Understanding Literacy Practices in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children’s Homes

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The development of literacy skills is important to academic achievement (Washington, 2001). The process of children's literacy development is influenced by many factors that involve sociocultural and ecological perspectives of learning (Hammer & Miccio, 2004; Martinez-Rodan & Malave, 2004). Furthermore, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1986) emphasize that interactions between people, as well as interactions between people and their environments, influence learning. Both theories help explain how a child learns and develops concepts in collaboration with adults and peers in and out of school (Martinez-Rodan & Malave, 2004; Ortiz & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005). Specifically, the influences of the home environment (e.g., family support) contribute to young children's language and literacy acquisition, and children may benefit from exposure to a variety of reading and writing activities (Goin, Nordquist, & Twardosz, 2004; Hammer & Miccio, 2004; Ortiz, 2000). Thus, differences in home literacy environments influence the
development of children’s listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Goin et al., 2004; Gutierrez-Cellen, 2001).

Children are exposed to language events at home that support their literacy development (Ortiz, 2004). When learning about print in the environment, children begin to develop phonological awareness and knowledge of letters (Hammer, Miccio, & Wagstaff, 2003). The learning process at home about how to read and write may be different from the experiences they encounter at school (Compton-Lilly, 2006). According to socio-cultural perspectives, the differences in perceptions of appropriate literacy events cannot be cultural or context free (Hammer & Miccio, 2004; Martinez-Rodan & Malave, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds’ literacy experiences are influenced by their parents’ beliefs regarding literacy practices at home. Therefore, the development of literacy skills for CLD children may be different than those from mainstream society (Moll, Velez-Ibanez, & Greenberg, 1990; Ortiz, 2004).

Research also has identified some variations in home environments that have effects on the development of children’s literacy skills (Burgess, Hecht, Lonigan, 2002; Hart & Risley, 1995; Goin et al., 2004). Variations in home environments (e.g., parents’ education, parents’ own literacy habits, and family income) may be associated with differences in children’s school literacy preparation (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). However, researchers (e.g., Auerback, 1989; Hammer & Miccio, 2004) did not support the assumption about the relationship between the home environments of poor (or undereducated) and decreased opportunities to acquire important language skills. Previous studies (e.g., Auerback, 1989; Ortiz, 2004; Wearmouth, 2004) revealed that poor minority families not only value literacy but also provided a rich literacy activities for their children at home. Taking the notions of socio-cultural perspectives, home literacy environments should not be neglected in the field of education, and the importance of parental roles in children's acquisition of literacy roles should be considered as well (Ortiz, 2004; Weigel et al., 2005).

Because parents are a critical link to their children's literacy development, they act as resources and meaning-makers of their children’s literacy learning environment (Ortiz, 2000; Volk & Acosta, 2001). Through investigating what parents
believe about how children learn to read and write at home, the knowledge of home-literacy practices can be understood while designing literacy activities (Hammer et al., 2003; Hammer & Miccio, 2004). Because knowledge that children bring to school match school expectation while others may not (Compton-Lilly, 2006), school should recognize and build on funds of knowledge grounded in childhood culture through examining families’ beliefs (Martinez-Rodan & Malave, 2004; Moll et al., 1990). Given the differences in cultural views, differences may exist between CLD families’ views of literacy, children’s literacy development, and how these families interact with their children for relevant literacy activities (Hammer & Miccio, 2004; Wearmouth, 2004). However, there was a lack of studies focused on investigating the connection between home literacy experiences and the literacy skills of children from CLD backgrounds (Ortiz, 2004).

Due to discontinuities between home and school culture about learning styles and language codes, a number of researchers (Reese & Gallimore, 2000; Washington, 2001) have pointed out that minority children, including those from specific ethnic backgrounds (i.e., Hispanic, African American) and low income backgrounds are at risk for poor literacy outcomes. Because children from CLD backgrounds may not have literacy experiences the same as children from mainstream society, the differences may result in far-reaching consequences that impact not only CLD children’s academic success but also their overall well-being and ability to compete in society (Hammer et al., 2003). In addition, teachers may explain the differences in cultural (e.g., less motivation in learning) and linguistic (e.g., dialect) styles that CLD children possess as factors in their low-achievement (Ortiz, 2004). This deficit literacy view for diverse populations prevents educators who want to improve children’s literacy in an appropriate way from doing so (Wearmouth, 2004). Finally, children from CLD backgrounds who display reading achievement difficulties are more likely to be referred to special education (McCollin & O’Shea, 2005).

