Can ‘Ways of Taking’ affect Literacy?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine reasons for literacy success or failure within school age children by looking deeper into family and community literacy and how the interplay between the two creates challenges in a formal learning environment. Literacy is a lifelong, intellectual process of gaining meaning using critical interpretations of the written or printed word. The theoretical approach adopted in this research paper is structured to prove that a child’s success in literacy is enhanced when cultural background is taken into account. I prove this by examining styles of learning in multiple speech communities. Analysis will reveal that children of low-income or multi-ethnic backgrounds will struggle academically, not due to lower I.Q. or lack of motivation but only because their at-home acculturation is very different than that learned in the classroom (Philips 2001). This can create a chasm of disparity between the child’s home learning environment and the child’s school learning environment.

**Introduction**

Literacy has many components and it is common in the teaching community to gauge a child’s success or failure based on a set of parameters/rubrics laid down by the governing school board. Barton and Hamilton state, “literacy is best understood as a **set** of social practices” and is “observable in events that are mediated by written texts” (Barton 2000: 9). Reading, writing, comprehension, and correct understanding of social cues are all pieces of a complex puzzle although “some literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others” (Barton 2000: 12). For example, the literacy of reading is emphasized in elementary school more so than the literacy of comprehension, whereas, in the home environment, correct social cues often become more important than writing. Unfortunately, the governing agencies tend to simplify this definition and do not take into account the cultural aspect of a child’s most formative years.

Reasons for literary success or failure within school age children can be identified by looking deeper into family and community literacy as well as classroom culture. Understanding the underlying life experiences of each child and adjusting otherwise rigid rubrics for introducing or teaching lessons could be the difference that changes a potentially exclusionary experience into one of meaning. Educating outside the lines of specific controls makes sense in a growing multi-ethnic and economically diverse classroom.

In this paper, I will present the experiences of children from low, middle, and upper class incomes and from a variety of cultural backgrounds. I will highlight how extensive pre-knowledge of both cultural and economic diversities can positively impact childhood learning while addressing what can be done to change a child’s experience of failure into a child’s experience of success.

**Multi-literacies and Reading Between the Lines**

Children learn culture from the community they grow up in. This is known as “ways of taking.” “Ways of taking” are lessons taken from their environment (Heath 1982). Shared bodies of “local Knowledge” are another way to look at a similar concept (Basso). Local knowledge is essentially, a sense of place, “where persons and whole communities render their places meaningful and endow them with social importance” (Basso). Individuals within specific communities are expected to develop set behaviors, patterns, and values, which legitimize their claim as members of that society (Heath 1982). Our local knowledge of the world around us directly impacts how we interpret localized events. Reading is considered a literacy event and is a way of taking from books. It is also a learned behavior and a recurring practice in the U.S. for both children and adults.

“Literacy is not simply a personal possession but it also belongs to specific communities and larger societies” (Gillanders 2004, 245). In other words, every group, regardless of size, has its own culture or ways of taking. Individuals within a family unit have a set of behaviors, but what is acceptable within the family may not be acceptable in a public situation (i.e., eating with your hands at the dinner table vs. eating with your hands at an upscale restaurant). One more example can be seen when looking at the larger population within a state. Colorado recently voted to legalize marijuana for recreational use. If an individual travels to a different state where it is not legal, they will be breaking the law if they continue that behavior in the new state. What is acceptable in one place is not necessarily acceptable in another. Day-to-day living is a constant series of negotiations and everything moves along smoothly as long as everyone understands the rules.

All behaviors, ways of thinking, linguistic interactions and social inequalities play a part in the linguistic competence of each individual (Chouliaraki). Language development, thought patterns and the organization of knowledge happen when two things come together- exposure to the language and actual participation in it (Blount). For those of us born and raised here in the United States, our own verbal and non-verbal behaviors are very familiar and generally accepted by us. Behaviors out of context, and ways of thinking that contradict the norm, create tension between people in the community as well as between students and teachers (Delpit). While this is true, it is important to remember that there is a global community of people that actively transplant into our populace and sometimes our families from other places around the world. Moving from one place to another doesn’t guarantee that the situation, financially or otherwise, will remain the same- they may benefit financially or they could just as easily be placed in a position of financial stress. Life in America will potentially look very different from the life they knew before. These families will be affected by social-economic factors, which will inherently change what is familiar and accepted both in their sphere of learned behavior, as well as their financial realities (Johnson).

