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Listening to Families over Time: Seven Lessons Learned about Literacy in Families

Although my first-grade students were obviously intelligent and capable, many of them struggled to learn to read. When I spoke with my teaching colleagues about the difficulties faced by our students, their answers were revealing:

“It’s the parents, they just don’t care about reading.”

“What do you expect? Tamika’s mother can’t read, either. You should see the note she sent in last week.”

“I don’t think that kid has ever seen a book.”

“It’s kids raising kids; the parents are just babies themselves.”

“Well, you know the father is in jail and his mother is never home. I have no idea what she does.”

The research reported in this article indicates that these characterizations are highly questionable. I found that virtually all parents are concerned about their children and emphatic that their children learn to read. In fact, it was not unusual for me to find that the same parents other teachers complained about were helpful and supportive in our interactions. I make this case because I have been a teacher in urban schools for the past 18 years, and I have met thousands of children who demonstrated their intelligence every day. Some of them outsmarted me on a regular basis, finding ways to co-opt, rewrite, and often improve the lesson plans that I so thoughtfully crafted each day. They brought humor, suspense, and surprise to a vocation that was never dull.

My purpose here is to invite teachers to join me in rethinking our assumptions about students and their families. I use data from a longitudinal teacher research study to present some of the lessons I have learned from my students and their families and to challenge other teachers to seek ways to learn about the families of their students.

I argue that when teachers listen to the voices of parents and children, they can begin to confront negative perceptions of families like the ones voiced above. It is important to recognize that these ways of characterizing poor and culturally diverse families are not the result of individual prejudice. They reflect dominant discourses (Compton-Lilly, 2007) and cultural models (Gee, 1999) associated with diverse families, as well as deep-seated beliefs that privilege particular ways of parenting, interacting with educational institutions, and supporting children with literacy tasks.

In this article, I present the work of researchers who have documented the strengths that children from diverse communities bring to classrooms. Then, I explore the potential of teacher research to help teachers recognize the strengths and abilities that their own students bring. Next, I describe some of my former students’ families, present the methodologies I used in this ten-year study, and share seven lessons I learned from the participants. Finally, I offer possible strategies that teachers can use to learn about the families in their school communities based on the lessons I have learned.

KNOWING FAMILIES: POSSIBILITIES FOR TEACHING

In 1983, Shirley Brice Heath published the results of a ten-year longitudinal study in which she investigated language and literacy events in three South Carolina communities. Her investigation revealed that despite socioeconomic, racial, and linguistic differences, families in all three communities were engaged in meaningful and purposeful literacy activities. She noted that even children who were considered deficient by school standards brought rich experiences and understanding to classrooms that teachers could build upon, access, and develop. A few years later, Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines (1988) investigated the literacy practices that
They found that despite economic challenges, parents found ways to support their children with reading and writing. Over the years, similar studies have documented the ways that parents in a wide range of communities support their children in school and with literacy. Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995) focused on Appalachian families, Sonia Nieto (1996) shared information about Puerto Rican families, and Guadalupe Valdés (1996) described the ways Mexican American families support their children with schooling and literacy.

Norma González, Luis Moll and Cathy Amanti (2005) have coined the phrase funds of knowledge to describe the knowledge and skills that children bring to classrooms. They explain that the concept of funds of knowledge is based on the premise that “People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (pp. ix–x). They argue that all people, despite educational, linguistic, or experiential differences, bring funds of knowledge to schools and classrooms and that teachers should build on these funds of knowledge to design instructional programs that are responsive to students and communities.

**Teacher Research: Possibilities for Learning**

Teacher research provides educators with ways to learn about their students and their families. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) defined teacher research as “systematic and intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (p. 23). The concept of teachers as researchers challenges images of teachers as transmitters of information or implementers of prescribed curricula. Teacher researchers are investigators of their own practices who ask their own questions, collect their own information, and regularly reflect on their own assumptions about children and families.

