

Tracing Literacy: An Examination Through Childhood

The foundations of literacy are laid in childhood when we first learn to communicate with others. These important formative experiences have a significant impact on how we interact with the world as an adult, as well as help define our relationship to literacy. We develop our own unique understanding of literacy through personal experiences and that which we learn from those around us; yet despite the subjectivity of these early experiences, there are many similarities and parallels that can be universally drawn. Early life experiences mature into adult relationships with literacy through a variety of means, including the ability to express creativity, the pursuit of personal interests, experiences with language, and the impact of other people's influence. The purpose of the following study is to trace how these influential trends develop in childhood and examine their effects on literacy later in life.

Essay writing is and has been a staple throughout many disciplines of academia and is the foremost way of reporting, arguing, and disseminating new information and findings. It is, because of this essentiality that a heavy importance has been levied upon essays. While individual disciplines have developed unique and identifiable essay structures that create a uniformity, they also impose a rigidity upon the writing process that can impinge upon an author's experience and writing. This phenomenon was experienced and considered by Victor Villanueva in his narrative book *Bootstraps: From an Academic of Color*. In his examination, Villanueva illustrates his experiences learning to write not only in English but on a higher academic level; specifically, he relates his intense struggle to write a formal, argumentative prose essay at a university level. Starting with his initiation at community college through to his tenure at university, Villanueva showed a marked enthusiasm for all literature, especially poetry, from

which he developed a love of writing poetry himself. Despite such a keen interest, Villanueva still found himself with difficulties adapting his writing to match the complexity to that of formal scholastic English. Because of this, he seriously considered dropping out of undergraduate studies (Villanueva, 1993). The intense demands of academic writing experienced by Villanueva exemplify a rigidity inherent to the style that excludes those who would think differently or had alternate educational beginnings; they are a limit to creativity and can negatively affect students' writing development and progression.

This trend is never more pronounced than when examining the experiences young scholars have with the stringent rules of essay writing. For example, the militant adherence to AP (advanced placement) criteria and the expectation of perfectionism of Mr. Murchie's ninth-grade English class had a detrimental effect on young Jaylene Fernandez (Fernandez, 2021). The strict compliance to academic writing guidelines degraded her morale, enthusiasm, and confidence, ultimately discouraging Jaylene from pursuing and enjoying writing further. In the same vein are the experiences of Marceline Tang. As a non-native English speaker, composing a formal essay was a struggle. When writing for school, she focused more on ticking all the boxes required for an essay rather than the argument itself, a process she found to be exorbitantly stressful, leading her to feel "discouraged and intimidated when it came to writing," (Tang, 2021). Luckily Marceline found a champion in the "writing collage." While writing in this style she could forgo the rigidity of a traditional essay, letting her creativity and enjoyment flow into a beautiful and personal piece of writing, demonstrating that eschewing traditional formatting does not hinder effective essay composition. The experiences of Jaylene and Marceline illustrate how conformity to the conventional and inflexible essay rules can have a detrimental and discouraging effect on young writers just beginning to find an academic voice.

It could be argued that this is because there are three different kinds of writers: creative, practical, and analytical, as outlined by Robert J. Sternberg in his book *Beyond IQ* (Sternberg, 1985). These different types of intellects not only analyze and compose in divergent ways but also respond to academic questions and tasks differently. Despite this, “our educational system favors analytical talent over the other two, resulting in a person-situation misfit for someone with more creative or practical abilities,” (O’Hara & Sternberg, 2001). When someone who is creatively inclined or favors practicality is forced to conform to the rigidity of traditional essay writing the resulting discouragement can profoundly and negatively affect their literacy proficiency and curiosity. Overall, there is an observable trend that follows: when strict writing rules are imposed over the free flow of imagination and creativity, the result is weaker writing and a marked decline in students’ literacy, interest, and engagement due to disenchantment with the overall process.

Beyond the subject of scholastic requirements, a cross examination of the literacy histories of four students in UWP 101 found several significant instances showing a person’s interests influencing the literacy content with which they engaged. For example, when offered a position as Editor of her school’s paper, Kelsey began engaging with a new writing literacy that engaged her new role (Navis, 2021). This led her to quickly and dedicatedly learn how to write in a journalistic style, developing her literacy skills in a new context. Kelsey was also encouraged and guided by a teacher to aid in building these new writing and analytical skills. As a result of this, Kelsey was able to passionately enjoy literacy with fresh purpose and personal understanding of the content she wrote. Correspondingly, Isabella experienced a similar development in her relationship with literacy. After a long break from recreational reading, returning to her interest in science fiction led her to begin reading for fun again. Isabella enrolled