Ethnographers observe other cultures in an attempt to understand without judgment. They must not interject their own ways of taking when trying to understand other cultures (Blount). Here is where the problem lies. Unlike an ethnographer, a teacher is not aware that they are making observations and judgments about students that might be based on their own ways of taking. If they grew up in the area, their ways of taking would generally reflect the most commonly shared culture. It feels familiar and correct and the majority of the students will feel the same way so theoretically, there should not be problems in communicating a lesson. The teacher makes an unstated assumption that everyone in the class shares the same intellectual background. This is a dangerous platform to attempt to build a literacy program on (Blount).

**Cultural Norms**

Educational achievement among many ethnic and low income children becomes increasingly important as populations reflect the growing number of linguistically and culturally diverse families making the United States their home. The 2000 Census states that 17.9% of families in the U.S. use a non-English language within the home environment (Gillanders). The world has many cultures and each culture has communities. The modes of the dominant culture are known and understood by those raised up in it, but friction is caused when opposing cultures converge. We easily share assumptions within a cultural framework that make our interactions feel seamless. Conversely, the subjects raised outside this culture have very different learned experiences (Heath 1982; Blount 1995).

This can be illustrated by one ethnographer’s experience. Tammy Johnson spent six weeks in Europe during the summer of 2009. While visiting eight countries, she found herself trying to blend in but failing on many levels because she did not understand the context of what was going on around her. While in Italy, she spent many hours observing people. Without fail, she noticed the same behavior popping up several times a week. Local people would be speaking with each other in normal tones. Suddenly, they would burst into arguing loudly with each other while encroaching into each other’s personal space. Hands and arms were flying and Johnson was sure that they were going to come to blows. After a few heated minutes, they smacked each other on the back with a laugh and a big smile, said their goodbyes and went on their way (Johnson). Her culture had overlapped into their culture and her lack of knowledge or understanding presented a problem; should she call someone to intervene, or not? Here in the U.S., it is never acceptable to encroach into another person’s invisible bubble of personal space. Behavior like this is seen as threatening or inappropriate and the one experiencing the breached space will take a step back to regain it (Cheesebro). In the end, Johnson did not do anything except continue to observe. She came to realize that this was their way. By the end of her stay, she had acclimated and did not notice the behavior anymore. Minority students face the same problem. Assimilation in the classroom becomes difficult because the specific cultural context of the learning environment is not understood. Their inadequacies are magnified thereby scaffolding the effects of “not belonging” (Wood).

**Culture, Language, Learning and Developmental Stories**

It is here that we will define *Literacy* *events* and look at examples of developmental stories. Literacy events are a “way of taking.” One type of literacy event is the use of bedtime stories and it is an important part of American culture. It is socially constructed and is used as a tool to model social behavior while introducing the written word (Heath 1982; Vygotsky 1978).

The following developmental stories (examples of literacy and learning in multiple cultures) are presented here in order to understand specific reasons for academic success or failure and present possible ways to negate the ongoing educational crisis that our multi-cultural, ethnically divided, and economically challenged children face daily.

Mainstream: White Middle-Upper Class Families

“Mainstream” refers to predominantly white children in middle to upper-class families with ambitions of completing higher education. Additionally, mainstream ideology values routines of promptness, repeated positive behaviors, and the ability to recognize contrary behaviors (Heath 1982). In middle and upper class white families, the primary caregiver is often the natural or adopted mother. These children are exposed to two-party interactions between themselves and their mothers. The children are treated as social beings from birth. Mothers speak to their children face-to-face, ask ongoing questions, and include them in conversation. Every behavior and action displayed by the baby is viewed as meaningful and encourages a verbal response (Blount). This system of dyadic modeling (back and forth communication) teaches young learners that they are communicative partners (Blount). One type of literacy event using dyadic modeling is bedtime stories.

