Helping families to capitalize on literacy in their homes

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Helping families to capitalize on literacy in their homes

Abstract
Literacy events of some sort occur most everyday in every home. Most schools have not considered some children's homes to be a source of rich literacy experiences, yet literacy practices are embedded within the daily routines of almost every family (McCarthey, 1997). The opportunities provided for children's participation in literacy practices in the home environment are closely related to parents' own literacy use at home. This article presents case studies of four families that each had a child involved in America Reads, a federally funded after-school program. The case studies are the result of an ongoing investigation of families' perceptions of routine activities done at home that include literacy. The goals of the project were to establish what events parents classified as literacy events in the homes, what literacy events were valued in the homes, parents' opinions of "school-like" literacy activities, and how the parents viewed the contribution that the home environment made to their children's literacy development. The purpose of this article is to share the research results to help teachers gain a better understanding of the importance of learning about their students' "funds of knowledge." This information can help adapt instruction based on what children already know and do in their homes. With this knowledge, teachers can help parents capitalize on what they are already doing at home to help their children with reading and writing.
Helping Families to Capitalize on Literacy in their Homes

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by
Paula K. Azinger
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This Research Article by: Paula K. Azinger

Titled: Helping Families to Capitalize on Literacy in their Homes

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Reading Education.

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Abstract

Literacy events of some sort occur most everyday in every home. Most schools have not considered some children's homes to be a source of rich literacy experiences, yet literacy practices are embedded within the daily routines of almost every family (McCarthey, 1997). The opportunities provided for children's participation in literacy practices in the home environment are closely related to parents' own literacy use at home. This article presents case studies of four families that each had a child involved in America Reads, a federally funded after-school program. The case studies are the result of an ongoing investigation of families' perceptions of routine activities done at home that include literacy. The goals of the project were to establish what events parents classified as literacy events in the homes, what literacy events were valued in the homes, parents' opinions of "school-like" literacy activities, and how the parents viewed the contribution that the home environment made to their children's literacy development. The purpose of this article is to share the research results to help teachers gain a better understanding of the importance of learning about their students' "funds of knowledge." This information can help adapt instruction based on what children already know and do in their homes. With this knowledge, teachers can help parents capitalize on what they are already doing at home to help their children with reading and writing.
Five copies and a disk of the enclosed manuscript are respectfully submitted for your consideration for inclusion in a future issue of *The Reading Teacher*.

The article portrays four families' perceptions of routine activities done in the home that include literacy. The results of this study will help teachers to understand the importance of learning about their student's "funds of knowledge" so that they can base their teaching on children's prior knowledge. This article is also helpful in sharing with teachers how to help parents to capitalize on what they already do at home to help their children with reading and writing.

This manuscript has not been submitted to any other journal.

Thank you for considering the article. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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Helping Families to Capitalize on Literacy in their Homes

“There's people who read novels and mysteries. I get a woodworking magazine and flip through it and pick up handy tips. I go through the Menards magazine and see what tools are for sale. I always thought a reader was a person like that, a novel reader.” – Carlos Martinez, parent/co-researcher.

Parents are the most important entity in setting the stage for their children’s literacy learning because naturally they are their children’s first teachers. Parents also see their children reading and writing in many different contexts outside of the classroom. Research studies and investigations of emergent literacy consistently conclude that parental beliefs, ambitions, and actions critically effect children’s literacy growth (Routman, 1996). Because parents know their child better than anyone else, parents are in the position to supply important information to help teachers to adjust the literacy instruction so that their children will be more successful in school (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Even though they may not be aware of it, parents constantly model ways of knowing about literacy through everyday routines such as reading a TV guide or phone book, or writing a grocery list or check (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). More importantly, parents’ attitudes about literacy influence how their children view reading and writing.