in ENL 173, a course that focused entirely on the science fiction genre. Since she had enjoyed reading that type of literature as a child, she quickly rediscovered her love of the works by writers who she had admired as a child. Her relationship to science fiction developed a new complexity as she revisited her favorite works in childhood as an adult. She also willingly and enthusiastically interacted with the new content of the course, including books and papers that she had never heard of before. This excitement led to a desire to learn more outside of the assigned curriculum. The professor enthusiastically and regularly engaged with Isabella about the themes and implications of the course materials, in addition to recommending outside reading that would add to Isabella's understanding and lexicon of science fiction as a whole. While receiving positive feedback and encouragement from the professor and engaging with works that helped maintain and expand her unique interest, Isabella found that her love of recreational reading had been rekindled (Elliot, 2021). This trend is also observed in Marceline and Jaylene's literacy development, in which they read books that were directly related to their interests as children, which held their interest and encouraged more regular reading.

This positive trend of engagement with interest-based literacy leading to an enhanced relationship with literacy has been recorded in children as they develop communication skills. A study conducted on language learning in young children who were beginning to read found that when these children interacted with practices that included their interests, such as reading about stars when a child had an interest in space, there was larger growth in their language ability and in their willingness to engage in these learning activities as opposed to exposure to content that was randomly chosen (Dunst, 2016). The study also noted that encouragement from parents regarding these interest-based activities further led children to participate in developing these language learning skills, especially when parents were engaging in the activity with their child.

This study directly parallels the experiences of the writing students and their relationships with literacy, specifically pertaining to a person's interests and the encouragement of those interests from outside parties. These influences directly lead to an increase in interactions with literacy and a resulting increase in willingness and eagerness to engage with such content. In each group member's literacy development, personal interest led to an enhanced relationship with the content they interacted with, and in turn an increase in engagement with literacy.

Relationships with literacy often begin right at home, as everybody is raised differently and in a wide range of cultures, ethnicities, and countries. It therefore follows that individual literacies are also just as variable. That being said, many children have different learning experiences which heavily influence their future relationship with literacy. Some of these different learning experiences can include the language in which one learns their literacy. After careful research, the trend shows that language barriers and non advanced reading and speaking skills can discourage and negatively impact the relationship children have with literacy as they grow older. This is demonstrated by Jaylene Fernandez. She has and still struggles with English grammar and pronunciations because her first language is Spanish. Growing up only speaking Spanish, she felt intimidated to speak English in front of classmates and teachers. Having these issues with English at such an early age set a negative tone for Jaylene's future relationship with literacy (Fernandez, 2021). This can be observed as a common occurrence for many, as demonstrated by UC Davis student Marceline Tang's literacy collage. She is an international student who grew up only speaking her native languages: Chinese, Shanghainese and Cantonese. She made a big move by fulfilling her high school years in the United States, while knowing very minimal English. She struggled with her reading to the point where she developed a negative association. It was very time consuming and so frustrating that she would begin to be

self-deprecating, stating: “[I’m] not a reader.”(Tang, 2021). Personal and academic struggles with a second language can be seen as a hindrance to proper literacy development and can lead to discouragement.

Going into further research that captures the essence of this trend is an article by Technology Network Online that states: “Another immense effect of the language barrier in the classroom is the delayed learning. Studies proved that many of the students are unable to progress with their academics due to the language barrier. They are not comfortable with reading, speaking, understanding or writing the new language. It causes them to face failure and a poor learning process as well... Language barrier not only affects the learning process but also affects the students' performance in studies and school as well,” (Admin., 2020). This further showcases that language barriers have a great impact on young children's lives and their academics can be negatively impacted. In contrast, native English learners seem to view their relationship with their writing and reading literacies in a more positive light. For example, in Kelsey Navis's youth, she was titled the 'Grammar Queen' by her teacher and was even an editor of her school paper. She always had a passion for reading and writing, never seeming to drastically struggle with it (Navis, 2021). In connection with Kelsey’s experiences, another fellow student, Isabella Elliot, had a similar experience with her literacy. English is also her native language and therefore she never really had the challenges of a language barrier. She has such a great passion for reading and is always engrossed in a book, especially minimalist style writings by authors like Chuck Palahniuk, where she was even able to join a community (Elliot, 2021). This online community of others just like herself, made her motivated and eager to expand her literacy and made her relationship with it stronger. This trend reveals that our literacy

is impacted very early on in our lives, some much more than others, which can be heavily influenced by aspects like language barriers.