Bedtime stories are an effective way of stressing and highlighting repeated patterns and types of behavior while engaging young minds with sing-songy repetition. A good example of this is the story of ‘*Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed*.’ The story teaches rudimentary addition and subtraction as the monkeys individually fall off the bed. At the same time, it stresses what happens when little monkeys jump on the bed- they fall off and get hurt- behavior moms would like to see averted. Aggregate patterns like these are echoed throughout the subject’s life (Heath 1982; Whitmore 2004).

Mainstream babies are exposed to books early on. From six months on, adults expand non-verbal cues into actual questions. Toddlers are encouraged to participate in the dialogue by answering questions such as “What’s that?,” “Who’s that?” or “What does the doggie say?” with sounds or simple word answers like “Doggie,” “Ruff, Ruff,” or actually barking like a dog (Heath, 1982). The goal is to achieve a running commentary on any object that was observed in a previous story.

Shirley Brice Heath (1982: 52) uses the example of seeing a fuzzy black dog in the street and comparing it to Blackie the dog in the story. The mom might say: “That doggie looks like Blackie. Do you think he’s looking for a boy?” From here, children are encouraged to be creative and “suspend reality”- to tell stories that are obviously not true. If books are not available, the adults may point out objects and talk about it in storybook context. They may ask the child to tell a story of their own. Finally, the child reaches pre-school age and new skills are learned. They can sit still while listening to the story and wait to be called upon to comment on the story or answer a question. At this point, the roles get reversed and the child becomes the active reader (Heath 1982).

Throughout the primary grades, this linear behavior is repeated over and over again to produce ‘*what-explanations*’ which in turn fosters a certain amount of comprehension. Children derive the topic, uncover new situations using contextual evidence, and recognize what is predictable by using what-explanations. This type of knowledge tends to be redundant and predictable causing them to become expert information givers (Heath 1982). Mainstream teachers put higher value on this type of learning because the subject learned is less detailed but acts more like a shotgun by effectively opening broader related subjects for discussion. The great tragedy here is that, on the surface, children tend to become ‘good readers’ reading text accurately and quickly, but do not have the ability to delve into the text (Hassett 2008). Simply reporting information can be viewed as a low-challenging task that never provides the student with the opportunity to see what they can do. Mainstream children may feel at home in the classroom from a socio-cultural aspect and it is true that they have an advantage over low-income and minority children, but they are still lacking in many ways. In the end, they too are deficient learners and the previously successful child now becomes the unsuccessful student. So much time is spent on this part of learning that many high school students never get to the *‘reason-explanation’* of the lesson.

Reason-explanations allow for effective commentary on the subject. Deeply detailed knowledge is understood and available to the student for presentation. Knowledge and understanding then become deeper so when required to present it, the student presents it configurationally rather than predictably. Ninety percent of questions asked by teachers in the classroom are shallow ones that require the student to regurgitate information from the textbook. While this type of question makes it easier to control the direction of learning, it does not foster deep or critical thinking. To become proficient at reason-explanations (a deep thinker), the teacher must focus on asking open-class questions that require deep reasoning. These types of questions address things such as why, how, what if, and what if not (McNamara). It forces the student to think beyond the obvious and encourages the mental gymnastics necessary for problem solving (Dillon).

Health (1982) points out that reason explanations tend to derail the original lesson so teachers dislike this type of learning. Generally, teachers do not encourage questions of this nature in the classroom until college level classes. By then, it is too late; the student has no experience or training to handle college level curriculum. Ramping up question quality and open discussions will encourage sophisticated reasoning skills allowing all students to be successful, even the newly stressed mainstream kids at college levels. McKeown and Beck (2006: 282) make a strong point- they found that the single, most valuable activity for strengthening language development and improving vocabulary and comprehension skills in school age children was to engage them in conversation about material they have read. Analyzing it together creates a social situation for understanding and allows them to play with ideas utilizing information they already know about the world around them (McKeown). An educator should want to steer students into areas that are more challenging (Pressley). When students see their literacy skills as relevant and meaningful, the activities become enjoyable thereby encouraging a drive for learning.