I am a White middle-aged woman who taught for eight years in a low-income city school. Rosa Parks Elementary School housed over 1,200 African American and Puerto Rican students annually during that time (the names of all people and places mentioned in this article are pseudonyms). As a teacher researcher, I learned many lessons about my students and their families that caused me to rethink my assumptions about teaching, children, and families. As William Ayers (2001) writes:

*Teachers need to be one part detective. We sift the clues children leave, follow the leads, and diligently uncover the facts in order to fill out and make credible the story of their growth and development. We need to be one part researcher: collecting data, analyzing information, testing hypotheses.* (p. 32)

When I engaged in the teacher research study described in this article, I encountered data that caused me to question the hypotheses I had formed about my students. However, questioning one set of hypotheses is never enough. The interpretations we develop and craft are never complete and are continuously revised as we learn more about the children we teach.

Specifically, I make a case for teacher research that extends beyond classroom walls and spills out into communities and homes. I agree with Leslie Turner Minarik (2001) who maintains that looking beyond classroom walls is especially important for educators who work with children from diverse communities. As Minarik explains, “The ethical necessity of studying our own practice is especially serious for teachers in large urban, culturally diverse schools where most students qualify for free lunch and teachers of color are underrepresented” (p. 19). Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2004) agree. They do not believe that teacher research should be restricted to teachers investigating their own classrooms, and they worry that limiting teacher research to classroom-bound issues may prevent teachers from gaining important information and insights that could inform their teaching. As they explain, “Teacher research can be done in classrooms, libraries, homes, communities, and anywhere else one can obtain, analyse and interpret information pertinent to one’s vocation as a teacher” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 9).

**The Families, the Community, and the Research Project**

The children in this study were randomly selected from my first-grade class to participate in a series of interviews and observations focusing on literacy and schooling. The children attended Rosa Parks Elementary School, a large urban school that served children from the lowest socioeconomic neighborhood of a mid-sized northeastern city. The original group consisted of six African American children, three biracial children (two...
students were African American/European American and one student was European American/ Middle Eastern), and one Puerto Rican child. Altogether, there were six boys and four girls.

One parent from each family was invited to participate in the research study. In this article, I use the word “parent” to refer to an adult who acts as a primary caregiver for a focal child; in some cases and at some points in time, this was a grandparent, foster parent, or adoptive parent. In most cases, it was the child’s female parent who volunteered to participate. The parents brought diverse experiences to the project. While a few had been raised in the city in which the research was conducted, others had migrated from “down south,” New York City, or small towns in other parts of the state. While all of the adult participants had attended high school, several had not graduated. One parent had an Associates Degree.

Rosa Parks Elementary School was located in a high-poverty, inner-city community. While the reading ability of the children in my sample varied considerably, the school was on the state’s “needs improvement” list due to low reading scores. While in past generations the community had housed a large Italian and German population, over time many African American families relocated from the South, and Puerto Rican families migrated from New York City and Puerto Rico. Following race riots in the 1960s, large numbers of White families left this area of the city, housing projects replaced the buildings destroyed in the fires, and Rosa Parks School was built. At the time of my study, the community struggled with a weak local economy, high levels of unemployment and underemployment, housing problems, a lack of health care services, and a high level of violence related to drug trafficking.

The ten-year project described in this article was originally designed as a one-year study. During that initial study, I interviewed my students and their parents four times, collected field notes, and tape-recorded classroom interactions. I also monitored student reading levels and collected their first-grade literacy portfolios. Semi-structured interview questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) were used with both students and parents. While specific questions were written prior to each set of interviews, I routinely crafted follow-up questions that invited participants to elaborate on their comments, share related information, and introduce issues that they felt were relevant. All interviews were transcribed completely with the exception of clearly off-task conversation. Field notes (Graue & Walsh, 1998) were recorded describing the interview settings, the people involved, and events that occurred immediately before and after each interview. In addition, daily reflective field notes were recorded each evening, documenting events that had occurred in the school that day.

