Dimensions of Literacy:

Sociocultural

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In the book *Dimensions of Literacy* by Stephen Kucer, five theories of literacy are synthesized. Each dimension (Linguistic, Cognitive, Sociocultural, Developmental, and Educational) is shown to be of importance, and has its own unique place in understanding literacy. As Kucer notes in the preface, “too often, each new view of literacy has replaced rather than extended and reformulated prior views.”

**My Connection:**

While all views help us to understand literacy as a whole, the dimension that I chose to focus on is the Sociocultural. As a Kindergarten teacher, students from a variety of cultures and socio-economic statuses are in our classrooms; and for many, this is their first “formal” form of education. Understanding how their backgrounds affect their understanding of literacy, and also their exposure to literacy, is imperative in order for us to be effective teachers, mentors and models. Making literacy meaningful for these students (and their families) will help these students become more successful readers and writers.

**Key Components:**

In chapters nine and ten, Kucer delves into understanding literacy events, practices, and performances. He also seeks to explain how literacy is used by various social groups to “produce, consume, maintain, and control knowledge” (2009, pg. 210). The individual as a “user” is examined, and the individual as a “text critic” is also examined.

For example, as I am writing this paper, the type of literacy that I am using is for “educational” purposes. I am interacting with print in reading Kucer’s book, and also on
my computer in writing my paper. The social identity that I would be a part of would be the “Professional” class, female teacher in a Master’s class. My youngest daughter’s (Hannah’s) most recent interaction with print was sharing pictures, with her sister that she had taken at church camp (we just picked her up an hour ago). Hannah’s interaction with print (literacy event) was social-interactional and her identity was a teen, middle-class, “church camper”. Elizabeth (my High-Schooler) is reading The Grapes of Wrath at the present moment. Her purpose is to finish the book because it is the summer reading requirement for her sophomore Advanced Literature course. Elizabeth’s purpose would be educational, and her social group would be a sophomore, in Advanced Literature.

The purpose of Hannah’s use of print was to share her experiences with her sister; while my interaction is to synthesize and apply my learning from my Master’s class in my classroom, Elizabeth’s is also for educational reasons, but material is fiction, while mine is nonfiction. Each use of print (literacy event) is important, but each has a very different purpose and is focused on different social groups. As we go through our day, our literacy events (use of print) will differ, our social groups will change, and our purposes of using print will also change.

Kucer (2009, pg. 222) states that “culture is a particularly powerful social framework that can significantly impact the nature of other social groups.” All students experience some form of literacy before they go to school, yet the type of literacy events, and the degree to their exposure can vary. He (Kucer, 2009, pg.222) also suggests that “the intersection of home and school literacy holds the most promise for
promoting literacy development.” Linking home and school literacy practices routines can help students in literacy development.

Chapter ten moves from understanding the individual as a text user to the understanding of how the text is interpreted. Kucer discusses how gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status affect how texts are interpreted by an individual. Those groups who teach the text affect the interpretation of the text, too.

Two views of knowledge are shared in chapter ten: foundationism and social constructionism. Foundationism holds that knowledge is truth. It changes when it is found invalid, but it is based on reliable evidence. Social constructionism, on the other hand, holds that knowledge is subjective and it is changeable when it is no longer useful. It states that there are multiple truths and realities. In our society, foundationism is the dominant view held and promoted.

Kucer then goes on to discuss how our views, background experiences and attitudes influence how we view print. Understanding our students’ backgrounds, values and norms will help in teaching them how to interact with print. This understanding of our students will also help us to understand how they think and what they are writing about.

In the last part of chapter ten, Kucer discusses gender as an influence and how teachers should intervene “to the promotion of a more equitable and just society” (Kucer, 2009, pg. 256). This part of the book has bothered me, because we, as a school studied gender and education last year. Why Gender Matters by Dr. Leonard Sax was a book which we read and discussed. It discusses how science has found that
men’s and women’s brains are different, how we learn differently, and how we can reach students better through appreciating these differences. Dr. Abigail James from the University of Virginia, also noted in the area of gender, also spoke to our school at a two-day in-service. She also explained her research, and classroom experience regarding gender specific education. So, while it is important that we take gender into consideration when teaching literacy, I disagree with Kucer in teachers intervening and turning it into a social agenda. Appreciating differences, working with those differences effectively, and then aiding students in developing literacy through various techniques which work better with genders will help us develop written literacy among our students.

Other Dimensions:

Understanding all the areas of literacy are important for the development of literacy in our students. It is important to understand the linguistic area because it focuses on text and the relationships between letters and sounds. The cognitive area is important because it helps us to understand how the mind processes the information that is read, seen, experienced, or heard. The developmental dimension is a spiral of learning incorporating the linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural processes and strategies. It is of importance because of the continued interaction of individuals with literacy throughout life and their growth as a result of adding to what they have learned. Finally, the educational dimension discusses integrating the thinking processes and communication processes, along with a variety of experiences, to teach concepts through the use of a variety of texts.
Application/Conclusion:

While literacy is a very complex issue, containing many different dimensions, having a basic understanding and appreciation of them will help us to become better educators. Returning to my original focus on the sociocultural dimension, understanding the families’ norms and values that my students have come from can help me to guide students in their literacy growth. Understanding how print is used by the student and their family can help me know how to help make learning letters and sounds more meaningful to them. If families are using print as more of a form of entertainment, I can help find games to share with those families. These games can help reinforce sounds and words. If families use literacy for more technological purposes, I can help find avenues on the internet to guide them in working with their children (starfall.com, writing a family blog, etc.).

In conclusion, knowing and understanding who we are educating can help us to focus on ways that will be more personable. Being able to connect with these students and the families will also make learning literacy more meaningful and potent.
References
