

# Case study: Observing an early literacy learner



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***“Literacy, in as much as it has anything to do with life, wasn’t meant to be easy.***

***(Holdaway, 1982. P. 293)”***

### **Constructing Literacy**

Every Friday at 1 Pm. Children walk into the classroom after lunch and recess. Knowing it is choice time. A time where children’s creativity sparks, and where development and growth take their natural path. The path of curiosity, testing ideas, learning from one another, and above all making mistakes. “Errors, inventions, and miscues are expressions of language and concepts as they currently exist in the child’s schema, they are thoughtfully documented and studied...to shift from representing unsophisticated conclusions to showing greater sophisticated conclusions. (Dewey, 1979; Owacki and Goodman, 2002, Pg. 7). “We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.” John Dewey. Errors are part of the child’s development. Something that teachers not only will expect but also embrace and build on to understand how children learn and think, and to develop strategies to scaffold children’s meaning taking from the environment. As a student teacher, I observed at choice time things, perhaps, I would never observe in a formal period. Sometimes I feel like they are different kids during formal periods. Sitting and following instructions, and deep inside them, they know that they are doing what they are supposed to do as students, not as children. (Picture 1).

During choice time, I heard laughter, ideas, stories, arguing, and plans. And I saw engineering, artworks, turn-taking, collaboration, and rules followed. The pictures below (Picture 2) show some of the children's products during choice time.

**Early literacy learner.**


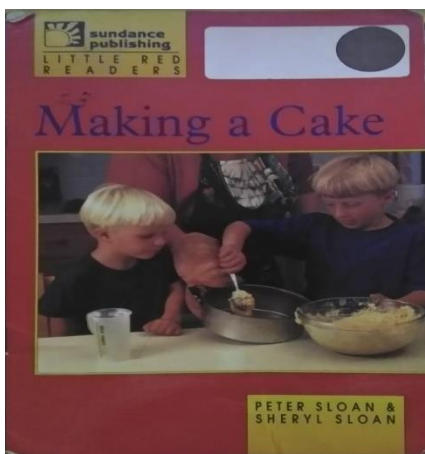
Hussam, one of the quietest students and, surprisingly, one of the active and socially involved children. He lives with his father, mother, older sister, and younger brother. He likes to tell stories about his family. Hussam's home language is Urdu, his parents are from Pakistan, and was born in Pakistan. However, Hussam is not as fluent in Urdu as he is in English. He can understand Urdu, but when it comes to speaking, he uses English. Physically, he is average tall, has black hair, and has dark brown eyes. Relatively thin. Hussam is aware of his body movement. He can perform all the movements a 6-year-old child can do. I observed him during gym performing the following movement: Throw a ball under and overhead, catch a ball (sometimes the ball bounced before Hussam could catch it), stand on one foot, throw a ball to a target, jump and run. And during class activities, Hussam demonstrated an appropriate level of fine motor skills, he can draw detailed, recognizable, pictures, cut out art projects, color within the lines. He can also form all the letters, numbers, and print words. Socially and emotionally, Hussam has a best friend his name is Preston, and he lives in the same building where Hussam lives, they call each other "buddy" and they always pick the same center during choice time. But also, he is good at interacting with other children, starting and maintaining conversations. He doesn't hesitate to give suggestions and set up rules when playing in a group. On Halloween Hussam was dressed up as a police officer, besides looking cute, his choice shows a sense of "Who I am?" in his costume, Hussam, sees himself as the strong man who wants to protect his community and serve his country. He also developed a strong sense of family and identity, I noticed this from his writings and our conversations where he always brings up stories from his home. Hussam has developed

good oral language skills. he can tell very detailed stories, use past and future tense, ask questions for information, and has built an interesting vocabulary background. When it comes to Cognitive development. Hussam is doing a great job. He is a level G reader and demonstrated a good level of writing/spelling and Math.