When learning stops, fun stops, and playing eventually stops. For humans, real learning is always associated with pleasure and is ultimately a form of play – a principle almost always dismissed by schools. There is one crucial learning principle that all good games incorporate that recognizes that people draw deep pleasure from learning and that such learning keeps people playing. Good games allow players to operate within, but at the outer edge of, their competence (Gee 2004: 71).

In addition, when the whole classroom engages in these conversations together, a community of respect is fostered and grown (Hassett).

Warm Springs Children- Native American Heritage

Now that methods of mainstream have been presented, we can move on to minority cultures. Susan U. Philips (2001) describes the Warm Springs Indian Culture in great detail. For the first six grades, they attend public school on the reservation surrounded by other Indian children. From the seventh grade on, they get bused to schools off the reservation and join a class that is predominantly white- five white children to one Indian child. Often, Warm Springs children are instructed by persons other than their parents. The older offspring, along with aunts and uncles, are usually responsible for the supervision and training of these children. They become accustomed to instruction and learning in large groups and this instruction is from kinsmen, not outsiders. Training for gender specific chores that require a high level skill set (such as cooking or hunting) begin as young as eight years old. Mainstream children may or may not get introduced to chores at an early age but learning a high level skill is rarely required. In the Indian community, learning these household chores is a process set up by an older relative. The tasks are segmented in order to train the child to be proficient in that one specific task. Once accomplished, the child is given the next task required until finally, all the segments of the tasks have been perfected. This type of learning is called scaffolding. Scaffolding teaches students skills that are difficult but not out of reach by providing support and encouragement from the one teaching as needed (Wood 1976; Hammond 2001). Only then, is the child allowed to demonstrate the learned skill in front of an adult audience (Philips 2001).

Because the Indian Springs children are learning high level skills, they remain focused and interested. When the lesson is too easy, there is no motivation, boredom sets in, and learning stops. While these Indian children are unfamiliar with the classroom standard of education, they have in many ways surpassed the mainstream classroom because they have already been exposed to a higher level of training- the reason explanation. They know their subject inside and out and are experts in what they have managed to learn even thought it does not fit the mainstream rubric.

The level of responsibility is high so it is common for young children of ten years old to spend all day unsupervised by adults while in the company of other older children without needing the permission of adults. This early training is so effective that Indian children can and do get to decide where they want to live. They can choose to spend months at a time at one relative then move to another if it makes sense for a given situation, eventually making it difficult to identify where the child’s original home was (Philips 2001).

Finally, children are encouraged and allowed to be present in adult activities but only as silent observers. Evening myth-telling events teach moral lessons but do not involve speaking interaction.They spend hours listening to adult conversation and watching different skills being performed making them quality listeners. Children are steeped in their native language and tribal traditions in every interaction in which they are involved impacting their speech patterns and behaviors (Diaz Soto). It becomes clear very quickly why these children would be unsuccessful in a mainstream school situation where the teacher is a non-native adult male or female. They are uninterested in what the teacher has to say and more focused on what is going on with their peers, going so far as to make verbal bids for their attention. In other words, they are not willing to accept the teacher as controller of the classroom. Indian children will fail when they are asked to speak and perform in front of a group before they are proficient. Finally, they are not allowed to have a say in any part of the comings and goings of the day (Philips 2001). It is frustrating for them when they have spent much of their lives being responsible and deciding for themselves what to do and when to do it. It is completely antithetical to how they have been raised and as a result, they transform from being socially engaged, capable communicators into inattentive, disruptive students (Whitmore).

Native Culture has been hit hard by politics, loss, and psychological trauma. Parents want their children to be able to participate in the outside world but are struggling to keep their culture alive in a world that calls for assimilation. No single belief system is better than others and educators need to strive to understand their own belief system first so they do not inappropriately force their own beliefs onto the native child (Diaz Soto). Rigid rubrics in the classroom act as an unintended catalyst that leads to loss of culture, loss of flexibility, and ultimately literacy failure in the classroom (Hassett).