The purpose of this article is to share with teachers the importance of learning about their students’ “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) so that they may adapt their teaching based on what children already know and do in their homes. As a result of knowing about families’ “funds of knowledge,” teachers can then help parents to capitalize on what they are already doing to help their children with reading and writing.
Parents and Teachers—A Paradigm Shift

With the current national emphasis on parent involvement, most educators are working hard to establish communication with families. However, a great deal of research has indicated that there needs to be a shift in the kinds of things educators do to connect with families. Traditionally, knowledge has flowed one way – from school to home. Teachers communicate to parents; for example, teachers stress to parents the importance of reading to their children because it is the number one influence on children’s literacy success in school. “Parents usually receive information about their children from teachers, rather than actively contributing to an emerging portrait of their child as a learner at home and at school” (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996, p. 229). Many parents feel pressured, wanting to do something to help their child, but they do not know what to do or how to do it (Epstein, 1995). In many cases, parents do what teachers tell them to do. However, in other cases, parents find they are not able to carry out what teachers tell them to do. This may be the result of busy schedules, feelings of intimidation about school, poor education, or lack of knowledge about what to do to help. What parents and many teachers don’t realize is that almost without exception, there are literacy activities occurring in the homes. “Literacy is not only the joint reading of high quality books, but also an interaction with all kinds of environmental print and literacy technologies that pervade the home” (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Literacy at Home

A considerable body of research emphasizes that literacy develops best in ordinary contexts that are meaningful to the child (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). “Everything children learn about written language is constrained by what they learn through experience about its functions and the values placed on its various forms within
their particular sociocultural communities” (Purcell-Gates, 1996). Luis Moll, an educator in anthropology, believes the secret to literacy instruction is for schools to investigate and tap into the “hidden” home and community resources of their students. He believes that households develop rich “Funds of Knowledge” that provide information about practices and resources useful in ensuring the well-being of households. Each household is a place where expertise in a particular area can be accessed and used. Examples of family expertise include repair of vehicles and appliances, plumbing, religion, hunting/fishing, and sports. With time, children develop this expertise well. They have many opportunities to apply what they have learned to their own tasks at home; if they and their parents can just see the connections.

Most schools have not considered some children’s homes to be a source of rich literacy experiences, yet literacy practices are embedded within the daily routines of almost every family (McCarthey, 1997). The opportunities provided for children’s participation in literacy practices in the home environment are closely related to parents’ own literacy use at home. The use of literacy by parents, in turn, depends on their education, jobs, social networks, associated traditions and their community and religious involvement (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). Most parents grew up in traditional classrooms and have traditional ideas about what constitutes a literacy event—for example, reading from a book, writing a story, doing a worksheet, or studying spelling words. However, they don’t realize many things that they do as a part of their everyday routines has a connection to literacy. As a result, parents do not use those everyday routines to help children realize the value of literacy. In addition, many teachers believe that if parents aren’t reading to or with their children then there are no literacy activities occurring in the home. In fact, many times those homes that are seen as lacking “school-like” literacy
activities are seen as having deficits in literacy experiences. When teachers teach in a mainstream way, assuming that all children have similar life experiences, the children who have not had a lot of experiences with “school-like” literacy events are at a disadvantage because they are not familiar with literacy events in school. “There are many kinds of literacy and many kinds of families, and the use of reading and writing within family contexts does not necessarily reflect the teaching of reading and writing in classroom settings” (Taylor, 1997, p. 3). As a result, a mismatch occurs between home and school because teachers are not familiar with what is happening in the home. Therefore, it is important for teachers to find ways to explore the literacy events that do take place in the homes and to help parents capitalize on those events by stressing the importance of reading and writing to their children. In this way, parents can convey an image of themselves as observers of and participants in home literacy events (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Teachers need to know more about the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of young children if reading and writing instruction in school is to become a meaningful parallel to their everyday lives (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Case Studies of “Home Literacies”

The quote at the beginning of this article comes from a parent who was a co-researcher in a study of parents' perceptions of their children's literacy learning and of the families' “home literacies”. By home literacies we mean the events that occur naturally in the home that has to do with reading, writing, listening and speaking of oral and written texts. We conducted case studies of four families during monthly home visits in their homes—the most logical place to learn about their literacy environments. Each family had a child involved in America Reads, a federally funded after-school tutoring
program. The goals of the case studies were to understand the parents' perceptions about their children's literacy learning and to describe the "home literacies" of the families as shared through conversations and photos.

