. Jones claimed that school was not important for some parents:

> I think a lot of times school is just not that important. It is just a place children go all day while the parents work or do whatever they are doing. If they [children] are not getting it from home that school is important then you know they have no reason to think school is the most important place for them.

Parents' educational support also includes providing a literacy-rich environment and participating in literacy activities with their children, which as Ms. King, Mr. Hill, and Ms. Baker claimed, not only exposes children to literacy but also motivates them and provides them with opportunities to practice their literacy skills.

While the literacy literature, in general, suggests that parent involvement contributes to children's success (Jongenburger and Aarssen, 2001; Leseman and de Jong, 1998; Leseman and van Tuijl, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Rohr-Sendlmeier, 1990; Shockley, Michalove, and Allen, 1995), research framed by social capital theory claims that parent involvement alone does not affect students' achievement (Haghighat, 2005). In addition, Heymann (2000) pointed out that low income parents can hardly afford to spend extended time with their children let alone to get involved with their academic learning either at home or at school. Gillies (2005) supports this argument and claims that the parent involvement discourse expects working class parents to raise middle class children, but with working class social, emotional, financial, and cultural resource

Emotional support: Some teachers pointed out parents' taking time to give attention to children, to meet their emotional needs, and to communicate and to socialize with them impacted their success/failure.

> I think everyone has a sad day occasionally especially little ones, they may have not gotten enough sleep or they

may wake up with aches. We all have bad days. But if they have a general pervasive feeling of unhappiness day in and day out it will affect them in every way academically and socially, they become isolated and unmotivated. And I think it's a huge factor. (Ms. Baker)

Ms. Smith said she would give every child two parents if she had a magic wand to improve their schooling experiences—not because she blamed single parents for poor parenting, but just to provide children with more emotional support. Research on family type also indicates that children from single or reconstituted families are vulnerable to social, emotional, and academic difficulties in comparison to their peers from intact families due to material resource distribution and within-family relationships (Keer and Beaujot, 2002; Marks, 2006).

Family structure: The teachers also pointed to the emotional and financial structure of family as a factor. *"This could be the safest place for some of them, at school. The home environment may not be the best for them. I think that that affects success"* (Ms. Smith). Serpell et al. (2002) suggest that family intimate culture is a stronger predictor for children's school performance than over-generalized family features like income level. McDonald et al. (2005) found that family socio-economic status does have an impact, but operates indirectly, on children's success/failure through other factors, for example, school socio-economic status, instructional practices, and teachers' educational level.

Institutional factors

In comparison to child and family related characteristics, institutional factors were given little attention by the principals and teachers. The institutional factors brought up by participants included school budget, class size and providing additional help, and teachers' characteristic

School budget: School budget was the most commonly mentioned factor in the school-related category. Both principals and the teachers, except Ms. Jones, had something to say about how the limited budget and recent budget cuts affected their practices and, as a result, children's experiences. Limited budget affected school practices at three levels: limited resources, cuts in extracurricular activities, and cuts in staffing. Aside from these, Ms. Baker, sadly, pointed to a larger dimension of school budget, namely inequality in public education system:

> *There is no equity in education. The school districts that have the money have the materials. And the school districts that don't have the money, they don't have the budget, they don't have the learners, they don't have the children succeeding, they don't have anything. There is just no equity.*

Ms. Baker's comments resonate with Books's (2004) claim that educational inequality functions state-wide and district-wide as well as school-wide, because poverty in the U.S. is geographically concentrated and children living in poverty often end up at low income schools, a cycle that further fosters family poverty.

Class size and providing additional help: All the teachers mentioned the difficulty of meeting so many diverse needs when they had children who are far below, below, at, and above grade level. Children below grade level need additional one-on-one support and those at or above grade level need to be challenged. In the absence of additional help, given large class sizes, teachers claimed, it was hard to balance these needs. As a result, the schooling experiences of children at either end of the continuum are affected. It is important to note, however, that the educators mentioned class size and providing additional help more as a challenge for teachers than as a factor affecting children's success or failure.

