
Children's utilization of written language in meaningful situations: literacy events in role play contexts

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1. Introduction

One of the main problems with early literacy is that is considered to be semantically opaque and/or polysemic. And this "indeterminacy" proliferates in view of its implications in school contexts.

In the present paper, our effort is to investigate literacy events occurring during "free choice" role playing activities enacted by preschool aged children (4;5–6 years old) in a Greek kindergarten setting. Our main concern is to contribute to a view of preschool literacy as a meaningful engagement in social semiotic processes. By this means, our framework mainly draws upon hallidayan concept of language literacy, in contrast with a rather narrow perspective of literacy as a set of neutral reading and writing skills that can be explicitly taught (the so called "autonomous model", Street, 1995).

As Halliday (1996, p. 340), points out "*in becoming literate, you take over the more elaborated forms of language that are used in writing – and the social values that goes with them*", moving up to a higher model of meaning situated in the overall social context. We could say, in a rather naïve way, that the two perspectives ("autonomous" vs "social-semiotic approach") are simply complementary, that is reading/writing skills are integrated in the whole literacy processes. This assumption, however, encounters some difficulties in face of teaching strategies, i.e. in function of its application into formal contexts such as pre-primary school, due to how teachers' do make sense of literacy processes.

That is the case of Greek kindergartens considered to be the place of learning and reinforcing "natural" literacy experiences (Hasan, 1996) towards school literacy.

In few words, Greek kindergartens are institutionally assigned to promote emergent literacy. The National Kindergarten Curriculum concerning the Language Program (reformed at 1999) replaced the reading readiness approach employed since that time adopting an emergent literacy perspective (e.g., Tafa, 2004). Consequently, it supports literacy workshops and the integration of written language in all kinds of activities.

For example, among other suggestions, it is clearly stated that "*Children are encouraged to take notes, to write as they wish, to express themselves through*

writing (e.g. cards, invitations or catalogues) (Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework, 2002: 597). It seems that the work of kindergarten teacher has altered to a continuous provision of child to be engaged in literacy events (Giannikopoulou, 2002). But the fact is that it is a common place that usually pre-school teachers are making assumptions about emergent literacy which do not compass with those of the curriculum, thus opting for the "autonomous model": None of the basic principles, such as authentic communicative situations, neither previous experiences and knowledge is used as a source for teaching literacy. Thus, the "orthographic" approach –or, a small part of "recognition literacy" in Hasan's (1996) terms, seems to be still dominant in Greek kindergartens. (Its worthy to say that, although teachers are aware of the specificity and complexity of reading and writing processes, their persistence in the "orthographic path" could be explained by a long tradition in educational policy and practice in Greece).

These considerations lead us to reflect on the conditions under which a literacy teaching programme could be realised. In consistency with our assumption regarding literacy as social practice, our main effort was to create a congruent communicative situations existing in actual school settings apt to scaffold children's participation in literacy events as social practices.

Our first point concerns the notion of literacy events we adopted. We focused on literacy events following Heath's (1982: 93) outstanding definition, as "*any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes*". Moreover, we should take into account also that "*[literacy] events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them. The notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context*" (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 8).

However, the above presuppositions concerning social practices are not easy to be fulfilled in school contexts, because of the very nature of these –by definition – "non authentic" teaching communicative situations. Previous investigations in Greek kindergartens have shown the importance of schooling - even if more traditional methods of teaching literacy are employed - in developing reading and writing skills (Kondyli & Stellakis, 2005).

In fact, teaching and learning communication is an equally social situation, but with somehow "non-authentic" characteristics (teacher-initiated, decontextualised subject-matters, focused primary upon uncommonsense knowledge, etc) (see, e.g, Painter, 1999) we looked out for contexts into which the principles of socially situated literacy events could occur without curriculum impositions and/or restrictions.

In that sense, we choose “free-choice activities” (integrated into the official curriculum) as communicative situations characterized by low degree of school-like disciplinary frames (see below for more details), considered, thus, to be the enabling condition for the emergence of children’s literacy practices.

No doubt, the most popular practice during free-choice activities is role playing, an advanced form of play in which children, under teacher’s supervision, are prompt to be engaged in taking on social roles and to act out make-believe stories and situations (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004). Role play seems so to be the most meaningful activity for children through which they are motivated to be engaged in authentic literacy events. It seems that only in these communicative contexts children’s reservoir of literacy knowledge becomes fully activated. Previous studies have shown that when play environments have incorporated specific literacy-related stimuli, children spontaneously use these stimuli during pretend play (Hall & Robinson, 1997, Roskos, Tabors & Lenhart, 2004).