Trackton – Black Mill Community

Heath points out that many communities do not fit within the standards of the traditional mainstream ideology and, in fact, “the ways of school are merely an overlay on the home-taught ways and may be in conflict with them” (1982: 50). The Black Mill community known as Trackton falls into this category. The town is built around a textile mill, and the population is comprised of a close-knit community of African Americans living in tiny tract housing (Heath 1982).

Child-rearing approached in this and other similar ethnic communities vary considerably from mainstream communities. Ethnic parents in Trackton teach clearly defined roles between the parent and child. The child is never allowed to partake in or negotiate decision making (Delpit 1995; Heath 1982; Lareau 2002) and when a verbal exchange actually happens, simple yes/no questions are asked, and answers to questions are short and simple (Prins). When asked why they question children in this way, adults explain that the children are “comers.” This means that they are coming into their learning “by experiencing what knowing about things means” (Heath 1982: 67). This type of learning allows for a shallow understanding of the world around them. Heath (1982: 69) gives this example: When a child is asked the question “What’s that like?”, they answer with “It’s like Doug’s car.” They would not be able to identify the vehicle as a blue, Ford, F150, but they would say that it was like Doug’s car because Doug’s car had a flat tire the week before and this vehicle has a flat tire now. Specific features are not evident. The fact that the vehicle in question is not a car but a truck is irrelevant to them.

There is no opportunity for acquiring three-dimensional thinking or the deeper dialogue that goes with it because diadic modeling and the “what-if” questions of mainstream learners are never presented so they skip learning to label and list features (Heath 1982). Ultimately, parents live by the belief that obedience should be rewarded thereby preparing the child for a lifetime of labor. Additionally, Trackton parents believe that schools and teachers are solely responsible for the cognitive development of their children (Hays 1996; Lareau 2002). This is problematic because, at home, the child is never exposed to three-dimensional, diadic learning so when they begin attending school, they are taught using a technique that they have never been exposed to.

From the time they are born, Trackton babies are immersed in human life interactions and environments. They live in a world without cribs, car seats or baby chairs and are held constantly during the hours they remain awake. There is no set bedtime rules – when the adults retire, the child retires – usually sleeping in the parents bed until they are toddlers or they are left lying where they fell asleep. There are no bedtime stories (Heath 1982).

Children are surrounded by environmental “noise” such as televisions, stereo’s, radios, and human conversations and learn adult behaviors by feeling and seeing them happen as they are carried around. Adults speak about them but never include them in conversation and never acknowledge their attempts to verbalize. Adults choose to ignore verbal signals from the babies and believe that they alone know when the child needs something – “Adults know, children only come to know” (Heath 1982: 64).

As babies grow to toddlers and toddlers grow to children, they play with “safe” ordinary household items. Specialty items like balls, trucks or dolls are withheld until Christmas and never include learning toys such as puzzles, blocks, or books (Heath 1982; Rogers 2003). The only reading that takes place in the household is reading items such as incoming mail, cereal boxes or school materials sent home by the teacher, etc. Books in these households are scarce and are not missed.

Speech, mobility, and their culture are learned through copying adults. Before a child turns one year old, they often attempt to speak or walk. Adults often laugh and credit the child with sounding like the person they are mimicking and will comment on the attempt by saying something like “He sounds like Toby,” or “He walks like Toby when he’s tuckered out” (Heath 1982: 65). As they get older, they pick up and repeat phrases, usually only saying the end of the original statement. If the mom is speaking to someone else and says “But they won’t call back, won’t happen” and the child is nearby, the child will repeat fragments only. The child might repeat to himself “Call back” (Heath 1982: 65) while he continues to play along side his mother. His speech is ignored and what he said will often be layered over other fragments learned earlier. Later, they include rhyming patterns and finally, they begin to participate in ongoing conversations. They will often use non-verbal cues to help recreate specific scenes and adults actually start to pay attention (Heath1982). Immitation has played such a strong role that the child can now imitate patterns of other people. They have quite a repertoire of expressive behaviors and can “feign anger, sadness, fussing, remorse, silliness, or any number of a wide range of behaviors” (Heath 1982: 66). Ultimately, this makes them great story-tellers and should be a positively acknowledged skill in the classroom but it is not.