However, explanations such as cultural and linguistic differences in home literacy practices alone cannot account for the complexity of reading failure of CLD students (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). These students’ text comprehension is hindered when content is different from their cultural backgrounds (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). The assumption of a literacy-deficient view for CLD families should be reshaped, and educators should believe that CLD families have the potential to support the
literacy acquisition of children who experience difficulties (Wearmouth, 2004). Furthermore, teachers should not neglect the additional personal, family, and situational factors that may affect the performance of CLD children. Therefore, we must work to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of home literacy practices for young CLD children. Based on existing literature, this article begins by exploring the impacts of home literacy practices on the literacy development of young CLD children, which can provide direction for future efforts to support families in home literacy practices. The article then discussed the relation between home literacy and young CLD children's learning outcomes. Finally, this paper examined the best practices for promoting this population's literacy development, specifically focused on the importance of cultural competence.

**Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children**

To meet the purpose of this paper, we defined children from CLD backgrounds as those whose home language is not English, and/or their race/ethnicity is not White/Caucasian. The statement that today the United States is comprised of many different cultural groups comes as no surprise to anyone, nor that diversity is reflected in the public education of every state, county, and local school district. These changing student demographics have challenged both general education and special education in a number of ways. The ongoing underachievement of some ethnic/racial groups, notably African-American, Mexican-American, and Native-American students, is of major concern (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). It is believed that the general lack of achievement among CLD students and discontinuity between home and school cultures are closely related (Gay, 2002). To promote students' learning outcomes, educators need to seek attitudes, skills, experiences, and dispositions that will allow them to see the child in the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and social context of his/her home and community. Specifically, the influences of families on early-literacy learning cannot be underestimated.

**Descriptions of Home Literacy**

Researchers (e.g., Weigel et al., 2005) have come to a consensus about the importance of home environment to promote young children's literacy development because children may have more opportunities at home to:
(a) become familiar with literacy materials,
(b) observe the literacy activities of others,
(c) independently explore literate behaviors,
(d) engage in joint reading and writing activities with other people and (e) benefit from the teaching strategies that family members use when engaging in joint literacy tasks. (DeBaryshe, Binder, & Buell, 2000, 119-120).

However, there has been relatively few studies focusing on promoting home literacy for children from CLD backgrounds. Findings revealed home literacy only represented certain ethnic groups, such as African-Americans and Latino-Americans. Due to different purposes of each study, home literacy practices focusing on CLD populations have been defined in different ways. For example, Hammer et al. (2003) described home literacy as maternal reading patterns and interactions with their children during book reading time. Some studies (e.g., Ezell, Gonzales, Randolph, 2000) focused on CLD parents' attitudes and their involvement in home literacy activities, while others (Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Farver et al., 2006) may focus on home literacy quality and its effect on CLD children's learning. When interpreting home literacy practices, we should consider the focus of study as well as the measures the researchers used.

A variety of home literacy activities for CLD children have been described, including academic support, book reading, and relevant literacy experiences. For example, academic support, such as helping Latino-American children practice letters and words and complete school assignments, would foster children's academic achievement (e.g., Goldenberg et al. 1992; Hammer et al., 2003). As for relevant literacy experiences, not only book-reading was considered as a common activity but also CLD parents used different ways when reading with their children. For instance, in the Britto et al. (2006) study, African-American mothers who served as story-tellers used more decontextualized language, asked more labeling questions, and gave children more positive feedback during book reading. However, mothers as story-readers did not talk much to children. Other literacy activities have found that CLD parents may read advertisements, playing the words while skipping rope, and finding the first letter of a word when interacting with their child (Britto et al. 2006; Britto & Brooks, 2001; Ezell,
In general, home literacy practices for CLD young children may not differ than those children from mainstream culture. Taking sociocultural perspectives into account, CLD parents may not perceive the same roles as those from mainstream, middle-class parents. For example, Reesee and Gallimore (2000) investigated how the perspectives of low-income Latino parents of kindergarteners influenced literacy activities with their children. These parents believed that the development of reading skills occurred through formal instruction rather than through parental support. When collaborating with CLD parents regarding young children's literacy development, professionals should recognize the importance of CLD parental beliefs.

The Influences of Factors on Home Literacy Practices
Several factors influencing home literacy practices for young CLD children were found, including opportunities to access the materials, amounts of reading materials, bilingual books, book-reading frequency, and the degree of parental involvement. In Ezell et al. (2000) study, the results revealed that there was a positive relationship between opportunities to access the literacy materials and literacy concepts enhancement.