Specifically, we wanted to establish what literacy events the parents valued in the home. We also wanted to know what events the parents classified as literacy events in the home, as well as, their opinion of "school-like" literacy activities and how the parents viewed the contribution that the home environment made to their children's literacy development. Lastly, we were interested in knowing how the parents described their children as readers and writers.

Two elementary schools (about 250 students each) serve as the sites for America Reads tutoring sessions in a large town in the Midwest. Pleasant Valley (a pseudonym) serves a predominantly European-American lower-income community. Washington (a pseudonym) serves a primarily African-American lower-income neighborhood. Two families from each of the two elementary schools participating in the America Reads program were invited to be co-researchers with our university research team (one university faculty member and one student researcher, both of European-American descent). One single-parent household and one two-parent household represented each school. Participants consisted of two European-American families, one African-American family, and one multiethnic of Latino and European-American descent.

The Families as Co-Researchers

Dave and Jeanette (all names are pseudonyms) lived with their two sons—a ninth grader and a third grader, Danny (participating in the tutoring), in a small, one story home in a modest neighborhood. Dave and Jeanette were actively involved at their church where Jeanette worked part time and Dave taught Sunday School. Both parents kept
close connections with the school. Jeanette had an Early Childhood Endorsement, and volunteered on a weekly basis in her son’s classroom. Dave was heavily involved with his son in Cub Scouts and reads for pleasure frequently. We observed through our visits that their home was very clean and well kept. Many things, including lots of print materials, were stacked neatly on the floor in the living room.

Carlos and Julia had two daughters away at college, one third grade son, Carlos Jr. (in tutoring), and one two year-old daughter. Carlos and Julia both worked full time. They also attended church regularly and participated as a family in school-related activities. Their son was involved in several extracurricular sports. The family lived in a split-level home in a working class neighborhood. Their home was always very tidy, with very few print materials visible.

Shirrelle was a single parent with a second grade boy, Tré (in tutoring), and a four year-old daughter. She worked full time at a local day care center where she was able to take her daughter. Last year, Shirrelle and her family lived with her grandmother while she attended a local community college to obtain an associate degree in business. With only six months left in her degree program, Shirrelle was forced to quit school due to financial challenges, but was hoping to return the next year. Shirrelle had a very small, older, but well-kept home in a working class neighborhood. Many of her extended family lived within a two-block radius and visited daily. We saw no evidence of print materials in the living room, where the family usually gathered.

Candice was the other single parent with a second grade daughter, Maddie (in tutoring), and a daughter in first. Candice worked a few hours a week cleaning a nearby church. She told us that she lived on public assistance. Candice was very thin and pale and spoke often of her many emotional and physical health issues. Candice appeared to
have had no car and lived in a very small, well-used one-bedroom mobile home in a mobile home community on the edge of town. She relied heavily on her mother to help with transportation and support. Due to space limitations, Candice stored many of their possessions in their main living area, which included the kitchen and living room. Very few print materials were visible in their home.

Each family received a Polaroid camera and a new pack of film each month. As co-researchers, the parents agreed to use half of the pictures to photograph literacy events that occurred in their homes over the course of each month. We asked them to watch for everyday occurrences that had to do with reading, writing, listening, and speaking of and about texts and to photograph those which were important to them. Each month we discussed that pictures could include events such as family storytelling, check writing, list making, and letter reading. The events could be initiated by anyone in the family or anyone who visited, and the pictures could show children, adults, or both. The monthly, hour-long interviews were semi-structured, usually beginning with a question, such as, "How is the tutoring going?" and continuing on to discussion of the pictures that the parents took over the previous month. Often these discussions led to other topics, which were usually generated by the parents or by our questions about the pictures. All home visits were audiotaped; in addition, each university researcher kept a record through field notes.

All taped interviews and field notes were transcribed for analysis. The interviews, interviewer notes, and photographs were analyzed for topics and themes particular to individual parents.

*Exploring Literacy In the Home*

One of the main purposes of the study was to find out which literacy events in the
home parents valued, what parents classified as literacy events, and their opinions of “school-like” literacy activities.