At this point we should clarify what we account for children’s “reading and writing”. Taken for granted that most of them are not yet in alphabetic phase, we considered as reading any attempt to make meaning out of a written text *interacting with other(s)*: That simply means that children are reading something to/for someone else. For example: G. reads a recipe book to his mates in the doll’s house. He states what the food to be prepared is and “reads” the recipe, based upon both the picture and his everyday experience.

As writing has been considered any effort to write down a message addressed to someone else by employing (quasi) linguistic and/or arithmetic signs. For example: F. pretending to be a cashier in the shop, wrote a receipt with the amount of “100 €”. Scribbles produced in various events were also considered as writing.

Research questions

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how role play reinforces literacy practices and what forms of literacy practices, such as reading and writing, emerge out of role play.

More specifically, research questions could be summarized as follows:

- Does literacy practice is a matter of making meaning which arises “naturally” in social interactions?
- Which kind of contexts privilege such literacy practices?
- How the communicative situation restricts/allows particular forms of reading and writing?

2. Procedure and data gathering

Greek kindergarten lasts two years and serves children from 4 to 5 and from 5 to 6 years old. For the first group the attendance is voluntary, while for the second the attendance is compulsory. Both groups follow the same curriculum and are aggregated in the same class, where they are provided with education-oriented care by staff with specialized tertiary qualification in education.

According to the official program there are two kinds of activities: whole class and free-choice activities. The first are based upon cross-thematic activities, while the later are taken place in various play corners mainly after arrival at school. They last about one hour and children can choose the play corner as well as their partners. For that reason the curriculum suggests the division of preschool classes into distinguished areas some of which should be permanent (discussion corner, construction area, library, art center), while others could be modularized (e.g. center for mathematics, doll house, music corner, computer area, laboratory for observation and discovery, shop center, hospital, etc) (Dafermou, Koulouri & Basagianni, 2004). During these activities it is at teacher's discretion to get involved in play or just to supervise it.

Method

Data collected through an ethnographic observational approach in a Greek kindergarten during a four week period (January – February 2009). Free-choice activities in various play corners were observed by a researcher, who, as neutral observer, recorded literacy events, that is events in which somehow a written text is integrated. When it was possible the researcher videotaped the whole process or took photos to augment this data and incorporated into the observation pattern. Through this ethnographic observation (kidwatching) we could gain insight into the ways children construct and express literacy knowledge (Owocki & Goodman, 2002).

The literacy events were registered into an observation pattern in which notes were taken about the play area, the participants, the duration, the purpose and the tenor of each interaction as well as the reading and writing episodes. As episodes were considered the instance(s) of the event, in which discursive practices are focused on a written text, which was to be read or to be written (see Appendix).

The case study took place in one public kindergarten class in a middle-class area of Patras. In this class there were 17 children, 9 in grade one of kindergarten (girls: 2, boys: 7, aged: 4-5) and 8 in grade two (girls: 3, boys: 5, aged: 5-6), (two children were not native speakers).

In the classroom under observation there were four play areas: a) doctor's office, b) small shop, c) doll's house and d) library. In order to enhance literacy practices, the researcher enriched the play areas with relevant artifacts [various kinds of paper, pencils, cards, notebooks, printed material (e.g. magazines, books, advertising leaflets, etc.)].

It is worthy to be mentioned that individual literacy events not co-involving other participants, such as personal reading or writing, were excluded because of their non-interactive nature.

Results

The number of literacy episodes registered was 214 in total: 111 were writing episodes and the 103 reading ones (Table 1). Even though we cannot argue for statistical relevance of our findings, the onset of literacy practices is evident in our case.

The great majority of literacy events occurred in doctor's office area (writing: 53, reading: 19) and secondly in doll's house area (writing: 32, reading: 26). As expected, in library corner the majority of registered episodes were reading ones (writing: 2, reading: 43).

Table 1
Writing and Reading episodes

	Doctor's office		Small shop		Doll's house		Library		
DAY	writing	reading	writing	reading	writing	reading	writing	reading	
1	9	2	2	1				2	16
2	5	2	3	2				1	13
3	4	2	4	2	1	3	1	3	20
4	4	2	1		5	2		4	18
5	3		3	1	5	2		2	16
6	4	1		1	2	2		2	12
7	2				2			3	7
8			1	1	2			1	5
9	3	1	1	1	3	4		3	16
10					2	2		4	8
12	3		4	2	1	3		2	15
13	3	1			3	3	1	2	13
14	1		1	1	1				4
15	3	1			1				5
16			2		2	3		2	9
17	3	3		2	1			6	15
18	3	3			1			3	10
19						2		2	4
20	3	1	2	1				1	8
	53	19	24	15	32	26	2	43	214

In doctor's office a great number of written texts has been noticed, mainly prescriptions; in shop play area there were receipts, and in doll's house area there was a variety of texts: messages, lists for shopping, postcards, texts on cakes (e.g.

names). In library the majority of episodes, as expected, were reading ones. As far as reading episodes in other corners are concerned, they deal with reading recipes or messages in doll's house, food boxes in doll's house and in shop, reading panels in doctor's offices. In some cases, although not so frequently, children read messages in mobile phones or received fax in doll's house.

