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PREVIEW

**CONSTRUCTING LITERACY: A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY  
OF JOEL'S PRESCHOOL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

**by**

**Carla S. Ketner**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Interdepartmental Area of  
Major: Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction**

**Under the Supervision of Professor David Wilson**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

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## Constructing Literacy: A Biographical Study

## of Joel's Preschool Literacy Development

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**CONSTRUCTING LITERACY: A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY  
OF JOEL'S DEVELOPMENT AS A READER AND WRITER  
DURING THE PRESCHOOL YEARS**

**Carla S. Ketner, Ph.D.**

**University of Nebraska, 2002**

**Advisor: David Wilson**

Early literacy development has been the subject of considerable research, both qualitative and quantitative, from many theoretical perspectives. This study looked at language and literacy development from a social constructionist perspective. The purpose of this biographical study was to describe and interpret one preschooler's transactions with oral and written language from his birth through his fifth birthday. Data in the form of artifacts and anecdotes were collected by the researcher, the subject's mother, on an on-going, constant basis over the length of the study. The subject's preschool teacher, day care providers, and father were also interviewed for their perceptions of his literacy-related behaviors and attitudes.

The narrative was written as an interpretive biography, describing and interpreting the young child's literacy use and

learning and identifying epiphanies, or significant moments in his development. Five such epiphanies were identified. They relate to the purposefulness, playfulness, and social nature of his literacy development. Other epiphanies recognized the facts that literacy, for this child, was empowering and also fundamental to his individuality.

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PREVIEW

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

When Joel was nine months old, he took his first step alone. He had been standing up, “cruising” around the room as he often did, and he let go and took a step. We celebrated with lots of hugs and applause, then began to encourage him to walk back and forth between us. A few weeks later, when he was almost eleven months old, he could take ten steps before falling into his father’s or my arms or onto his diaper-padded bottom, or getting down to crawl quickly to whatever he was after. By his first birthday, Joel was choosing to walk rather than crawl and was able to do so relatively steadily.

I, like most first-time mothers, was eager to record Joel’s achievement in his baby book and in the journal where I kept track of significant moments in his life. But I wasn’t sure how to document when he learned to walk. Should I use the date he took his first step? Or the date he made it ten steps before falling? Or when he used walking as his primary means to get around?

Later, the same was true of reading. Should I record that Joel learned to read at age two, because that’s when he recognized his

name in print and knew that printed letters and words were meaningful? Or was it when he was three and could recognize a few other words, such as his brother's name and STOP on the sign at the corner? Was it when he was four and could read his preschool friends' names, Mom, Dad, STOP, NO PARKING, McDonald's and several other words? Or, as he turned five, had he not yet really learned to read?

Joel and all young children are constantly learning, long before they enter school and begin their formal education. They learn to feed themselves, sit up, and walk. They learn to throw a ball, give mommy a kiss, and that no matter how much they scream and arch their backs, they are still going to have to sit in their carseats. They learn to tell us what they want, to read their cereal boxes, and to write their names.

Mastering any of these skills requires practice and development. And, just as Joel and other children began learning to eat, throw, and walk from birth, they also began learning to talk, read and write from birth. Learning to read and walk are both developmental processes, and the steps leading up to the actual ability to walk or read independently are significant parts of the

process. Joel didn't suddenly open a book and read it any more than he suddenly stood up and walked.

Research shows that preschoolers are well on their way to attaining literacy (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1991, 1998; Hall, 1987; Laminack, 1990; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990; Teale & Sulzby, 1986 and others). They have been learning about reading, writing and speaking from their earliest encounters with print and oral language. At some point, children achieve a level of learning that is such that people will say they have learned to talk, read and write, that they have become literate. Becoming literate, like learning to walk, throw a ball, or ride a bike without training wheels, doesn't happen overnight. It is a complex achievement that develops unevenly over time.

### *The Complexity of Literacy*

Literacy itself is difficult to define. It has been described as "a complex and multifaceted phenomenon" that involves "attitudes, assumptions, and expectations about writing and reading, and about the place and value of these activities in one's life" (McLane & McNamee, 1990, p. 2). Literacy includes activities directly requiring



the use of print, as well as related activities that involve print peripherally (Snow, 1983).

Typical definitions of literacy refer to the use of written language, or reading and writing. Literacy is also closely tied to oral language use and thinking, and I would question limiting discussions of literacy to the use and understanding of *written* language. A discussion of literacy learning seems incomplete without the inclusion of the role of both oral language development and thinking.

There is a complex relationship between speech and written language (Clay, 1991; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; F. Smith, 1978). Research has identified similarities between written and oral language (Shannon, 1990; Snow, 1983), as well as differences in the production of written and spoken texts (Steward, 1995; Wells, 1986). Realizing that oral and written language, while similar, are also different in important ways, has been called a "critical moment" of growth in literacy learning (Clay, 1998; F. Smith, 1997; Steward, 1995).