Additionally, the variables related to parental background information were also identified as factors influencing children’s learning outcomes, including the levels of maternal education, maternal teaching and reading patterns, maternal quality of assistance, and maternal sensitivity which may predict the development of CLD children's literacy skills. These factors were also indicators of the quality of the home environments in terms of promoting home literacy. Moreover, studies (e.g., Britto & Brooks, 2001; Britto et al., 2006; Hammer et al., 2003; Robert et al., 2005) have revealed that mothers played important roles in the development of African American and Latino children’s literacy skills. For example, in two studies (Britto & Brooks, 2001; Britto et al. 2006), the authors suggested that African-American children's vocabulary appeared to be associated with a more interactive maternal book-reading pattern and teaching pattern. The findings from these studies.
demonstrated that the African-American mothers who used more book reading strategies helped children to have higher vocabulary scores over time, between 3 years and entry to kindergarten.

The practices of home-based literacy were guided by parents' involvement with the using the materials and their views of how literacy learning takes place (Goldenberg et al., 1992; Hughes et al., 1999). Since parental attitudes were the influences in the structuring of home literacy environments, evidence highlighted the importance of examining the parental perspectives and their roles regarding literacy practices at home (Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005). Moreover, research found that active parental support (i.e. expose children to literacy activities either directly or indirectly, parent's views about the importance of literacy) produced an effect on the child's spoken language, phonological sensitivity, and print awareness (Burgess et al., 2002). Children from CLD backgrounds may not have the same opportunities to be exposed to literacy activities in the same ways as other mainstream children, but, the factors influencing development of emergent literacy are not due to their race and/or SES status (Gutierrez-Clellen, 2001). Instead of holding deficit views toward CLD students' home literacy backgrounds, educators should take students' cultural knowledge and experiences into consideration as they design literacy activities in schools (Moll, Velez-Ibanez, & Greenberg, 1990; Purcell-Gates, L'Allier, & Smith, 1995).

**Home Literacy and Learning Outcomes**

Researchers (Britto & Brooks, 2001; Britto et al. 2006; Robert et al., 2005) have identified that there was a positive relationship between provided home literacy and young CLD children's literacy skills. Moreover, Latino or African American parents provided varieties of literacy activities (i.e., rich language and verbal interactions, positive parental teaching and learning styles, and warmth and motivational support in the home) to their children, which they could use to improve their literacy skills, such as building phonological awareness, decoding syllables, and demonstrating higher expressive language.

Specifically, young CLD children show improvement in two areas: language skills (i.e., expressive and receptive languages)
and school readiness. For example, Britto and Brooks (2001) identified that mothers’ assistance during a puzzle task was positively and significantly associated with the children’s expressive language. As for enhancing school readiness, children showed better performance by getting high quality literacy practices at home. For instance, in Farver et al. (2006) study, Latino children whose mothers provided them with high levels of academic support and guided participation demonstrated greater school readiness compared with children who received low levels of maternal engagement in the studied activities. On the other hand, the frequency of maternal expressive language and decontextualized language and their skills in helping children stay motivated in learning were positively associated with children’s school readiness (Britto & Brooks, 2001 & Britto et al. 2006). Finally, parents’ literacy involvement not only enhanced children's literacy skills and school readiness, but also increased their social functioning, which included cooperation and compliance, effective communication, appropriate help-seeking, and form the basis for positive socio-emotional adjustment at school (Farver, 2006).

**Home Practices and Home-School Relationship**

To empower parental involvement in CLD young children’s literacy learning within the home contexts, educators should recognize families’ feelings of competence in the literacy development of their children and provide further guidance regarding concepts of print, environment print, and sharing books (Hammer & Miccio, 2004; Ortiz, 2004; Purcell-Gates et al., 1995). For example, Goldenberg et al. (1992) specifically discussed the home-school relationship regarding the literacy development for Latino children. They reported that the school offered homework and instruction for parents in Spanish which facilitated the families to actively participate in their children's literacy learning. Even though those children lacked literacy tasks and materials at home, schools incorporating these supports increased students’ opportunities to learn. Children’s literacy experiences at school increased the frequency and amount of time they used school-like literacy activities at home. Therefore, schools play an important role in facilitating and supporting families to actively participant in their children’s literacy learning (see Tips for Teachers/Practitioners below).