To make sense of the data, I utilized constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in which preliminary codes were assigned to data based on topics that I identified during my early readings of the transcripts. This cross-case analysis focused on the numerous topics that occurred across the entire data set and resulted in a lengthy and extensive codebook. In order to make sense of this long list of codes, the initial codes were grouped, regrouped, combined, and sorted into larger categories of data that eventually led to the identification of themes that recurred across cases. These themes ultimately revealed a set of findings related to the purposes of reading, relationships that involve reading, and participants’ identities as readers that I explored in Reading Families: The Literate Lives of Urban Children (Compton-Lilly, 2003).

After I had completed the initial study and written extensively about the families, I became curious about my former students and made the decision to extend the initial study. I began the second phase of the project when the children were entering grades 4 and 5—some children had repeated a grade and were now a year behind their peers. At that time, I was concerned that by conducting the cross-case analysis described above, some of the nuances and unique qualities of the individual families had been lost. Therefore, during the second phase of the project, I decided to construct family case studies by coding the data for each family separately. This time, constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to analyze the data for each separate case study, resulting in a separate codebook for each family. Once coding was complete, an index was created for each family in order to facilitate locating coded data within each data set. Only after the individual case studies had been constructed and case summaries outlined for each family were recurring themes across families identified and explored. Much of the writing from the second phase of the study featured fully...
developed case studies that were published as book chapters and articles exploring issues related to identity development and reading achievement (Compton-Lilly, 2007, 2008).

While the case study approach was valuable, I continued to recognize the benefits of the cross-case analysis conducted in Phase One. Realizing that it was the movement between cross-case analyses and case study analyses that allowed me to focus on both the individual families and the collective themes, I made the decision to return to the original cross-case analysis during the third phase of the study when the children were in middle school, and the case study approach during the final phase of the study when the children were in high school. Unbeknownst to me, longitudinal qualitative researchers in the TimeScapes Project (2008) had adopted a similar analysis process of moving between cross-case analysis and case study analysis for multiple phases of longitudinal research projects.

During the final phase of the study, in addition to completing three interviews with each child and parent, I visited my former students in their high school classes and invited them to complete a series of writing, drawing, and photography projects. Analyses of these data are continuing. Over the years, the interviews focused on participants’ experiences with learning to read, self-assessment of their reading abilities, critical events in their lives as readers, and their experiences in school. By the end of the project, I had interviewed the children and their parents when the children were chronologically expected to be in grades 1, 5, 8 and 11; some children had been retained in school.

On the pages that follow, I present what Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Miller Power (2003) described as “aha” and “oh, no” moments. These moments occurred for me during data collection and analysis and led to my articulation of the seven critical lessons that I present below. As Hubbard and Power explained, one of the best ways to share teacher research is to offer these “aha” and “oh, no” moments, inviting educators to reflect on similar moments in their own teaching experiences.

LESSONS LEARNED

I learned many lessons during the course of my longitudinal study. Some lessons were difficult; they required rethinking my beliefs about my students and their families. I learned to view my students and their families as powerful, resilient individuals who enjoyed stimulating and supportive home environments. Only then did I begin to recognize and develop the many abilities my students brought to our classroom. Here is a Letterman-style countdown of the top seven lessons I learned, ending with the lessons that were most salient to me as an educator. Five of these lessons are from outside of the classroom and two are from within the classroom.

- My students’ families had books and enjoyed reading.

Perhaps it is my status as a teacher that compelled people to show me books, but in all but two homes, parents and/or children spontaneously brought books to share with me. At Alisa’s house, the living room was furnished with only a ragged sofa and a small wobbly table supporting a 16-inch television. When I mentioned that I was interested in talking about reading, Ms. Rodriguez sent her son, Tyreek, to “Get that box of books from the back.” It was over halfway through the first round of interviews, and I was no longer surprised when children brought me books; still, I was not prepared for the heavy box of books that Tyreek dragged across the floor. It was filled with hundreds of books. There were “Little Golden Books,” board books, Dr. Seuss books, textbooks, and discarded library books. As we turned our attention to the interview questions, Mrs. Rodriguez remarked, “There’s another box just like this in the back.”

