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ABSTRACT

A study tested the generally accepted theory that low income children fail to achieve adequate levels of literacy because there is a vast discontinuity between home and school in the functions of literacy, language, and the nature of typical teaching/learning experiences. Thirty-two elementary school children were studied. Parents and teachers of the children were interviewed, and one observation was made of a parent helping a child in an assignment at home. This assignment involved filling out an hourly log-sheet of the child's activities on a specific day. Interaction between the child and the helping parent was noted. Analysis of observation data led to the conclusion that parent child interaction over a homework-like task is very similar to dyadic interaction between a teacher and child in school, and the implicit theories of teaching and learning held by parents and teachers are very much the same. Results indicate that discontinuity between home and school cannot fully explain all of the problems low income children have in acquiring literacy. (JD)

Parents as Teachers:

Observations of Low-Income Parents and Children in a Homework-like Task

by

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Low-income, working class children in the United States are much more likely than middle class children to fail to achieve adequate levels of literacy, as defined by grade-level norms. Furthermore, the differences between middle and working class children increase as the children continue through school, becoming especially serious at grade 4 and above when the ability to read complex material in order to acquire new information becomes crucial to school success (NAEP, 1981). A task of major importance to researchers and educators is to explain why working class children experience such risk of failure at literacy development.

To many, the fact that there are social class differences in literacy achievement suggests that the cause is to be found in the home or in some aspect of the relationship between home and school. One claim that has been made concerning the source of working class children's difficulty with literacy achievement is the "discontinuity between home and school" (See, for example, Heath, 1982a, 1982b, in press; Au and Jordan, 1981; and Philips, 1972, 1983). In this chapter after reviewing literature relevant to the "discontinuity hypothesis", we will present data from our study of 31 low-income families of mixed ethnicity living in an urban setting in the northeastern United States in order to see whether the proposed explanation holds for our population.

Home-School Discontinuity

Ethnographic studies of the uses of literacy in low-income homes demonstrate that low-income and minority children experience a tremendous discontinuity between home and school in a) the functions of literacy, b) the functions of language, and c) the nature of typical teaching/learning experiences, and suggest furthermore that these discontinuities may explain the children's failure at school.

Functions of literacy. A number of ethnographers have pointed out that the uses to which literacy is put vary widely in different communities. Shirley Brice Heath (in press) studied three Southeastern communities: Roadville, a poor rural white community; Trackton, a poor rural black community, and Maintown: a middle class white community. Varenne, Hamid-Buglione, McDermott and Morrison (1982) conducted an ethnographic study of 32 families of low socioeconomic status in a borough of New York. Scollon and Scollon (1981) compared the acquisition of literacy by Athabaskan children to the acquisition of literacy by their daughter.

In the lower class communities studied by both Heath and by Varenne et al., children experienced general and specific discontinuities. Overall, for these children, the print used at home had an immediate function. Things were rarely written for their own sake; print was utilized for specific extrinsic purposes. Most of the contexts for reading for these children were tied to the immediate tasks of everyday life; in Heath's distinction, they did not learn to read as much as they read to learn (1980).

Varenne et al. (1982) and Heath (1980) independently identified specific functions of literacy. Activities which call for literacy included 1) household activities such as directions for operating gadgets, recipes, etc.; 2) keeping up a social network, such as exchanging letters, notes, and greeting cards; 3) communications for social institutions, such as notices from school, tax returns, insurance policies; 4) marketplace shopping, which included reading and comparing labels and prices, ingredients, etc. (Varenne et al., 1982). Reading is crucial to all of these activities, and writing to some. All these exercises of literacy, however, constituted a means to an end; they were not particularly valued in and of themselves. Thus, children from these communities were unfamiliar with the need to focus on reading and writing as ends in and of themselves, as school tasks require them to do.

Communicative rules around reading and writing differ as well. The reading of a letter in Trackton, for instance, became a collaborative effort, involving decoding unclear words, gathering information and spontaneous storytelling inspired by the material in the letter. Given this, one could predict that the structure of traditional reading groups, with their emphasis on turn-taking and on reading exactly what is printed with no embellishments, would be a puzzling and remote task to Trackton children.

The Scollons (1981) have illustrated that the rules for the use of literacy in Fort Chippewan, Alberta differ radically from those of traditional schools, due to the close connection between literacy and religion in Fort Chippewan. Children were taught to respect the text, not to reproduce it in writing, to learn through repetition and chanting, and to see reading as the task of an adult rather than a child. One could predict that children raised in this tradition would be reluctant to write, would be puzzled by demands on the part of the adult that they read, and might be uncomfortable with questions, discussions, and interpretations of the text.