Lastly, school age children are only exposed to outside educational stimulus via school field trips. Low-income families traditionally live in low-rent, unsafe neighborhoods that do not support local museums, libraries, or parks (Prins 2008). Day-to-day life for poor families looks very different than a mainstream family. They are constantly worried about basic necessities such as food, health care, transportation needs and safety. Malnourished children are affected cognitively, emotionally, and physically, adding additional stress to an already stressful and misunderstood school environment (Prins). It is easy to see how quickly each distinct problem compounds itself making learning in this environment nearly impossible.

Technology Learners

In this last example, we see that human communication is structured around practices specific to culture (Whitmore). Technology is one of these practices and is changing at record speed requiring constant attention to keep up with new modes of operation. Today’s generation of children have become technology users and possess a high level of technological know-how. This category of learners seems to have a natural affinity for anything electronic and can come from any of the previously mentioned groups. New technologies such as texting or email are constantly being invented, and this creates tension between new generational learners and older generational learners. As a result, new ways of representing the written language evolve and change (Goodman 1992; Birch 2001) but the accepted ‘model of teaching in education’ has not. Because of this, the term “literacy” has become subjective (Koh). Policy makers and program providers look at literacy in an outdated way and do not include the importance of being a student of technology- the newest form of literacy that we have. Surprisingly, many families do a better job of adapting and interweave these technologies in with traditional ways of learning at home. Carrington and Luke (2003) use the example of two children to highlight specific examples of these technologies.

Eve, six-years old, is from a middle class family and is being raised by her single parent father. Eve’s mother lives in another household so Eve communicates with her daily via e-mail. She is proficient at utilizing the internet and using CD-ROMs. Bedtime stories have never been a part of Eve’s upbringing, but her use of e-mail uses lively interactive exchanges and is notably different than static print texts used in stories and school texts (Carrington 2003). She is literate in this new “language” and is understood by her peers and family, but the school system does not recognize her literacy in this area.

Five year old James, grew up in a lower socioeconomic status (SES) community and had no access to the internet at home but he was able to access the internet at his cousin’s home. He also utilized their CD-Roms and he and his cousins played video games regularly. At home, both children engage in literacy activities that are necessary in today’s world of technology yet the school has identified both children as having difficulty in the school literacy program. Schools typically do not teach these particular types of skills or value them in classroom situations (McTavish 2009; Carrington 2003). Schools follow a rubric that rewards the old idea of literacy.

It is interesting to note that computer software is developed with the intention of making the user ask deep questions (Graesser). Video games and Google, for example, are used by a large part of the American population. In both cases, a query can be made and the answer given encourages other questions to be asked. The user may be given an answer that includes something they are unfamiliar with. The program has already highlighted the word and now the user can click on that word and be taken to yet another explanation providing deep knowledge on the subject of the original query. Consequently, it can now be argued that the mainstream definition of literacy is no longer viable in today’s society.

These children have been tagged as being “literary deficient” in school yet they clearly demonstrate a proficient use of technology in their daily lives. Technology is a form of literacy and has become a necessary tool in everyday life. It is a highly valued skill in the modern work force but its significance is lost in the modern academic life deemed important among educators (Carrington 2003). It goes against the traditional teaching of the mainstream ideology mentioned previously. It is important to note that not all children at risk have access to technology adding one more layer of separation between mainstream kids, low income white kids, multi-ethnic kids with access to technology, and multi-ethnic kids with no access to technology (Rodriguez-Brown).

Family Literacy Programs and Possible Solutions

A classroom has many “voices” and many of those voices do not share a common language. How then is it possible for a teacher to negotiate through all the noise to find a way to communicate and teach all of these students effectively? The solution is not easy, but it must begin with a search for common ground so that through a shared language between the teacher, the child, and the class as a whole, we can form a new mutually advantageous future (Gallas). Dropping the strict teaching rubric and incorporating a flexible stance will positively impact all students no matter what their past experiences (Hassett).