In other homes, children brought me storybooks, and parents shared children’s books that they had read years ago and were saving for their own children or novels they had finished the night before. I learned about the varied reading interests of the parents of my students:

Mr. Sherwood: Personally, [I like to read] the newspaper. The newspaper, science fiction, I like science fiction. I read those a lot. [I] keep up with that. Mechanical books, I read mechanical books.

Ms. Hernandez: Maybe some magazines. I don’t know anything that interests me I guess . . . my soap opera magazines.

Ms. Johnson: I like love stories. I like the magazines that come through the mail, like Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, and [reading] U.S. history is my favorite.

Ms. Webster: I like romance stories . . . it’s the thrill. I don’t know, it’s like falling in love again.

Ms. Holt: The newspaper I read. I do that.
Ms. Hudson: I like to read the cable book, the bingo books, and then I like to read the paper.

Ms. Mason: Well, I read the paper sometimes, and since I work in a daycare, I love to read a lot of kids’ stories to the little kids in the daycare.

All of the parents in this study, with one exception, reported enjoying reading. Unfortunately, as teachers, we are rarely aware of the reading lives of our students’ parents. Too often we rely on dominant assumptions that define poor parents as illiterate or alliterate. As their children’s teacher, I had no indication that the parents of my students were readers. It was not until I went to their homes and asked them directly about reading that parents revealed their reading interests.

- *For my students, reading was closely intertwined with social relationships.*

Before beginning my study, I was familiar with the research on the role social relationships play in learning. I knew that peers could work as partners to complete problems, participate in writing conferences, or read. But I did not realize how central, and even dominant, social relationships were for the children I taught. One morning, six students and I gathered on the rug in the front of my classroom with our guided reading books. As the children assembled, I asked them a routine question that I hoped would stimulate their thinking about the reading strategies that we had been talking about during recent lessons. Specifically, I had placed the children in the same reading group to focus on self-correction strategies. However, the children perseverated on social aspects of reading.

Ms. Lilly: Why did I put you together in a group? Leshanda?

Leshanda: Help people.

Ms. Lilly: Sometimes you help people. But why did, the main reason I put you together? Jasmine?

Jasmine: So that we can read together.

Ms. Lilly: Yeah, but why did I want you guys to read together? Alisa?

Alisa: Cuz we could be friends.

Ms. Lilly: Yeah. James?

James: Listen [to the teacher].

Ms. Lilly: There are things that I want you to do.

Jasmine: Help, help people when they get stuck on a word.

Ms. Lilly: What is it? Yeah, you guys do all those good things, but what is it that you guys don’t do sometimes when you read that I want you to be more careful about? What is it? Alisa?

Alisa: The words.

Ms. Lilly: Hmmm, you don’t know all the words, do you? Hmmm, what do you do when you make a mistake?

Leshanda: Go back and try it again.

Finally, I elicited the response I was seeking. Despite my attempts to focus on a reading strategy, the children focused on each other and the social relationships they shared. The children in my class were clearly aware of the social context that accompanied learning to read.

Perhaps even more intriguing is that the children generally identified a close friend as being a good reader, irrespective of that child’s actual reading ability. Bradford consistently selected Marvin, while Christy selected Nadine. Generally, my students identified children who they found to be good reading partners as good readers. In other words, a good reader was someone who was good to read with. While schools tend to treat reading as an individual accomplishment by expecting children to become independent readers who can solve the difficulties they encounter in texts without assistance, the children in my class recognized reading as a social practice that involves helping each other and working together.

- *Even children who struggled with reading could collaboratively construct meaning from text.*

Occasionally tape recorders capture information that teachers would have missed. I was audio-taping a guided reading group comprised of children who were struggling with reading. I moved close to Bradford and Jerome to make sure that they were reading; once they seemed to be working, I left my tape recorder behind and went to listen to other children read. Weeks later, I heard the amazing interaction the tape had captured.

Ms. Lilly: What did he do? He, /r/. . .