It seems that the setting enacted certain interactions, co-involving, thus, embedded literacy episodes. The findings support the assumption about the significance of social context as the vehicle by which literacy is practiced. Spontaneous writing attempts carry clear cultural assumptions, since the texts are closely linked to their cultural function. Children seem to make meaning out of the texts, based upon previous experiences, with the mediation of social conventions of communicative events.

3. Conclusion and discussion

The results empirically not only support the assumptions about the emergence of literacy as socially situated practice. Children's previous social awareness that written communication is meaningful and that is part of cultural behaviors of the everyday world trigger reading and writing. In addition, observation of children's reading and writing in everyday contexts, such as role-play, provides evidence of their knowledge about the symbolic nature of written language as well as the purposes it is used for in certain communicative events. The communicative purposes of a scenario enact children's situated literacy practices and, therefore, enhance the socio-semiotic recourses of literacy events as a social dialogue. This social dialogue implies not only "recognition literacy" (making meaning and use of symbolic systems) but, also, "action literacy" (Hasan, 1996) (making meaning and use of texts) in socially-situated, every day genres (booklets, recipes, etc).

Lastly, this kind of observations illustrate the significance of pre-school education in the development of early literacy, by supporting children's investigation and engagement with written language not only in traditional whole class teacher-centered activities but, also, in authentic or "simulating" situations.

It is a matter of further discussion to which face of literacy each of these two situations privilege and if they can function complementary in order to empower school literacy.

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APPENDIX**Examples of registered literacy events**

OBSERVATION PATTERN	
EVENT NUMBER: 32	
Date Time -	12/2/2009
Duration	23'
Play area	Doctor's office
Participants	J. (boy, Grade 2) M. (girl, Grade 2) Z. (girl, Grade 1) M. (boy, Grade 1)
Total	(4)
Videotaped	Yes (), No (X)
Photographed	Yes (X), No ()
Event	J. is pretending the doctor and M. is his assistant, dressed in white robes. [J. wears the tag "DOCTOR"]. Z. is bringing her son (M.) for medical examination. He is suffering from sore throat. At the beginning they knocked the door and they spent some minutes waiting at the hall. [A medical examination takes place] After examination, M. asked for medical booklet and Z.'s answer that they had not brought it. M. suggested never visit doctor without the booklet.
Reading episode(s)	➤ J. explained to Z. and M. pointing to the relevant panel why there is this pain in M.'s throat.
Writing episode(s)	J. "wrote" a recipe for syrup (string of letters) and wrote the numbers "3" and "5". The first ("3") was to indicate that M. should take the medicine every three hours and the second ("5") for the number of days he should take it.
Notes	The language used was relevant to the communicative event. They exchanged greetings and the language used was rather formal.
OBSERVATION PATTERN	
EVENT NUMBER: 18	
Date Time -	7/2/2009
Duration	11'
Play area	Doll's house
Participants	G. (boy, Grade 2) K. (girl, Grade 2)
Total	(2)
Videotaped	Yes (X), No ()
Photographed	Yes (), No ()
Event	G. and K. are writing a shopping list. They decide to make a vegetable soup and buy, also, some fruits. G. is writing to a notebook but K. is also involved.
Reading episode(s)	➤ They are looking for letter /p/ to a calendar at the wall. They find it at days "Thursday" and "Friday" which starts with that letter.
Writing episode(s)	G. is writing the words "onion, cabbage, beans, pine apple". [in Greek: ΚΡΕΜΜΥΔΙ, ΜΑΠΑ, ΦΑΣΟΛΙΑ, ΑΝΑΝΑΣ] He wrote: «ΚΡΕΜΙΔΙ, ΜΑΠΑ, ΦΑΣΟΛΑ, ΑΝΝΑΣ, ΑΝΑΣ» In the first two words all the phonemes are written, in the third one phoneme (/i/) is omitted, but in this word is not so clear. The last word ("ananas") seems to be more difficult because the syllable "NA" there is twice. He writes the word two times: one as "ΑΝΝΑΣ» and one as «ΑΝΑΣ».
Notes	They had a very nice collaboration. K. continually told G. that he was doing well.