**Literacy events that parents valued.** We found that all parents emphasized the importance of reading to their children and helping out with homework. However, only one family admitted to keeping a regular schedule with these activities. Several comments were made about the respect that parents held for their child’s Title I teachers as well as their regular classroom teacher when it comes to literacy. Candice in particular spoke very highly of her daughter’s teachers. “They (the Title I teachers) know what she’s up to with the words. Last year they would have to tell me which ones (books) she would be able to read, otherwise she would get too frustrated. That’s not where we want her at.” Jeanette said, “It’s been nice to talk with Ellen, his (Danny’s) teacher, on how the reading is going and working together.” She also adds, “I went and watched and heard how she (his first grade teacher) talked to them and the terms (they used while reading). At home when we would get stuck I would use the same terms and it was easier.” Shirrelle kept in close contact with her Tré’s teacher. “She keeps me informed about what he’s doing and how he’s acting.”

**What parents classify as literacy events.** When we gave the families in our study a Polaroid camera to take pictures of literacy events that took place in their homes, they initially did not know what to take pictures of. During the first couple of home visits with each family, we noticed the photographs consisted mainly of “school-like” literacy activities such as maintaining magazine subscriptions, writing and reading recipes, playing games, children reading with their parents, using the phone book, working on homework projects, writing letters to relatives, and using the dictionary, just to name a few. We resisted giving them examples of what we were looking for because we wanted
pictures of authentic routine activities in their homes that involved literacy, not just pictures of the examples we gave them. However, we found it necessary to suggest a few non “school-like” examples to get them started. In short, routine activities were not acknowledged in these households as reading and writing opportunities. As the home visits progressed, so did the parents cognizance of all the literacy events that took place in their homes as a part of normal, everyday routine activities. The literacy events that we found in homes that did not engage in a lot of “school-like” activities included such things as reading words with music (the backs of cassette and video tapes), looking at globes, reading clocks/watches, hanging art projects on the front door, and hanging lots of pictures, schedules and school work on the refrigerator. At our last home visit Jeannette shared, “It’s been kind of fun (taking pictures). I think, oh, this is a picture moment. You don’t realize how many activities you do that are encouraging reading, like the baseball cards.”

While establishing the goals of the project, we didn’t realize that what parents originally classified as literacy events and “school-like” literacy activities would be the same.

Parents’ opinions of “school-like” literacy activities. Homework was valued by the parents, and all stressed that it should be completed. The parents talked about homework on a frequent basis. They all tried to find times for their kids to do their homework, and often expressed that their children struggled with their homework. Candice talked about the frustrations her daughter, Maddie, faced with homework. “If she has any type of homework… last year I figured out that she can’t do her homework when she comes home from school because her brain has been worked too much in school. She has to get a night’s sleep and get up in the morning and do her reading.”
Learning With and From the Families

Topics and themes that seemed to characterize all of the families in the study emerged. Photos and discussions that were common across families included: the use of the refrigerator as an information center and for a display of achievements; the reading of cereal boxes; reading connected to sports and famous people (on video boxes, sports cards, etc.); playing school, writing cards and letters; reading to and with siblings; and support for the Title I classroom teachers' efforts to help the child grow in literacy.

Other photos and discussions common to at least two families were: writing recipes, playing educational games, playing literacy games on the computer, reading product labels at Wal-Mart, and reading materials connected to church.

Influences of the parents on literacy learning.

Roles of the parent also emerged from the interviews. It was clear that they did not see themselves as their children’s primary literacy teachers. All parents viewed their role as being a supporter of the school literacy program by helping with homework, encouraging their children, and listening to their children read, reading with their children, or having someone else listen to their child read. Shirrelle shared, “He (Tré) has a desk where he can do his homework. When he’s done, he comes down and I check it over. We do spelling words and he rattles them off. He’s doing really good. Before he had a tutor, we’d sit down for about one half to one hour and run through some math problems, spelling words, read. That was routine.” Later on in the interview, she added, “Some things I can teach him, some things his teacher can teach better than I can. My role basically is being the encourager. I can teach, but there’s only so much that I know. I teach them what I do know, give them the basics.”