The literature on engagement indicates that students are more behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively engaged when the teacher is actively involved because higher teacher involvement, in addition to its direct effect on engagement, increases students' perceived self-autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Fredericks, et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 2002), all of which positively affect achievement. From this point of view, classroom size and availability of additional help appear to be a significant factor affecting children's performance.

Teachers' characteristics: Of all the participants, only Ms. King, Ms. Baker, and Mr. Hill brought up teacher characteristics as a factor account for children's success/failure. Ms. Baker believed it would improve children's success in literacy if all the K-2 teachers were Reading Recovery trained, because K-2 was the most critical period for teaching reading:

> *I would like to have Reading Recovery starting in kindergarten and go through two. I would like to see more support early…. because that's where they are going to start reading. We do have Reading Recovery in our district in 1st grade. There is nothing in kindergarten to support kindergarteners that are behind. And there is nothing in 2nd grade and our literacy specialist and title people focus on 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders, when it's almost too late.*

In addition to training, Ms. Baker also expressed her concern about teachers' view of their work affects

children's schooling,

> One of the problems, not in even just our school right here, we have people for whom it's a job it's not a calling. It's a profession, but it's not a calling. I mean for Mr. Hill and I, this is more than a job. We couldn't exist without doing thiI think that it affects the children, because there is an attitude that "It's not part of my job," or "It's not as important," or "You either get it or you don't and I'm not going to put myself out," and that's not the kind of attitude a teacher should have. And a lot of teachers have the attitude if a child is not learning it's their fault.

Hansen (1995) devotes an entire book, *The Call to Teach,* to this issue and suggests reconceptualizing teaching as a *vocation* rather than a *profession,* because the term *vocation* highlights both service to public (the social value) and self-fulfillment (personal value). Teachers who view their job as a calling are involved with their students more actively, which, as mentioned above, has significant influence on children's schooling experiences.

Lastly, Mr. Hill mentioned some teachers having low expectations for children from poor families:

> Sometimes people have a low expectation. "Oh this child comes from a poor family." Teachers I am talking about. "The brother and sister never set the world on fire." That's a mistake. Every child deserves a chance to be a superstar, and they might not be a superstar in reading, but I tell you maybe they might be in math, or they might be in art, or science might be their thing.

Teachers' perceptions and expectations have been popular topics in educational research, but with somewhat contradictory findings. Jussim and Harber (2005) claim that teacher' expectations predict rather than cause student outcomes. Other scholars, however, argue that the impact of teacher's expectations on students' outcomes is not the question, but the strength of the effect and whether it has similar effects on all students. Hughes et al. (2005) and Rubie-Davies (2006) argue that the more the students are treated differently based on their abilities, the stronger the effect of teachers' expectations on students' experiences.

Sociocultural factors

These factors originate from sources beyond the children, families, or the schools, for example, poverty levels, increased expectations on children at earlier ages, changing technologies, and changes in educational policy such as NCLB. In comparison to the other categories, sociocultural factors are given little attention not only by literacy researchers, but also by the participants in this study. The sociocultural factors brought up by participants included changes in the family make-up and changes in the place of school in the society.

Changes in the family make-up: According to the principals, changes in family make-up affect children's schooling. Ms. King pointed out the increased number of single parents and related financial, experiential, and emotional issues affecting children's schooling. Ms. Phillips also mentioned that mothers used to be at home, and that there was more cooperation between home and school in the past.

Changes in the place of school in the society: All the participants claimed that school had been more important for children and for parents in the past. According to Ms. King and Ms. Phillips, because school had such an important position in society, children were more respectful to teachers, and teachers did not have as many classroom management issues as they have today. "*Teachers were a little stricter, and they could afford to be stricter*" (Ms. Phillips). In addition, Ms. Turner mentioned that children in the past used to put more effort into their school work than children today, who are more vulnerable to distractions from school learning, "*They are just distracted by so many things. Hours and hours of television, hours and hours of play-station instead of reading a good book.*"

All the participants acknowledged that more is expected from children today than was in the past. They also pointed out that children did not used to be under so much pressure from standardized testing. This resonates with Fernandez's (2001: 5) claim that "increasing standards, not decreasing performance, can be pointed to as the root cause of the literacy crisis."