There have been many programs introduced that address the incompatibility of the divergent social constructs and educational paradigms already in place (Whitmore). The idea is to bridge the gap between home and in the classroom in an effort to produce confidence and a working functionality of learning that benefits both the educator and the child being educated (Kyle). One such program requires that teachers visit the students’ homes in order to become familiar with the child’s regular surroundings. It comes from a longitudinal study that examines the effectiveness of Kentucky’s 1990 state-wide mandated K-3 primary program in which students have the same teacher for multiple years. Experiencing the child’s surroundings first hand gave meaning and context to the teachers, where before, there was none (Kyle 2005; Kentucky Department of Education 1991). Teachers had a clearer understanding of where the children were coming from, so they were able to help students in new ways while increasing the confidence of the child in skills they already knew (Moll et al. 1992; Heath 2012). Teachers gained critical insight into the families’ contextual differences enabling the teachers to make valid suggestions that were helpful to the parents. Additionally, the families received valuable information about how classrooms were conducted and what was expected of their children every day. Esther Prins (2008: 579) states that poor and working-class families generally socialize with relatives rather than school families so they have limited information about what happens in school on a daily basis. Once teachers and family members understand what the other side is facing, it becomes much easier for the parents to support their child’s experience at school and vice versa (Anderson 2010).

One reading program was set up to teach Spanish speaking families how to read to their child using the diadic reading style of mainstream children. The parents were told that it would support learning in the classroom. It was a colossal fail and the families felt like they were being punished (Anderson 2010). Teachers were frustrated because they knew the program worked for mainstream families. In response, teachers went into the field and began visiting the homes of the Spanish children where they discovered that if they made a simple change to the program, the families became successful (Kentucky Department of Education 1991). The original discourse style was “diadic” but meaningless- the stories had no substance and they were predominantly in English. Spanish families place value on reading stories that teach moral lessons (Anderson 2010) and many of the parents had limited English skills. Once the teacher identified the problem, the families were allowed to choose the stories and to read them in a discourse style that was familiar to them- in their native language. The books were in Spanish and had an English translation under each sentence. An example of a morally based book would be *‘The Berenstein Bears and the Truth*.*’* It teaches an important lesson about telling the truth. Strategies are then used to interpret the text allowing the individuals involved to take action (Heath 1982). Parents can be taught to have a dialogue with their child as to why telling the truth would be important. They can also explore different ways/reasons/strategies to tell the truth and to make the situation right. This teaches children behaviors that are acceptable within their communities as well as encouraging three-dimensional thinking by using the traditional diadic method used in the classroom. Additionally, parents became more familiar with the English language, everyone was happy and the program was successful. Learning a little about cultural backgrounds paid off in an unexpected way (Anderson 2010; James H. 2001).

Head Start is one program that is making inroads in learning for Indian children. Head Start recognizes that a child’s background is paramount in determining educational outcomes by instituting locally developed plans. These plans include individual background information on the student from birth like answering the following questions: What skills do they possess and how did they learn them?, What kinds of things have they experienced?, What things will he/she be able to do in life? – basically, an in-depth look at their culture (Diaz Soto).

Studies have shown that Indian Children display right-brain learning; that means they have a greater capacity for artistic expression and symbolism. They tend to be very musical, are very intuitive, and have very developed visual and spatial awareness. Head Start takes what they know and begins a dialogue between the families and the school system, encouraging participation from both sides. Essentially, they look at the child through the eyes of an ethnographer. By documenting tribal values, the schools can facilitate learning in a way that respects what the child knows and encourages the child to participate because the environment becomes familiar (Diaz Soto).

Many parents who participated in a year-long family literacy program with their young children were surveyed by Anderson and Morrison (2007) and reported the following: 1) they understood the school’s expectations for their children and were now able to support learning at home; 2) they felt comfortable advocating for themselves and their children both inside and outside the classroom; and 3) they now had a social network with which to share knowledge and strategies (Laureau). One take-away point here is that when parents and children are included in family literacy programs as a team with sufficient focus on adult literacy instruction, these programs are effective in enhancing the learning of all involved (Anderson 2010).