In the interviews, all parents spontaneously stressed the importance of learning to
read and write, and sometimes sent verbal messages to their children about how important it is to learn to read and write. For example, Julia said in front of Carlos Jr., “He says he wants to play for the pros (hockey). If you go to college and play sports, you still have to get good grades and do all the homework to get to college.” Shirrelle said, “I tell Tré that education is an important part of life. You have to go (to school). I understand that he gets tired, but if you don’t learn anything in school, you won’t know anything when you get out of school. I have to preach that to him. I’m just his encouragement.”

All parents believed that children need to practice; all confessed that it was difficult to find the time. Julia admitted, “I think what we need to do is have a certain time and just say it’s reading time...that’s easier said than done”.

All of the parents in our study practiced reading with their children in some way or another. During one of our interviews, Candice explained a strategy that she had learned from a TV show where a mother and son communicated with refrigerator magnets. Since magnets were not available, Candice adapted the strategy by using a mostly-intact garage-sale easel that the girls had in their bedroom. “We have an easel in there. One side is drawing but we don’t use that side. We use the chalkboard side. She writes a sentence every night. In the morning, I’ll erase it and I’ll write a sentence to her. So when she comes home from school, she sometimes reads it and sometimes forgets about it. I’m trying to get it so she’ll come home...I have to think about how we can do it...ask her a question and then she’ll answer it and then she’ll have to ask me a question and I’ll have to answer it. That’s what I want to do.”

*Children struggling with literacy learning.* At the beginning, all parents made comments that indicated that their child was struggling with reading and writing.
Candice’s second grade daughter in particular was struggling with reading. During our first interview Candice admitted, “She hates to read. She absolutely hates to read. For me to get her to read at home is virtually impossible. Every once in a while I can get her to read; we’ll pick out some easy books. I think she should pick out a little harder books. But then I know how frustrated she gets. She gets frustrated real easy and then she completely...she’s just like me, if you get frustrated you forget everything you’re trying to do. You forget everything.” Shirrelle also described her son’s frustrations. “We used to really bump heads when it came to doing homework. With him...he’s doing second grade over. He didn’t want to read after he got home from school.”

Interestingly, all of the parents in our study noted that struggling with reading and writing was not new in the family. All of our families could remember someone in their family, and sometimes even themselves, having trouble with reading and writing. In fact, all of our parents thought that genetics played a role in their child struggling with reading and writing. For example, Candice said, “I slipped through the cracks until 7th grade, then they found out that I could barely read. ...I know how downgrading it is to be the low man on the pole in reading.” Shirrelle talked about her son, “I think Tré is more like me...he’s one of them kind of learners like I am. I need that one-on-one attention to really focus in on what I’m doing.” Dave and Jeanette think that their son inherited their spelling genes. “He’s a rotten speller, but we both are. Who knows, it might be genetic.” Candice says, “She gets frustrated real easy and then she completely...she’s just like me, if you get frustrated you forget everything you’re trying to do.” Several months later during a home visit while discussing her daughter’s reading ability, Candice adds, “It must be partly in her genes, just inherited”.

All parents in our study also thought that confidence was directly linked to
success. Parents saw an increase in confidence in their children as they had success with reading and writing. Dave and Jeannette talked about their son performing in a church play. “He practiced his script; he had it memorized. He was surprised how well he had it memorized. He got so into character. He enjoyed it. I never would have guessed. At one time I thought it (the part) was too hard for him to learn. I told him there was still time to give it to a new person. He said, no, he could learn it.”

In the interviews, parents indicated that their children grew in their ability to read and in their attitudes about reading. The parents attributed this growth to the extra help through tutoring. Jeannette said, “He told me he was going to be one of the best readers in the class this year with all this practice. He won’t be, but he has a good attitude about it. It’s not like he’s doing this because he’s a poor reader; it’s like he’s going to become such a good reader by doing this—that’s his attitude.”

They also found that their children changed in ability. Carlos’ mom said, “He passed out of his Title I at school. She tested him on some stories. He got to his grade level and he even got to the 4th grade level. The teacher called me and told me that he passed and that she hated to lose him because he was a good role model for the other ones.”