In addition, Ms. Turner, Ms. Baker, and Mr. Hill disapprovingly pointed out that literacy-based schooling also contributes to failure of some students by undermining their talents in other fields if they are not good at reading. Ms. Baker complained that the way today's schools are structured sets children up for failure. The comments of these three teachers resonate with Erickson's (1987) claim that it is not the children failing the schools, but vice versa.

4. DISCUSSION AND INMPLICATIONS

This report presented educators' concepts of literacy concerning (a) the consequences they associated with literacy and (b) the factors that they believed account for children's success/failure in literacy.

I found that educators' conceptions of literacy reflect more an autonomous than a contextual approach. This finding resonates with McDermott and Varenne's (1996: 112) claim that "Psychometric and experimental

cognitive psychology is the institutional language of schooling and its problems." Literacy, from autonomous approach, is viewed as a set of discrete skills bearing significant academic and functional consequences. Emphasizing school literacy, this approach focuses more on students' performance than on their experiences in a given context. Thus, students are held responsible for their success or failure. The teachers and principals made teaching literacy a priority for institutional and policy-driven reasons, social and cultural reasons, and personal reasons. These reasons coincide respectively with literacy's academic, functional, and experiential values. The teachers and principals placed greater emphasis on the academic and functional values. A similar narrow view of school literacy is also present in the literature and has been critiqued by researchers who approach literacy from a contextual perspective (e.g., Cook-Gumperz and Keller-Cohen, 1993; de Castell and Luke, 1988; Luke and Kale, 1997; Robinson, 1988; Scribner and Cole, 1988; Szwed, 1988). All the teachers and principals expressed the belief that literacy must be emphasized in early schooling because it's significant place in today's society and its consequences for children's life. Only three teachers (Mr. Hill, Ms. Baker and Ms. Turner) drew attention to the quality of children's learning experience. The emphasis they put on getting children interested in learning and loving school, in addition to teaching subject matter and skills, reflects a more holistic view of teaching. This view resonates with the four essential elements of teaching: knowledge, skills, disposition, and values:

As typically understood, teaching means leading others to know what they did not know before [knowledge]…to know how to do things they could not do before [skills]…to take on attitudes or orientations they did not embody before [disposition]…to believe things they did not believe before [values]. (Hansen, 1995: 1)

The finding that teachers and principals highlighted more academic than non-academic aspects of schooling in their responses leads us to ask, "What messages does this emphasis give to the students?" Rubie-Davies (2006) argues that students receive salient feedback from their teachers more frequently on academic than non-academic areas of performance. The emphasis on academics appears to undermine the significance of non-academic aspects of schooling, which call for attention if a more holistic education is to be achieved and if the aim of education is teaching dispositions and values as well as knowledge and skills (Hansen, 1995). In addition, the question, "Why is the experiential value of literacy absent from contemporary discourse while its academic and functional values proliferate?" is potentially enlightening for future literacy research.

The participants in this study emphasized the academic and functional values of literacy. This narrow view can also be observed in literacy research, teacher education programs, political campaigns, media coverage, and everyday conversations concerning literacy. The growing emphasis on the academic and the functional values of literacy undermines the significance of its *experiential* value, which provides one with the power to *transcend* immediate constraints of time and space. The experiential value of literacy differs from the academic and functional values of literacy in that it is very much personal—it touches the *self*. Once one senses the experiential value of literacy, reading becomes deeply personalized, and, as Manguel (1996) suggests, *one cannot but read*. The findings of this research call for a deeper (Robinson, 1988) and broader conceptualization of literacy, one that is not only functional but also more humane, in research, policy, and in practice. Literacy, as Fernandez (2001: 3) notes, citing Borges, "exists to give human access to the universe of knowledge, a universe representing the universe of experience. That experience is one key to transcendence [of the self]." Literacy refers to much more than a set of functional skills. It needs to be considered in the context of "memory, imagination, dream, desire, [and] passion" (Fernandez, 2001: 3). Not only children's literacy performance, but also their literacy experiences, need to be taken into account in research, policy, and practice.