Functions of language. Researchers have found discontinuities not only in the functions of literacy but also in the functions of language. Heath (1982b), for example, found that Roadville and Maintown children were very fluent in responding to a questioning strategy which could be labeled "didactic", information-oriented questions such as those that parents and teachers often ask their children either in order to teach them new concepts or to check their understanding of old ones. Thus, Roadville children and children from Maintown were familiar with labeling questions ("What color is that?") and questions which asked them to repeat something ("And what did the little goose say?"). They were used to answering questions to which the asker already knew the answer. Didactic questioning is one of the primary

questioning strategies of teachers in both traditional and open classrooms (Edwards and Furlong, 1978).

To the Trackton children, however, these questions seemed strange and silly. "Ain't nobody can talk about things being theirselves," stated one frustrated third grader (Heath, 1982a: 105). Instead, Trackton children were fluent in answering questions which called less for factual information and more for metaphorical or descriptive information. Comparison questions ("What's that like?"), almost never seen in white families, were frequent among the black families. Questions were used in Trackton as story-starters ("What happened to James' car?") and as invitations to defend oneself ("What's that on your face?") but in school, questions were never used to serve these purposes. Heath (in press), Jordan (1981), Michaels (this volume) and the Scollons (1981) have all identified differences in narrative structures learned at home and those expected in school. Michaels, for instance, has described the way in which children who used a topic-chaining rather than a topic-centered style during sharing time were negatively evaluated by their teacher. Heath (in press) found that essays of the fifth grade Trackton children were full of drama, dialogue, and emotion, but were low on factual information that helped to set the stage for the reader by alerting him or her to a change of scene or chronology. The Roadville fifth graders, on the other hand, were skilled at creating literate narratives with a beginning, middle and end, but stopped at a factual account and added little of the drama or dialogue found in Trackton stories. Thus, Trackton children were at risk of being evaluated as having little of the most elementary decontextualizing skills; Roadville children were at risk of being evaluated as unimaginative.

Learning styles. The research of Philips (1972, 1983) and Jordan (1981) illustrates that discontinuities between the school and the home in the area of learning styles may greatly inhibit children's literacy achievement. Jordan

and Phillips have indicated that Warm Springs Indian children and native Hawaiian children are accustomed to learning most culturally valued competencies among peer groups, not in a one-on-one situation with adults.

The Hawaiian children are accustomed to being responsible for their own and others' learning; thus there is much "peer tutoring" in their everyday learning. They are typically responsible for tasks which contribute in important ways to the smooth running of their households, taking the role of teacher as well as learner with their peers (Jordan, 1981).

The native American children are socialized to learn tasks on their own (Philips, 1972, 1983). They are rarely verbally instructed by parents; instead, parents may demonstrate the task, whereupon the child will practice privately and not make her new accomplishment public until she is fairly certain she can perform competently. It is clear how these children may be inhibited by the conventions of classroom learning. Public practice, performing publicly before competence is achieved, and verbal instruction all violate the norms to which these children have been socialized.

Intervention to reduce discontinuity. Thus we see that functions of literacy, functions of language, and learning styles are three areas in which home-school discontinuities can put a child at risk for acquiring literacy skills. The suggestion that home-school discontinuities are responsible for low literacy achievement is supported by the success of various changes implemented in the classrooms. Most of the changes are in the direction of adapting the structure and/or curriculum of the classroom to be more congruent with the home.

For example, using the native Hawaiian collaborative "talk story" narrative form as a basis for reading instruction has improved the Hawaiian children's success at learning how to read (Au and Jordan, 1981). Furthermore,

simply informing teachers that their didactic questions may be unfamiliar to some children and suggesting that they also use some of the more open-ended question forms familiar to black children can improve the children's functioning in the classroom (Heath, 1982a). The most effective and global intervention involves providing a teacher who is a member of the children's own culture and who thus understands, appreciates, and responds appropriately to the children's language use, narrative style, and literacy practices (Erickson, 1977).

Another form of intervention focuses on the home as the site for change. Such early enrichment programs as the parent-training project of Levenstein (in press) work to reduce home-school discontinuities by training parents in some of the techniques that teachers typically use--didactic questions, demands for display of knowledge, demands for lexical specificity, etc. Such programs are especially effective in improving children's school success during the primary grades (Lazar and Darlington, 1982).

All of the above suggests that when teachers understand more about the home environment and when parents' behavior is more similar to behavior encountered in the school environment, teachers can make children's home-skills relevant to school success. If they can do this, as well as teach school skills as additions and not replacements for home skills, the children's probability of becoming literate increases significantly. As is evident, most of the descriptive focus of the ethnographic research is on what families do in their natural context, apart from school, to facilitate learning and literacy. The prescriptive focus is on how teachers can modify their own behavior and the classroom contexts they create to resemble these home contexts.