**The value of siblings.** Siblings can play an important role. All of the children in the study had siblings. The parents frequently talked about how siblings learned from their older siblings or were teachers to their younger siblings. Shirrelle told us about how Tré and his four-year-old sister played school. “He goes upstairs with his sister. I have to go check on them because they’re so quiet. Like they’re in school, they’ll have all these books laid out and paper. He’s the teacher. There’s nights he’ll read to his sister and she half-reads to him.” Carlos talked about the influence his son has on the baby in
Family Literacy

the family. “He make little Donna want to pick up a book. She wants to get her baby books and look through them. She starts babbling.”

**Guilt.** One of our most surprising findings is the guilt that parents felt if they and/or their children were not doing “school-like” activities. Several times throughout the interviews, the parents expressed guilt about their children not being engaged more in “school-like” activities. From their words and the tones of their voices, the guilt was obvious. They often blamed themselves for having a child who struggles in reading. In the Martinez family, Carlos said, “It would be better if we did more reading and stuff like that. It’s hard for me to sit down and say, ‘Let’s read this.’” Then Mom added, “He loves being outside. By the time we come in, take a shower, eat supper, then we’re all tired. That’s one of our faults.”

**Findings Particular to One or Two Families**

During our visits, several themes emerged that were particular to one or two families. We felt strongly that these findings were significant, mainly to the single parent families, and needed to be included.

**Family challenges.** One of our co-researchers, Candice, faced many hardships in her personal life that prevented her from being an active participant in her daughter’s academics and at the school. Candice had many health issues that left her feeling ill and in bed many days. During our visits, when she felt well enough to go through with the interview, she frequently talked to us about her illnesses and the different medications she was trying to get her pain under control. She also talked at length about how she sometimes got the “run-around” from doctors because she had “welfare stamped all over her insurance forms”. There were several times that we arrived at her house for a visit and she was too ill to talk to us. A few of the interviews were even held over the phone.
Aside from her own poor health, her youngest daughter also had many health concerns. Candice had frequent doctors appointments for her daughter, who was also on numerous medications that would sometimes trigger tantrums and out-of-control behaviors.

Candice’s health kept her from maintaining a full time job. Because her income was limited; it required her to be on welfare. She was not able to afford a car; therefore she relied on other people to get her to appointments and to run errands. As a result, she did not have easy access to the school and sometimes did not keep appointments at school. To many teachers, it may have seemed as if Candice was not concerned about her daughter’s academics or did not care enough to come to the school for visits and communication. To the contrary, Candice was very concerned about how her daughter was doing in school and otherwise. Fortunately, the teachers at Pleasant Valley School understood Candice’s challenges and worked hard to keep two-way communication open. If teachers understand the circumstances that some parents are under, they will be less apt to make judgments about families and more empathetic towards parents’ efforts to be involved with their children’s learning.

*Family support.* Family support plays a large role in the development of the children’s learning. Through our research, we found that the extended family can have a lot of influence over children’s growth. We noticed especially that the extended family played a larger role in single-parent families. Shirrelle spoke of her extended family.

“Tré has 5 older cousins and 2 older uncles. He bonds with them. They talk to him, they help him out…. There’s something about each one of them he’s just so crazy about. Any time they get, they come by and check on him to see how he’s doing in school. They said, ‘Tré, you’re doing good. Keep it up.’ He just smiles. That helps a lot, too, to know that those guys do take an interest in what he’s doing.”
Sharing responsibilities for childcare and management of the home appeared to enable the two-parent families to engage more often in literacy events with the children. In the one-parent families, extended family members played a much larger role in childcare and reading to the children. Shirrelle, a single parent, talked a lot about how nice it was to have family around. “His grandma lives down the street. He rides and roller blades up and down the street. Great grandma is here and grandma, my mom, is a couple of blocks away. We’re all just right here.” Candice added, “That’s my mom. She always reads to them.”

*Outside influences.* Various outside influences also played a large role in the frequency and types of literacy activities that took place in the homes that we visited. Church participation was important to all of the families in our study. However, one family in particular was heavily involved in church activities. Jeanette recalled when her young son tried out for a part in the church play. “He tried out and got a part in that (the play). It’s a fairly bigger part than what he did last year. He has 2-3 paragraphs and another 6-7 lines after that. This is a part that he really wanted because he wanted a bigger part.”