**Culturally Responsive Approach and Promoting Home-Literacy Practices**
As parents' roles, home literacy environment, and home-school relationship interactively influence CLD students' literacy development and academic achievement, it is essential to discuss how teachers and parents collaborate to foster CLD students' literacy competence. Drawing on the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy, this article used culturally responsive literacy instruction designed by the National Center for Culturally Responsive Education System (NCCREST) to suggest the ways to promote home literacy.

**Tips for Teachers/Practitioners**

- Offer parents information how to access the books.
- Help to determine which materials might be more meaningful to parents within the frame of reference used to understand how children learn (Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004; Goldenberg et al., 1992).
- Instruct parents to investigate how to read with their children and use strategies that fit individual needs (e.g., reading with children should be language-and meaning-rich experiences) (Ezell et al., 2000; Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004).
- Understand the role of literacy in different cultures and communities as well as cultural uses of literacy and reading styles when developing literacy interventions (Hammer et al., 2005).
- Examine what literacy experiences children have at home and develop a program that builds on children's familiar experiences and supplements children's literacy activities to include more frequent and/or more varied
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is termed by Gay (2000) to be applicable to students from minority backgrounds. Drawing from multicultural education and concepts of equity (Banks & Banks, 1995; Banks, 1999), CRT is designed to respond or react to minority students appropriately (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Thus, teachers should use the cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of reference and performances styles of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2000, p. 29). To connect home and school, teachers take action to bring students' cultural experiences and funds of knowledge into classroom (Gay, 2000). This cultural knowledge includes a broad range of elements, including cultural or family ways of being, values, languages, and identities that are important in students' home lives.

One powerful way to incorporate these is to invite parents to participate in class. By providing traditional experience and stories relevant to students' cultures, teachers and parents create authentic and meaningful ways of learning. Gay (2000) further connects the notion of cultural competence to curriculum that is related to students' backgrounds. This could include, providing literature that is consistent with students' lives and school-related experience (Hefflin, 2001), using culturally compatible communication patterns (Foster, 1996; Howard, 2001), and allowing a collaborative work style (Benson, 2003). Thus, teachers not only serve as experts to implement appropriate instruction but also collaborate with parents to enrich students' learning.

Culturally responsive literacy instruction. According to NCCRESt, there are seven elements of culturally responsive literacy instruction. First, goal of instruction aims to establish students' ownership of literacy. That is, teachers have to acknowledge
the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups and encourage students to value their heritage languages. Second, role of home language indicates that students are welcomed to build upon the uses of home language and literacy they are familiar to develop their English ability. Learning native languages also helps students strengthen their ethnic identity and connect to their ethnic groups (Valdés, 2001). Third, instructional materials refer to the involvement of cultural literature into the curriculum. That is, the implementation of culturally responsive lessons in prereading activity, read aloud, group discussion, and journal writing fosters students to develop literacy competence that reflect their real-life experiences.

Fourth, classroom management and classroom interaction indicate that teachers have to understand students' distinctive ways of speaking in their cultural speech communities. For example, Philips (1972) found that Native American children were more comfortable working together in small groups, a pattern of participation typical of their community, rather than being singled out from others. Similarly, Au and Jordan (1981) demonstrated how the "talk-story," an adaptation of the oral reading lesson, enhanced oral language learning by Native Hawaiians. Thus, culturally responsive classroom discourse helps students build their own sense of identity and develop their emerging language and literacy abilities.

Fifth, relation to the community aims to view that students do not enter school as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Rather, they bring with them rich and varied language and cultural experiences. More importantly, teachers have to connect with the community members to integrate cultural values into the curriculum. Sixth, instructional methods include both authentic learning activities and instruction in specific literacy skills. Teachers in the public school system have to support the languages that students bring into class, provide input from additional codes, and give students the opportunity to use the new codes in a nonthreatening and real communicative context (Delpit, 1995). Finally, assessment should not only use standardized test to evaluate students but also strive to understand each student's progress and take individual differences into account. The assessment should also eliminate bias toward the use of prior knowledge, language, and questions type.
Closing Thoughts
To establish a better communication between school and parents, the school should take a leading role to educate parents and offer resources. For example, school could hold talks, seminars, and courses to provide parents with knowledge about parent-child interaction, bilingual education, and home literacy environment construction. These supports not only allow parents to apply the knowledge they learn through parent-school and parent-parent communication but also encourage students to develop positive attitudes toward their native languages and cultures. Clearly, the interactions between parents and children increase the frequency and amount of time of children's use of school-like literacy activities at home. Thus, the bridge between home and school should be cohesive to achieve the goal of CRT and CLD student's early literacy development.

References