### **Literacy Rich environment.**

The classroom provides balanced literacy programs and embeds literacy in various activities to foster emergent literacy practices. This is fundamental in many ways, as it supports developmentally appropriate practices, meets the child's Literacy level, "creates a literacy-rich environment that provides young children with multiple opportunities to explore and use literacy through the day in their daily routines and play." (Reich Shapiro, p.1). and supports various learning styles and interests. The classroom is designed in a rich and encouraging way for children to develop their language. everything is labeled, there are many posters, months of the year, schedule of the day, Jobs list, the Alphabet, numbers, and a library with a great collection of high-quality books. In this Integrated Co-teaching classroom, the teaching strategy fosters social interactions, inclusion, and diversity. Rules of conversation are very important and "a natural activity" (Beaty, Pg. 210) throughout the day. In addition, Word study, read aloud, guided reading, reading workshops are some of the components of the balanced literacy program I observed during my student teaching.

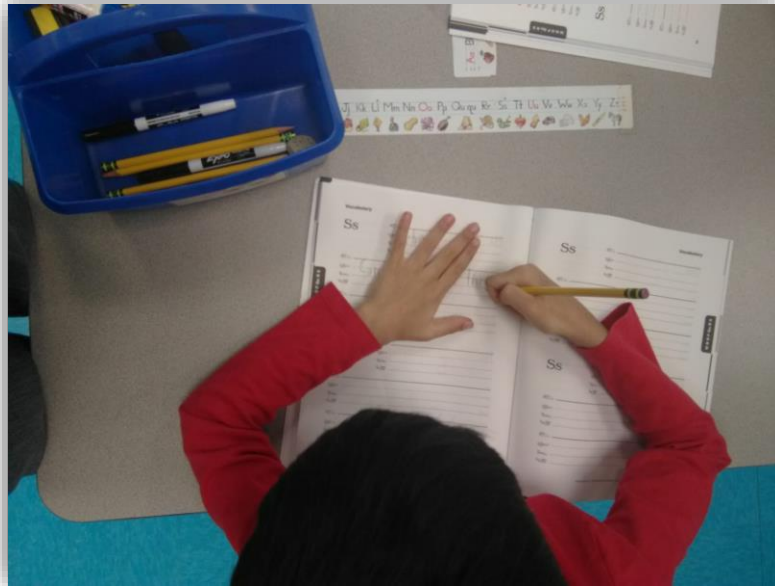
**Phonemic awareness****Reading Profile: Reading Analysis**

Hussam reads:	Text	Page
<b>Audio recording:</b>  AUD-20211130-WA0000 (1).m4a  	Dad is making a cake. It is a carrot cake. My brother and I want to help him	2
	My brother mixed the butter with the sugar in a bowl. Now it looks smooth.	3
	I put in two eggs. Some eggshells fall into the bowl. I lift the shell out with a spoon.	4
	Now my brother adds the flour and grated carrot. Then he pours in some milk. He mixes everything together quickly. Dad has the cake pan ready.	5
	The oven is already hot. I spoon the batter into the pan. Dad puts the pan in the oven.	6
	My brother and I lick the spoons. This is the best part of helping dad make a cake!	7
	When the cake is baked and iced, we eat it.	8

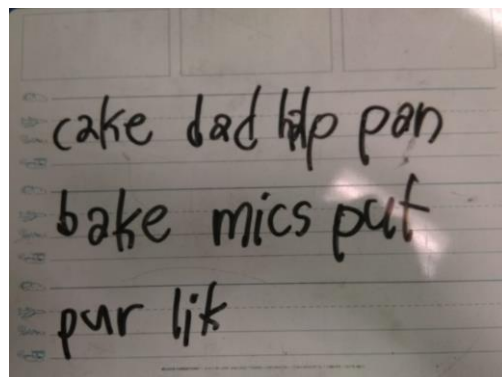
When I gave Hussam the book to read he first examined the book by looking at the cover. I asked him if he had ever seen or read this book before. He said, "I never saw one, I never saw this one." I asked him, what do you think this book is about? He said, "I think it's about they are making a cake because it says, "Making a Cake" and maybe it is about how to make a cake." He then started to read. After he finished reading, I asked: now that you have read the book can you tell me what is it about? do You think your prediction was right? He said "it was about some... to... something wrong they are not just making a cake they help dad make a cake. But one thing is right that is how to make a cake, a carrot Cake, they are making a cake and I knew they are

going to eat it at the end.” My last question was, can you tell me how they made the cake, what are the steps to make the carrot cake? Hussam started to go over each page as he answered: “first, mix the butter and then you add some sugar then it will look smooth, then you mix everything quickly together and you add some milk, flour, carrot, and then you turn on the oven and then put it in the oven. Then you can lick the spoon and then the cake is going to take some time and at the end, you can add the frosting, and then you will be done.”