Limitations on the discontinuity explanation. These convincing descriptions of discontinuity between home and school present data on groups which show very different cultural patterns from "mainstream" North Americans. Native Hawaaians, North American Indians, and rural blacks participate in truly

different cultures from middle class North Americans, and it is not surprising that classrooms staffed by white, middle class teachers in schools organized by white, middle class administrators would constitute very unfamiliar environments for such children.

It is tempting to extend the discontinuity hypothesis to explain the poor achievement of working class, low-income children in general, on the assumption that class is the primary source of the discontinuity between home and school. We would argue, however, that such an extension is unjustified--we need to look carefully at various groups of low-income children to determine whether their home experiences are indeed discontinuous with their schooling. Conversely, it would also be useful to compare the home and school experience of middle class children. Surely, on many points these children also are required to make a considerable adjustment to school practices (e.g., conforming to rules for turn-taking and for not talking at will, respecting adult authority, sharing toys and other desired objects); yet their literacy development is not impaired.

Analysis of the data we collected from 31 low-income families living in an urban setting suggests that the parent-child interaction over a homework-like task is very similar to dyadic interaction between a teacher and a child in school and the implicit theories of teaching and learning held by parents and by teachers are very much the same. We will present the data supporting these conclusions below, after describing the sample and data collection procedures in greater detail.

Participants and Procedure

The participants in this study were 32 children from 31 families, selected from one urban school system to meet the following criteria: 1) The children

were in grades 2, 4, or 6 at the start of the study; 2) They could be classed as somewhat below or somewhat above-average readers, as measured by scores on standardized tests in reading. (Classification was based on school records and teacher recommendation, supplemented by individually administered reading tests.) 3) They were eligible for the free-lunch program at school, based on the family's per capita income.

Approximately half the children were male and half female. The 31 families included 6 American black families, 5 black families of Caribbean origin, 3 Hispanic families, 3 Irish-American families, 2 Portuguese-American families, and 12 white families of remote or mixed ethnicity. Parents' education ranged from third grade to graduate school. Over one-third of the mothers did not graduate from high school. Of these eleven, four women had attended grade school only. Another third of the mothers had graduated from high school. The remaining third had some college or technical school training. Only the one mother with a master's degree had graduated from college.

A wide range of data was collected on the families: The children kept time allocation diaries: various family members and the children's teachers were interviewed: the children were observed at school: and their reading, writing, and language skills were tested twice at one-year intervals (See Chall, Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, Hemphill, and Jacobs, 1982, for a complete report on data collection). In this chapter, while we will draw on data from the interviews of the mothers and teachers and from our observations of home and classroom interaction, we will rely primarily on our observations of parent-child interaction during a structured, homework-like task.

We had hoped to observe parent-child interaction during naturally occurring homework tasks. However, we were frustrated in trying to do this for a number of reasons: Many of the second graders were assigned little homework,

some children had time to do their homework at school or during an after-school program; in many families there was no set time to do homework, and parents helped with homework only when it was too hard or too long rather than on a regular basis. We found in our pilot home observations that waiting to see parent-child interaction over homework or any other literacy-related activity was impractical and inefficient for the researchers, considering that we had 31 families to observe. We therefore decided to use the task of filling out time allocation diaries of children's activities as a focal point around which to observe parent-child interactions during a school-type task. This diary task resembles homework in that the children had to read and follow a set of directions, recall and organize factual details, write them in a prescribed format, and return the diary to us. A further advantage of the diary task was that it allowed us to observe more spontaneous behaviors on the part of the parents since it was not obvious to the family members that observing their interaction was of interest to us; they thought we were focusing only on the activities of the child and on his or her writing.

The diary-observation visit always included two researchers--one to explain and one to observe. The researcher who had had previous contact with the family asked the child and whichever parent was present to participate in the task of filling out the diary. This researcher explained that we wanted a diary of the child's activities for four consecutive weekdays. Each day's diary consisted of spaces in which to write what the child had done, where he or she was, and who he or she was with, as well as a checklist on which any activity engaged in during the day had to be checked off (See Figure 1 for diary form). This researcher asked the parent and child to fill in the diary together right then and there for the previus day's activities "so it would be clear how to do it." It was left up to the parent and child who should do the actual writing. During this whole time, the second researcher--who had not

previously met the families and knew nothing about them--served as observer. Having had training in ethnographic methods, she wrote a running narrative of the entire interaction over the task.