Table 1 displays the gaps and overlaps I found between the literature and the educators' perceptions of factors contributing to success/failure in literacy.

Table 1. Comparative view of gaps and overlaps between the literature and the educators' perceptions of factors contributing to success/failure in literacy.

Categories	Contributing Factors	Educators' statements	Literacy research
Child Related Factors	Lack of life experience	√	
	Low intelligence, ability, and maturity level	√	
	School absence	√	
	Certain habits, dispositions, and interests	√	
	Lack of previous educational experience (at home or school) and practice	√	√
	Low performance in literacy related subskills	√	√
	Low self-efficacy beliefs, self-concept, and self-esteem		√
	Certain personality types (e.g., introverted, antagonist, neurotic, etc.)		√
	Low social competence, high problem behavior, and ego-defensive or social		√

	dependence task orientation		
	Low motivation, use of maladaptive achievement strategies, and low cognitive and non-cognitive engagement		√
Family- and Home-Life Related Factors	Low parental involvement at school	√	
	Low parental communication and cooperation with school and teachers	√	
	Low parents' educational support at home (not providing literacy rich home environment, high expectations, or help)	√	
	Low level communication within family	√	
	Lack of parents' emotional support	√	
	Low income	√	
	Emotional distress	√	
	Low parental education and occupation		√
	Low parental self-efficacy and expectations		√
	Certain family types (single-parent and reconstituted family types)		√
	Large family size (when combined with low SES)		√
Institutional Factors	Low school income	√	
	Large classroom size	√	
	Unavailability of additional help	√	
	Teachers' qualifications (their perceptions of teaching and negative perceptions and low expectations of children)	√	
	Unsatisfying student-teacher relationships		√
	Teacher's ability-based differentiated student perceptions and expectations		√
	Low teacher's and collective school staff's self-efficacy beliefs		√
	Instructional and teacher practices that do not foster student's self-efficacy beliefs		√
	Classrooms where peer tutoring is not utilized and have high peer-clustering		√
	Instructional and classroom characteristics that do not meet students' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence		√
	Skill practice and behavior oriented instructional practices instead of comprehension		√
	Instructional characteristics and teacher practices that do not foster motivation and engagement		√
	Schools with low social capital		√
	Schools that do not encourage or support by its structure parental involvement		√
	Schools with dominantly minority and low income student population		√
Sociocultural Factors	Changes in society in relation to family make-up, income distribution, and the place of school that inhibits parents', teachers', and children's involvement with school.	√	
	Educational inequality		√
	Living in poverty		√

The family- and home-life-related factors and the child-related factors were stressed both in the literature and in the educators' responses. The teacher and principals mentioned children's intelligence and ability level, previous educational and life experiences, school attendance, and other child characteristics (e.g., health, interest, habits, etc.) – all factors prominent in the literacy literature. They failed, however, to mention some factors that appear extensively in the literature: children's personality (Caspi et al., 2003; Judge et al., 1999; Sneed et al., 1994); children's social competencies and classroom behaviors (Alexander et al., 1993; Corsaro and Nelson, 2003; Judge, 2005; McClelland et al., 2000; Miles and Stipek, 2006; Peterson and Swing, 1982; Poskiparta et al., 2003; and Welsh et al., 2001); children's self-concepts and self-efficacy beliefs (Aunola et al., 2002; Bandura, 1993; Bandura and Locke, 2003; Bar-Tal, 1978; Lynch, 2002; Margolis and McCabe, 2004); and children's causal attribution theories and use of achievement strategies (Bar-Tal, 1978; Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Onatsu-Arvillomi et al., 2002; Wigfield et al., 2004; Wong and Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Within the family- and home-life-related factors the respondents cited parental involvement, parents' emotional support, and financial and emotional family structure, again factors prominent in the literature. Not mentioned were parenting styles and parents' self-efficacy beliefs, also prominent in the literature (Judge, 2005; Lynch, 2002; McClelland et al., 2000; Räty, 2006; Serpell et al., 2002). Family income and children's home life were brought up in relation to children's academic performance more frequently by the teachers at Lincoln than by those at Douglas, reflecting the greater variation in school composition and community characteristics at Douglas.