Hussam seems to understand the logic of written language. His dominant decoding strategy is based on his phonemic awareness. He is “aware that spoken language consists of a sequence of phonemes.” (Yopp & Yopp, 2000. p. 131). Listening to his reading we can hear the sound of each letter. He quickly examines the illustrations, usually after he reads, but when he came across the word “grated”, page 5, he stopped and started to look for clues. The illustration didn’t give him much information, so he uses his decoding skill; Sounding out the letters to make a word and he read “grad.” On page 4, Hussam read “I put in the two eggs” but the text doesn’t have the word “the” Hussam didn’t correct himself because the way he read it, make sense to him. However, on the same page, he read “with the spoon.” and corrected himself and read “with a spoon.” I think he is starting to notice the use of different articles. On page 6 Hussam read “butter” instead of “batter” this is a new word for him, but he didn’t correct himself because again for him it is something that makes sense.

**writing Profile: writing/drawing Analysis**

When Hussam is asked to write, his phonemic spelling makes him confident and willing to write long complicated stories with very detailed drawings. When he writes a word that he is familiar with he writes it fast, but also, he is “prepared to attempt the spelling of unknown words by taking risks.” (Baghban, 2007, p. 26). When attempting to write unknown words, he stops and looks away from his paper, and starts to sound the letters, then put them together to form the word. The inventive spelling seen in the picture below tells us a lot about how Hussam understands the written system.





Hussam is exploring and developing different written language formats and genres (Owocki & Goodman, 2002 p.79). He can write a detailed story with a beginning middle and end. Write about specific events, make a list and instructions. He is aware that writing can serve different purposes and the format of his writing is a key to conveying his ideas. (Writings samples can be found in the attached appendix.). his writing is often accompanied by drawings and labels. For Hussam, the drawing part gives his writings more details and allows his readers to picture the story. When I ask Hussam about his writings, he always points to the drawing while he talks and expands on what he wrote. He usually writes down his ideas first then draws and labels them according to what he wrote. Looking at Hussam's writings we can see how the content of his writing is connected to his personal life. and we can also notice the use of conventional spelling, capital letters, punctuation. He uses complete sentences and different verb tenses.

### **Conclusion:**

Literacy acquisition is a process where children first observe, connect, then construct the meaning and the purpose of the written language. Hussam's way of thinking about the written system makes me think about the importance of a balanced literacy approach. Teaching reading and writing in a way that combines phonemic awareness and the whole language. The component of a balanced literacy program complements each other and give emergent readers a holistic understanding of literacy acquisition.

Each balanced literacy program addresses one or more pillars of literacy. And all the component supports emergent readers and their ability to read and write efficiently. Each balanced literacy program, I observed in my field work site as a student teacher, addresses one

or more pillars of literacy (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). And all the component support emergent readers and their ability to read and write efficiently. In addition, it is very important to include oral storytelling in a balanced literacy program because it is a great learning strategy that supports children's academic achievement. Storytelling required the use of "decontextualized talk" which is "grammatically sophisticated" as children tell stories (fiction or nonfiction) that happened in the past or will happen in the future. It "promotes higher-order thinking such as reminiscing and planning." (Curenton, Pg. 81). And it supports children's comprehension skills as listeners.

This case study had truly made me believe that making mistakes is key to Literacy acquisition. What children need is confidence encouragement and support. When Hussam reads challenging books, he never gives up when he comes across new words. To test this theory. I once corrected him (two words), after he read almost half of a challenging book. He stopped and looked at me and said, "I think this book is hard." But I encouraged him to continue, and I stopped correcting him. he finishes the entire book and grabbed another one. When it comes to literacy acquisition correcting miscues is the last thing teachers need to worry about.