[Once the boys had started, I moved on to work with other students and left the audiotape recording]

Ms. Lilly: . . . ran up the lion

Jerome: He ran down the lion
Bradford: He ran down the lion. Man, you ain't even reading.
Jerome: Yes, I'm is.
Bradford and Jerome: Stop said the lion. Your playtime is over mouse now I will eat you. The mouse said
Jerome: No.
Bradford: Let
Jerome: Look
Bradford: Let, let... Bradford and Jerome [echoes]:... me go. [together] The lion said I could say yes I could say no lions have... Bradford:... to go.
Bradford and Jerome: Lions have the say and I say no.

[This interaction continues for another 35 exchanges]

Although they were both struggling readers, Bradford and Jerome were able to work together to read this challenging text. Individually, I suspect that they would have become frustrated and may not have been able to maintain interest and effort. Bradford and Jerome were close friends, and I believe that their friendship was central to this successful reading experience.

Computers represented possibilities to the families in this study.

Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin (1995) describe iconic statements as “pithy summaries of how interviewees interpret their world” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 236). The parents of my students identified the computer as a powerful tool for success in the existing society and in years to come. Their comments are illustrative:

Mr. Sherwood: A computer is awesome; it’s right now. It’s the space age; you can’t get around it. Ya just got to look in the paper, they want a computer programmer.

Ms. Webster: Cause that’s [computers are] the thing now-a-days. [When you] watch TV. What’s on TV? And www.com, ok? Everything now is going to be computers.

Ms. Johnson: That’s all it is now-a-days. I mean everything is on computer. Wherever you go there’s computers. Everywhere. Grocery stores have them, a lot of department stores, mostly all the businesses. Where I am [food service], I have to use a computer. He’d [her son would] be lost without it.

Ms. Holt: [When it comes to computers, Bradford should] know how to put them together, know how to take them apart and know how to do everything... [if] I had my way he’d know everything there was to know about a computer.

Ms. Lilly: Mmm-kay, what do you think that will do for him?

Ms. Holt: Help him read, help his writ-, it will help him in the future in every capacity ‘cause everything’s computerized.

There is an immediacy to the words of these parents. Ms. Webster and Ms. Johnson both use the phrase “now-a-days” in their discussion of computers; Mr. Sherwood says, “It’s right now.” Ms. Holt looks ahead, explaining that the computer will help her son in the future.

Not only are computers recognized as important contemporary innovations, but they are also believed to permeate society. In these four data extracts, the word “everything” is used three times to express the extensive proliferation of computers in contemporary society. Ms. Holt even suggests that computers will help Bradford with his reading and writing, although no specifics are offered. While I often assumed that children gravitated to the computers because of the games they offered, I now understand that in the eyes of parents, computers represent significant possibilities that extend beyond amusement.

Parents and children were overly focused on sounding out words.

When I spoke with my first-grade students about reading unknown words and becoming better readers, almost all of them mentioned “sounding out words”:

Tiffany: By sounding the letter[s] out.
Christy: Sound it out.
Peter: I sound it out.
Marvin: Sound out the words.

Four years later, I interviewed these same 10 students about reading. They still described “sounding out”:

Jermaine: They [teachers] make me sound the words out.

Tiffany: I think they [good readers in the class] sound it out.
Marvin: She [the teacher] help me sound out the words.

Alisa: Like, I need help with a word and she [Alisa’s mother] be like, “Sound it out.”

The children’s comments about sounding out were clearly echoed in the words of their parents, who described how they encouraged their children to sound out the challenging words they encountered in text.

Frank Smith (2003) describes “Just Sound Out” as a “Just So Story” that is widely accepted by “newspaper columnists, politicians, and publishers of educational tests and instructional materials” (Smith, 2003, p. 256). According to Smith, one reason for the prevalence of this belief is that “sounding out can be reduced to small steps, pre-packaged in instructional materials, dealt out one bit at a time, and tested and monitored every step of the way” (Smith, 2003, p. 258). Sounding out is a commonly accepted formula for helping children to read. As teachers, we must recognize that parents who encourage children to sound out words are neither ignorant nor stupid. Sounding out reflects ingrained theories about reading that have existed in our society for generations.