Through this research, we found evidence that literacy events occurred in all homes, regardless of socioeconomic status, culture, or family structure. It is true that the literacy environments varied extensively from home to home, but all families had home literacies that could be an important part of their children’s development.

**Classroom Applications**

Teachers’ personal experiences with home literacy may vary dramatically from those of the children they teach. As a result the reading practices taught in school “may bear only partial resemblance to the kinds of abilities and knowledge utilized in the
performance of literacy tasks in everyday life” (Nistler & Maiers, 2000). Implied in all of this is the need to obtain information about home literacy practices and perspectives in order to make school and home literacy learning congruent (eg., Taylor, 1997, Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) and the need to “recognize them (parents) as sources of information and as subjects of their own learning” (Handel, 1999).

**Home Visits**

As discovered through our study, teachers have no way of knowing about specific families’ home literacies until they come in contact with the families in their homes. One way to do this is through home visits. When teachers are able to visit the homes in which their students live, they can witness firsthand what types of literacies are prominent in their home. “We learn some of the schedules and circumstances of our families’ lives; many of the social, emotional, and academic needs of the children; and the families’ interests and funds of knowledge. This information enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between home and school from the families’ perspectives” (McIntyre, et. al., 2001).

We asked all of our families at the end of the study how they felt about having teachers come into their homes for visits. All of them were positive about teachers taking their time to get to know families better. One of our families replied, “I think it’s a good idea. Each parent is going to accept it differently. It’s the parent who’s going to open the doors and say, ‘Come on in’. Another mother added, “I think it’s good. I like home visits. It’s a lot more comfortable. It’s not so professional. It gets me familiar with his teachers and they get to know me as a parent. It makes me feel like you’re interested in knowing and that you care about my child. I like to be informed. I like to know everything.”
Finding Families' Funds of Knowledge

The findings of Moll and his colleagues revealed that once students “funds of knowledge” are uncovered and activated for learning, they could become a social and intellectual resource for school (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Teachers need to help students find meaning rather than learning isolated facts and rules; using activities that involve students as thoughtful learners in a socially meaningful task can do this.

Seeking out students “funds of knowledge” has many rewards: teachers will have a better chance of helping bilingual and minority children achieve authentic literacy, teachers will foster a sense of community, and they will impart a much richer education for all children to enjoy.

To find out about students funds of knowledge, teachers can talk to parents and families to uncover what it is they do as an occupation and for recreation. Interest inventories and attitude surveys can also reveal interests the family and the child have.

We discovered that a good way to find out about the literacy environments of students is ask parents to write down everything they have read or written in the last 24-48 hours. This can give teachers a wonderful way to know about the kinds of activities that are taking place in their homes; in addition, this exercise opens the eyes of the parents to help them realize just how much reading and writing they do in a typical day. Good parent-teacher communication will lead the teacher to a better understanding about the lives of their students. This can, in turn lead to school literacy events that are more familiar to students.

Applying Funds of Knowledge

After the information has been generated, teachers can help parents realize all of the good examples that they are setting for their children in the uses of literacy. It should
be stressed that in every home there are opportunities to read and write. Some home environments may have shelves stocked with books, magazines, and writing material. Yet other homes that would appear to have limited literacy resources still partake in everyday routine events that involve literacy. Teachers may want to discuss and “privilege” routine literacy events such as reading signs and environmental print; using refrigerators for display and review; reading cereal boxes; reading recipes while helping to cook; shopping and reading labels; reading and writing grocery lists; reading and writing notes, letters, and cards; telling stories, jokes, riddles, and tongue twisters (and maybe writing them down); reading and filling out forms; and singing together. Talking through these activities and connecting them with literacy growth helps parents realize that they already do many things that foster literacy and offer examples of literacy use for their children. Discussions with parents may also help them learn to capitalize on their routine literacy events, effectively using “teachable moments” that occur throughout the day.