Just as language barriers originate in our youth, so too does learning, as it is a huge part of human life. Starting from birth, we absorb information from the environment around us. Since most people spend a large amount of their childhood with family members, such as parents or siblings, literacy learning is most influenced by them. In Ralph Wilson's research outlined in *The Impact of Parent Established Home Literacy Experiences on Early Childhood Literacy Acquisition*, he states that "[g]enerally, it is the adults in a child's life that have the most impact on their literacy learning as the adults are typically the ones that promote language in the lives of young children. Adults are greatly involved in the development as they model the uses of language and also assist children as they try to use the language themselves," (Wilson, 2014). Therefore, it is important for us to analyze how establishing a home literacy environment can impact a child's literacy development, especially because family members are a child's first teachers and role models.

There are many ways that family members can be involved in a child's literacy development. A very common practice used to encourage parental involvement in language learning is bedtime reading. Parents reading books to their children before going to bed can potentially promote early literacy and foster a love for reading. For example, Isabella Elliot mentioned in her Literacy Artifacts that her father would read to her out loud before she fell asleep (Elliot, 2021). This evening routine not only helped Isabella and her father to bond but most importantly engaged her in reading as children tend to love the sound of language more than looking at the printed words on the pages. When parents read out loud, children's imaginations are stimulated, helping them better interpret the story (Cullinan & Bagert, n.d.). Not

only are children's visual processing skills improved, but also their vocabulary. In the article *The Importance of Reading to Kids Daily*, Jeff Grabmeier states that "kids who are read only one book a day will hear about 290,000 more words by age 5 than those who don't regularly read books with a parent or caregiver," (Grabemier, 2019). Children who grow up listening to their parents' reading will be benefited as they enter school, because their language and listening skills were developed to better prepare them to understand written words. Therefore, it is necessary for parents to read to their children starting from a young age. It helps children to develop visual processing, language proficiency and most importantly encourages them to become independent readers.

However, simply reading books to children is not enough for their literacy development. It is also crucial to create a home environment that can engage reading and learning. A number of studies have shown that children growing up in a family that encourages reading and learning will have better performance in learning and understanding (Wilson, 2014). Family members can simply create a reading environment by having books, newspapers, or magazines around the house. In Isabella's Artifacts, she states that "we had books next to bed" (Elliot, 2021). Simply having books in easily accessible areas encourages children to independently make reading a high priority. Another way of creating a literacy friendly environment is to have all family members actively participate in reading. They do not necessarily have to read the same books, as long as they read in their leisure time. Kelsey Navis mentioned that reading was a big part of her household; no one was forced to read, instead, it was "self-encouraged and self-indulgent," (Navis, 2021). Seeing parents or siblings reading at home can trigger a child's interest in reading as well, thus, having family members who value reading as a worthwhile activity can potentially motivate their children to read for pleasure.

A family's involvement in extracurricular literacy activities not only improves children's literacy development, but can also increase their engagement at school. Family members can be involved in a child's schooling by sharing the responsibilities to help their children with academic work. It is proven that students with family involvement at school have higher academic achievement than others who do not (Clark, 2007). In Jaylene Fernandez's *Artifacts*, she recalls that her mother would help her with writing in elementary school and her older cousin would help her with other academic work (Fernandez, 2021). Since English is Jaylene's second language, sometimes it would be difficult for her to follow along with school work; however, with help from her family members, she felt supported, and thus began to develop a more positive attitude and engagement with the school curriculum.

Overall, having family members actively involved in a child's early literacy development can encourage their positive relationship with literacy. Growing up with family members who read to them before bed, having books around the house, or helping with academic work can improve a child's literacy performance drastically. Such a familial environment not only aids children to improve their literacy skills and perform better in school, but most importantly fosters a love for reading. The earlier this family involvement starts, the more profound and longer-lasting the effect will be in children. Therefore, having a family that is involved in a child's literacy is crucial in developing a healthy relationship with literacy in the long term.

Child and young adulthood is a time for literal and intellectual growth. Alongside the body, the mind experiences an exponential growth that must be guided and nourished in order to truly flourish. From bedtime stories painted across a child's imagination to the burgeoning rigors of high school academia, these formative years solidify not only ability but also interest in literacy, upon which future endeavors or disinterest are predicated. Literacy trends can be traced

through personal experiences: young Isabella, who inhabited the stories read to her, Jaylene and Marceline and their struggles with learning and exercising English as a second language, and Kelsey's encouragement to explore writing. From prohibitive language barriers that can halt academic progression to the support of personal interests that echo and multiply, through the anchoring sponsorship of a child's reading literacy, and expanding across the freedom to express oneself in a sometimes suffocating pedagogical atmosphere, the future of one's literacy can be traced through past experiences that can both buoy and stifle enthusiasm. The framework of present and future literacy, for reading, writing, and beyond, is built and solidified in the experiences of the past.

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