• Parents were often aware of how they were perceived by school personnel.

Bradford’s mother told the following story when I asked her if she ever felt uncomfortable or unwelcome at her child’s school. She responded:

Sometimes. As a matter of fact, yesterday I had to go to school for one of my sons. And when I went there, the principal made me feel uncomfortable because we were talking and then all of a sudden he says, “When your son was staying with his dad, he was doing so much better. As a matter of fact, how long has he been back home?” I said, “What are you trying to insinuate—that I’m a bad mother?” I mean, I got offensive right quick because my son was only at his father’s house maybe six weeks, and he’s trying to tell me that since he’s come back with me, he’s got that much of a change. I said, “No, that’s not why.” Then I went in detail [about] why he changed, and then the principal made a total about face, but he had just made an assumption.

In her account, Ms. Holt confronted the assumptions that had been made about her. Her position as a poor, African American, single mother contributed to the principal’s assumptions, and Ms. Holt was aware of how the principal viewed her.

Likewise, Ms. Rodriguez shared a story about Alisa’s younger sister, Quanza, who was in kindergarten.

Quanza has lost gloves and I had just bought her a pair of gloves. And I find out [imitating Quanza] “I lost them.” And I said “When I get paid, I’ll buy you another pair,” right? Her teacher assumed I was on welfare. . . . [She] said, “Tell your mother when she get her check to buy you another pair of gloves.” And I went to school and told her, “Let me explain something to you, OK? I work, every day. Don’t tell my child to tell me that, OK? When I get some money, I’ll go buy her a pair of gloves. I don’t need you or nobody else to tell me that. I know her hands are cold. That’s why most of the time she wear my gloves [on the way to school] but I take them from her when I got to go to work, thank you . . . because most of the time when they leave from school, my girlfriend[‘s] husband is down there and he drive them home. I don’t get no ride home. I walk.” So she looked at me like excuse me, I’m sorry. [I told her] “That’s OK, be careful.”

When Quanza’s teacher made assumptions about Quanza’s family, Ms. Rodriguez alerted her to the precautions she had taken to ensure that Quanza would not suffer without gloves. Ms. Rodriguez spoke with me directly about the assumptions teachers made about urban families, “A lot of teachers in a lot of schools, they figure you live in a low [income community], and they say this is the ghetto, right? And they say a lot of people [on welfare] is in the ghetto, so they assume everybody is on welfare.” Ms. Rodriguez clearly understood that being poor and living in this particular community positioned her in particular ways that invited teachers to make assumptions about her.

While it was often assumed that parents did not realize how school personnel viewed them, this was not true. Parents did talk with their children and were aware of what happened in school. What we say and do in school matters, and we must remember that quick judgments can be detrimental to the collaborative relationships we strive to build with families.

• The parents in this study often presented insightful critiques of their worlds.

The parents I interviewed were aware of existing economic and societal inequities. Marvin’s
grandfather maintained that without learning to read, young people would only be able to get “garbage jobs.” Yet he also described the limited effect learning to read has in gaining viable employment.

_I know a lot of people . . . they love to read. They don’t have no problem with that. They read and they did their math and you know what upset them is that you get mad when they read and they figure that they have all the abilities and they can’t get a job . . . They just get frustrated._

As Mr. Sherwood explained, reading was not the sole issue. People did what was expected of them in school and still struggled to get jobs. Parents saw the asymmetries and broken promises that complicated simple formulas that equated reading success with viable employment. Later in this interview, Mr. Sherwood mentioned “the system.” His comments inspired me to ask other parents about “the system.” Parents’ replies focused on schools, the public health system, welfare, and employment.