How children learn such a complicated phenomenon as literacy is difficult to understand. To do so, we must consider both

the phenomenon of literacy itself and how young children learn and develop (F. Smith, 1978). Literacy is a community's way of using written language for social purposes, and literacy learning involves adopting a community's ways of using and interpreting written language (Solsken, 1993). Since literacy is a cultural and social, as well as a cognitive achievement, we must consider the specific relationships and contexts in which children learn to read and write (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Heath, 1983; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Solsken, 1993; Taylor, 1998/1983; Wells, 1986).

Because of their complexity, literacy and early literacy development have been and continue to be the topics of much research. In spite of considerable research over many decades and in many professional spheres, however, the path to literacy is not clear. No one knows for sure how children learn to be literate. There may, in fact, be no one way in which all children learn literacy. There may even be no one form of literacy. Just as in other areas of learning, many conditions in children's environments and in who they are seem to play a role in early literacy

development. How children learn to read and write is a fascinating question with no easy answers.

### *Purpose*

Early literacy development has long interested me, but when my own son was born the semester I was taking a graduate-level course called Language and Learning, my interest became more than mere curiosity. I was fascinated to see my infant son doing the things with oral language that I was reading about in the course textbooks and wondered what his journey to literacy would look like. I decided to find out.

This study grew out of that desire. For my Ph.D. thesis, I conducted an in-depth biographical study of my son Joel's literacy development from his birth through his fifth birthday. The purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the early experiences of one child, the one who gave new urgency to my interest in literacy development, as he interacted with the tools and attitudes of literacy. I wanted to better understand Joel's transactions with oral and written language as he attempted to make meaning from them

at different times in his young life, to draw a detailed portrait of Joel's early literacy life and development.

### *Research Questions*

To shape this study, I began with the question, "How do young children develop language and literacy during the preschool years?" As my thinking progressed, additional questions emerged. I wondered what young children know about literacy before they enter kindergarten and how they learn about literacy and oral language. What conditions in their families and cultural backgrounds would play a role in young children's literacy development? I wanted to know what young children's literate behaviors and thinking tell about them as individuals and, conversely, what influences children's literate behaviors and activities have in shaping them as individuals.

Recognizing that there are no universal answers to these questions, I decided to focus on describing and understanding Joel's early experiences as he interacted with literacy. The research questions then became:

1. How does Joel develop literacy, from his birth through his fifth birthday?
2. How does Joel interact with and respond to books during the preschool years?
3. What does Joel know about literacy?
4. How does Joel learn about literacy?
5. What conditions in his family and cultural background play a role in Joel's literacy development?
6. What do Joel's literate behaviors and thinking tell about him as an individual?
7. What influences do Joel's literate behaviors and activities have in shaping him as an individual?

### *Significance of the Study*

As I analyzed the stories I had collected about Joel's life and literacy, I repeatedly asked myself the question, "What can this study add to the existing research?" The answer seemed to be that it could become an in-depth portrait of a young child's literacy learning and use from a perspective other than one based in cognitive development.

The study of Joel's language and literacy development, in the context of his family and social relationships, fills a void in the available literature about young children's literacy. Rich, detailed narrative of an actual child learning to read and write should help illustrate the process or processes by which individual children develop literacy. Since both the psychological and social aspects of Joel's literacy development were treated as significant, this study might illustrate how ". . . literacy might be reconceived as developmentally entwined with social structures and processes in a fashion far more subtle and complex than anything described to date. . . ." (Hruby, 2001, p. 59).

In addition, since this study considered the cultural and social environments in which Joel lived and learned, it should help to clarify the role of the family and other relationships in shaping attitudes toward and knowledge of literacy. By also focusing attention on one child as an individual and on his development of a sense of himself, this type of study could provide insight into the role of literacy in shaping who we are, as well as the role of a sense of self in literacy development. Together with other studies, Joel's story could highlight the variation in literacy learning within cultural or social groups.

Finally, it could provide a "language and a framework that parents, teachers, and researchers can use to explore other children's literacy development in similar ways" (Y. Goodman, 1996, p. xi).

It is important to note that all children are unique and have unique experiences. I do not claim that Joel has a "typical" literacy life, or even that there is such a thing. By presenting the story of one child's interactions with literacy I am not encouraging a generalization to all children's experiences. In fact, to generalize Joel's story to other children's trivializes both his experiences and those of other children, whose uniqueness contribute to who they are and to what we can learn from them. Van Manen (1990) says:

Pedagogic situations are always unique. And so, what we need more of is theory not consisting of generalizations, which we then have difficulty applying to concrete and ever-changing circumstances, but *theory of the unique*; that is, theory eminently suitable to deal with this particular pedagogic situation, this school, that child, or this class of youngsters. (p. 155)

In writing and interpreting Joel's literacy story, I hoped to better understand his unique transactions with oral and written language as

he attempted to make meaning from them at different times in his young life, to draw a detailed portrait Joel's early literacy life and development. A study such as this one about Joel can only enrich what we know about children and their development.

PREVIEW