An extensive literature investigates the effects of institutional factors on children's academic performance. Most of this research looks at the indirect effect of institutional factors on child-related and family-

and-home-life-related factors. The educators in this study brought up, but only briefly, a few institutional factors, some of which they mentioned as challenges rather than as factors directly affecting children's success or failure. They talked about school budget, class size, availability of additional help, and teacher characteristic. Teacher characteristics, interestingly, were cited only at Lincoln. Lincoln is located in a middle-class neighborhood. Most of the students are from middle-class homes and are at or above state standards in achievement. Given that educators at Lincoln serve a more privileged student population than their colleagues at Douglas it is possible that they brought up teacher characteristics as a factor contributing to student success rather than preventing failure.

The teachers and principals, similar to those in Storer et al. (1995), did not mention many of the institutional factors cited in the literature: classroom and school composition features (Burns and Mason, 2002; Driessen, 2002; Thrupp, 1997; Thrupp, Lauder, and Robinson, 2002); classroom and instructional materials (Bandura, 1993; Bar-Tal, 1978; Borko and Eisenhart, 1986; Davenport et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 2002; van den Oord and Van Rossem, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2004); and teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and teacher-student relationships (Christensen and Elkins, 1995; Feiler and Webster, 1999; Davis, 2003; Dumais, 2006; Fowler et al., 1998; Graham, 1984; Hughes et al., 2005; Jussim and Harber, 2005; Margolis and McCabe, 2004; McDonald et al., 2005; Mills and Clyde, 1991; Rubie-Davies, 2006; Salvesen and Undheim, 1994; Soodak and Podell, 1994; Storer et al., 1995; Yochum and Miller, 1993; Wright et al., 2000). This finding has troubling implications about educators' awareness given Osterman's (2000) claim that the school, the official societal context for literacy teaching and learning, has a strong and more direct impact on children's learning experiences. Future research is needed to explore educators' views of the role of institutional factors in students' learning.

The relationship between sociocultural factors and student success/failure was brought up only briefly by the participants. They referred to changes in the family make-up and changes in the perceived place of school in society. Unlike the other categories, sociocultural factors are given little attention in literacy literature as well. Most research investigating the relationship between sociocultural factors and children's success/failure has been conducted from a cultural-capital perspective. This line of research indicates that poverty leads children to failure in literacy through its impact on parental involvement (Gillies, 2005; Heymann, 2000), the low social capital inherited from parents (Leonard, 2005), the psychological impact living in poverty (Reay, 2005), and inequality in educational system (Books, 2004).

I asked the teachers and principals what they would change to improve young children's schooling experiences if they had a magic wand. Though only imaginary, the question provided respondents with the power to make whatever change they wished. Participants' responses fell mainly into the family- and home-life related factors and institutional factors categories. This finding points to a deeply held belief that children's schooling is the responsibility of families and schools and that if the conditions in families and schools are improved, this would evidently lead to success for all the children. It is very curious that when hypothetically provided with a magic wand, educators chose not to make any changes in the larger social-cultural environment.

In addition, the finding concerning the descriptors the teachers chose for the good and poor readers indicates that their perceptions are strongly colored by cultural view of academic success. The participants described the good readers using cognitive terms and the poor readers using behavioral terms. The implication of this finding is that educators need to become more aware of their own cultural beliefs, eventually realizing that effort is an important factor not only when children perform poorly but also when they perform successfully.

The majority of risk factors found in the literacy research are common among second language learners, native speakers of minority groups, and children of low income families. This agreed upon and consistent finding clearly indicates that the issue of literacy failure is not *only* an individual child or family- and home life-based problem but, more so, a political, sociocultural, and institutional one.

Finally, though it was not covered in the present study, future research is needed to investigate whether educators' perceptions of the individual, familial, institutional, and sociocultural factors that account for success differ from those that they perceive leading to failure.

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