During these studies, many non-English speakers, bi-lingual speakers, and ethnic parents expressed two things: their concerns about their limitations to help at home and a willingness to improve their own skills in speaking and utilizing the English language (Kyle). In one case, teachers were responsive to their enthusiasm and increased the English as a Second Language (ESL) class by an hour. As the parents themselves became better speakers, they also became better advocates for the school in helping their children to succeed.

Educators in general, have little information about the backgrounds of the children in their classrooms (Kyle). Many teachers lack social and cultural knowledge of the different ethnicities. They may also lack any understanding of what it means to be an impoverished child. By utilizing more of this information and highlighting each child’s strengths, we can incorporate it into a flexible curriculum that can potentially deflect failures for low-income and multi-ethnic families by creating an environment of inclusion and encouragement.

It is important to note that having teachers go down the road of an ethnographer does create some additional problems. There must be structures in place to make sure that this “tool” of ethnography is used in a positive way. The teacher must agree to include active reflection after each visit. This means that the teacher will take time to think about all they have experienced; they must consider the goals they have for the child and the classroom and how this information can be used to facilitate this. Looking for ways to make learning meaningful will result in raised achievement for the student. Added reflection gives the teacher the opportunity to “think back, address and resolve problems, anticipate and ‘try out’ possibilities, and sort through the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of what is working and not working” (Kyle 2005: 45).

Adding to this complication, family visits are very personal and it could be possible that the teacher would come away with an increased negative view of the student and their ability to learn- especially in an environment of poverty. Personal biases are difficult to leave at the door and it is imperative to utilize the information learned as a tool adding insight to help the student be successful (Kyle 2005; Moll 1992). It is crucial to work closely with someone trained in interpreting this newfound knowledge to avoid this scenario; this would be a great position for an ethnographic anthropologist.

Conclusion

As we have seen, literacy is not just for the classroom. Language is observed and learned in a child’s social world long before they even begin to speak. We are reminded that, “reading, writing, listening, and speaking are parallel and fluid processes. From these lessons, we learn that literacy is not handed down to children but that they uniquely construct and refine their literacy through active interpretation and purposeful sense making” (Whitmore 2004: 303). Culture shapes who we are and humans alone have a desire to express that notion. What we express, who expresses it, and when and how it is expressed is directly affected by the local expectations and accepted behaviors of the current dominant society (Blount). Non-dominant groups within the community may operate amongst themselves under a different set of social parameters (Hyams 1967). Many groups like the Warm Spring children and the Trackton children find themselves “participating in interactions in which the language is familiar but the interactional procedures and participant structures differ from earlier experiences” (Heath 2012). Difficulties present themselves when the minority culture must function in an unfamiliar environment. As we have demonstrated, our school system is a strong example of the breakdown between enculturation and effective learning.

Acquiring language, literacy, and sociocultural knowledge are all intimately tied (Blount) and continuous, open-ended learning happens throughout our lifetime (Blount 1995; Whitmore 2004). As infants, we learn to communicate in socially specific ways. Mastering this skill makes us competent speakers and we, as humans, are inherently flexible and can adapt to change successfully given time and the correct tools. It is up to us to affect the changes necessary to mentor, encourage, and educate children of all cultures so that they may master and embrace multi-literacies.

In order to do this, we must all strive to be more like ethnographers (Hymes 1973). It is imperative for teachers to understand each child’s frame of reference along with the knowledge that their ways of taking and cultural perspective define their success or failure within any given program. It is equally important for the child’s parents to understand that the recognized teaching methods may not coincide with what the child is raised with. Restrictive policy rules and standards make it difficult for teachers to teach outside the lines. Change must begin somewhere, and with teachers gaining skills as ethnographers, they are able to take an otherwise inflexible curriculum and bend it to accommodate their newly gained information (Hassett).

Searching for common ground is not an easy prospect and adds many layers of difficulty to educator’s jobs, but the end result is what should matter (Hassett). Looking for clues and meaning in the lives of non-mainstream children that will begin the process of bridging the gap and building a framework for inclusion, is the beginning of breaking through the barriers of silence brought on by cultural differences (Gallas). Recognizing and understanding the hurdles faced by both sides of the classroom will help to ensure that every child has a positive, ongoing learning environment.

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