It is important to stress to parents that using a variety of vocabulary to explain what they are doing will aid in an increased child vocabulary. For example, when parents explain the need and importance of filling out papers such as forms, children are much more likely to see a purpose for learning how to read and write. When a child watches a parent write a check, reinforcement for literacy can be made by saying, “I need to know how to read and write so that I can read my bills and write checks to pay them.” Many adults may not sit down and read an entire book, however they frequently fill out forms for a variety of purposes. During a visit, Carlos’ mom related, “Sunday I looked at the paper. I had yesterday off because my little girl was sick. I needed to redo our car insurance, so I got out those papers and talked to the guy about that. I took her to the
doctor. I took her immunization chart, so I read that over. I started her on a different medicine, so I read the label on that. I'm not really a book person. I don't read a book very often." This quote is a perfect example of just how many times literacy is a part of day-to-day lives.

When teachers begin to learn about the nature of their students' "home literacies," they can use the findings in planning instruction. A great deal of this information can enlighten our teaching. "Knowledge of children's social and emotional learning patterns seemed to get us closer to understanding children's zones of proximal development for learning particular skills and concepts" (McIntyre et.al., 2001). For example, all of the families in our study shared that grandparents played a significant role in the lives of their children. Knowing this, the teacher can then pull a variety of fiction and non-fiction books selected with students' ethnicity, family structures, housing arrangements, geographic locations, interests, and family events in mind (McIntyre et.al., 2001). In two of our families, the boys were highly interested in sports and popular sports figures. As a result, the teacher could help the children to find books about these athletes to promote learning and writing about them. Sports scores and rules could even be incorporated in math lessons and assignments.

The goal of our study was to learn about the routine literacy events that occurred in the homes of the case study families. At the time, our focal point was not finding the families' funds of knowledge. However, through these informal discussions we found that we did learn a lot about the various interests, attitudes and knowledge of the families. Certainly all of these aspects of the families' cultures contributed to the children's home literacies.
Literacy Tips to Share with Parents

After acquiring information from families about their “home literacies,” it is important to supply parents with tips and ideas that they can find useful. As teachers, we often advise parents to read to their children. It is important to remember that some parents don’t know exactly how to do this or feel unable to do it. As a part of our communicative efforts, we need to provide models and fun, low-pressure, low-cost opportunities for practice. This could occur in homes, at school, or at other places in the community.

As we discovered, parents oftentimes feel guilty if they and their children are not doing “school-like” activities. However, many different resources can be utilized that help to promote reading and writing that parents need to be made aware of. One way to spread the word about variations of literacy activities is to send a newsletter home with tips on different ways to read and write. For example: reading signs and environmental print walking or traveling in a car; using the refrigerator as a communication center in the house; reading cereal boxes while eating breakfast; giving children a challenge to find certain types of foods while grocery shopping; having kids help write grocery lists; cooking, following, and writing favorite recipes together; and writing notes, cards, and letters. Also, having children become “literacy detectives” in their homes allows students to become cognizant of the literacy around then.

One of the most important things to consider when giving parents advice about reading and writing with their children is that some parents are very limited in their confidence and knowledge of how to help their children to read. Conducting an open house is an excellent opportunity to do a mini-workshop on how to read to/with your child. For those parents who are not comfortable reading with their children, suggest
books on tape, wordless picture books, or encourage them to enlist another person to read with their child.

Conclusions

Students' home environments help shape their chances for school success. Therefore, it is important for teachers to know each one of their students on an individual and personal level. Through home visits, teachers can observe first-hand the types of literacy environments that their students experience outside of the classroom, as well as, find out about the families' fund of knowledge. As a result, teachers can alter instruction to be more sensitive and empathetic to their students' needs.

Research such as this also supplies important information about parents and their role as teachers in reading and writing. After finding out the families' home literacies, teachers can now be more conscious of what parents' value in reading and writing. Teachers may include activities in their curriculum that can be done at home that deal with everyday occurrences to supplement "school-like" learning.

Many parents are not aware of all the examples that they set for their children that have to do with reading and writing. They do not realize that every time they do a simple, routine activity, such as reading a recipe, or writing a grocery list, they are setting a positive example for their children. Talking with and modeling for parents, helps them capitalize on the daily routine activities that involve reading and writing. When parents are aware that the reading and writing activities that are done in the home are important in their children's lives, parents may look at themselves more as having an important teaching role in their children's lives.
References


Spielman, J. (2001). The family photography project: “We will just read what the pictures tell us”. The Reading Teacher, 54(2), 762-761.