I was impressed by the insightfulness of the parents I interviewed and their keen critiques of “the system.” Parents recognized the importance of learning to read, but they also recognized the inequities and challenges that accompany living in a high-poverty neighborhood and attending poor urban schools. It’s not just about learning to read; it’s about being able to deal with and succeed within the system. Racism, classism, and sexism are embedded in institutional policies, and simple explanations that focus only on reading competency are insufficient.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This article invites teachers to rethink their assumptions about students and families. By reflecting on my own longitudinal teacher research study, I identified seven important lessons that have informed my teaching and my thinking ever since. Teacher research provides many ways to learn about our students’ families:

- Teachers can interview children and parents. These can be formal tape-recorded interviews, casual conversations, or discussions incorporated into parent–teacher conferences.
- Many low-income and culturally diverse communities host community organizations that work on behalf of community members. Representatives from these organizations can provide teachers with valuable insights.
- Teachers can also learn important information by visiting students’ homes to get to know families, become informed about their interests and literacy practices, and become familiar with their funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) that families possess.
- Student-led or parent-led tours of the local community can also be helpful. Not only can teachers learn first-hand about the community, but they can also observe environmental print and various literacy practices.

My work with families has changed my teaching practices in three significant ways. First, I make it a rule to assume that there are more literacy practices and educational experiences occurring in families than I realize. Had I not spoken directly with family members about their reading practices and interests, I would never have realized the extent and depth of the literacy practices in my students’ homes.

Second, my research has provided me with ways to respond to my colleagues’ negative assumptions. When colleagues characterize parents as not caring about reading or maintain that children do not have access to books, I have data to challenge those assumptions. I now encourage my colleagues to learn more about the families they serve.

Third, conducting this research has helped me to recognize my own cultural blinders. Reflecting on the “aha” and “oh, no” moments (Hubbard & Power, 2003) that I experienced forced me to confront my own assumptions about teaching in inner city schools and has helped me to constantly monitor my actions, words, and thoughts for times when I am biased, insensitive, or judgmental. As products of a society where dominant discourses circulate, we are all subject to flawed thinking that imposes unfair assumptions on others.

There have also been specific changes in my teaching practices. I took note of the books that children owned and incorporated those stories into classroom lessons. While in the past I had dismissed Disney storybooks and “Little Golden Books” as substandard literature, now I used these texts in conjunction with school-approved materials. I incorporated activities that parents value into homework activities. Despite my professional aversion to flashcards, parents often request flashcards and are comfortable using them with
their children; therefore, I started sending flashcards home. In addition, I became aware of literacy practices that were problematic and took steps to address these concerns. For instance, I helped parents to understand that sounding out is only one way of decoding words, and I made sure that children learned additional strategies at school. I worked to obtain multiple copies of texts so that children could read together with peers. In addition, I seriously considered parental interest in computers and took full advantage of the technological resources available in my school. Finally, I developed a heightened awareness of the ways parents view schools and realized the extreme importance of demonstrating respect for parents.

This project opened my eyes to the myriad literacy activities that exist in children’s homes. When designing literacy activities, I drew more on the oral and musical texts that the children brought to school. Clapping rhymes, jump rope rhymes, rap songs, cartoon theme songs, and jingles from TV commercials were familiar texts to my students and could be used for early literacy learning. In addition, my students were familiar with Sesame Street, the Arthur series, and Dora the Explorer. Many children have great depths of knowledge about Pokémon characters, football teams, popular music, World Wide Wrestling, auto racing, or monster trucks. All of these funds of knowledge can be used to create rich and relevant literacy activities for children.

If we listen to families, we can no longer easily blame them for their children’s difficulties in school. We begin to recognize the complexities of their lives and realize that all marginalized families are not the same. We confront dominant discourses (Compton-Lilly, 2007) and cultural models (Gee, 1999) that feed into simple explanations and negative assumptions about families. Conducting teacher research, reflecting on our teaching and our students’ learning, and considering the rich funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that children bring to school can help us to design richer and more student-focused classrooms. By listening to parents and children, we begin to conceptualize possibilities and solutions that recognize the strengths of families and the potential of children.

References


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