When the observer had completed narratives for all the families, she developed categories for organizing the notes in order to facilitate comparison between families and to do other data analyses. These categories were 1) activities in progress when we arrived, 2) the setting, 3) the role of participants, 4) participants' manner toward the task and toward each other, 5) other simultaneous activities, 6) questions, 7) off-task remarks, 8) problems with the task and their resolution, 9) other interaction over the task, 10) participants' remarks about the task, 11) participants' remarks about other participants, and 12) language other than English.

Because of scheduling problems and attrition, observation of the diary interaction could be carried out in only 26 families. Thus, though we present data from interviews with the parents and teachers of all the children, the number on whom direct observational data are available is somewhat smaller.

Setting and Role of Participants

Virtually every family was receptive and friendly to us upon our arrival and during the diary task. A variety of activities was observed when we arrived, e.g., eating dinner, watching television, playing with an Atari, mother returning from jogging. Television was a constant presence in many of the families. In five families it was left on during our visits but appeared to be a continuing distraction to the child in only one (even when the mother turned down the sound but left on the picture). Another child, a second grader, jumped up in the middle of filling out the diary to turn on the TV in another room. In all the other families either the TV was not on or else the mother turned off the set when we arrived, in preparation for the task at hand.

Siblings of 11 of the children were present during the task, but they were not necessarily a distraction. It is interesting to note that no siblings were asked to leave, although four of the children's friends were told to come back later when the task was completed. Younger siblings invariably wanted to get involved in the task and we usually offered them a piece of paper to write or draw on. In some instances, though, the sibling played more of a role in the task. For example, a younger sister of one of the children reminded her that they had made up songs during the day. In another family, the younger daughter helped her sister remember events while their mother took care of the baby. At one point, the two girls argued briefly about what time something had occurred during the day and appealed to their mother for a solution.

In 23 families, the mother was present with the child during the task; in two families, fathers helped the child; in one family both mother and father were present. From our interviews with parents, we know that for the two families in which the fathers helped during the diary task, the father helped with homework regularly as well. In another family, the mother gave responsibility to the interviewer to help the child with the diary; she did not usually help the child with homework either. The only fourth grader whose mother wrote the diary for him must have done some of his homework for him too since she commented in the interview, "I like his workbooks; I think they're fun to do." We felt that what we saw, in terms of who helped the child, how much and in what tone help was given, was representative of homework help in general in these families. The two families in which parent-child interaction during the task was negative and nonproductive, in our view, were marked by similarly negative interactions during our other visits to the household.

Also, what parents said in interviews about helping their children was consonant with what we saw them doing in interaction over this task. One helpful mother said, "I work with the kids during the summer so they don't

forget stuff" and another commented, "I go over new things with her once before she does her homework." One mother told us, "She asks for help with words sometimes. Just last week they found a decomposed body in the project, and she asked me what 'decomposed' meant." Another explained how she helped her child with homework:

> When she reads ancient history, she doesn't know the words and it puts her head into a whirlwind. So I make her read each sentence aloud to help keep track of things. Then I ask her to say what it meant in her own words.

Nature of the Parent-Child Interaction

There were many parallels between the dyadic interactions over homework-like tasks we observed at home and those which we saw in classrooms. Like dyadic interactions between a teacher (usually female) and an elementary school student in the context of a normal classroom with other students present, the interaction we observed in the homes was primarily between one parent (usually the mother) and one child, but with other family members present and involving themselves in various ways. This kind of adult-child dyadic interaction is only one kind of interaction which influences children's development of literacy and probably not the most frequent type either in the classrooms or the homes in our study. The norm in many classrooms is a teacher with a small or large group of students or children working independently. The norm in our families--all but two of which had more than one child--was for older children, as well as parents, to help younger children with homework, as we discovered from our interview data. Still, a parent helping a child, like a teacher working with one student, was common in our sample (according to interviews with parents) and can be, as our observational data demonstrate, an important source of literacy learning.

The interactions we saw between parents and children, like the exchanges we saw between teachers and students, were varied in tone and in level of skill exhibited. We saw a few instances of parent-child and teacher-student interaction during which the emotional tone was negative and little school-related learning seemed to be going on, but most of the parents and the teachers helped the children pleasantly and skillfully.

Like teachers, parents had differing expectations from one another of children who were the same age. One parent of a second grade boy who was

getting restless during the diary task asked us, "How long can you keep kids interested in this?" Another parent of a restless second grade boy said to him confidently, "I told you it was gonna take an hour and I know you can do it." One sixth grader's mother leaned across the table during the entire task giving her orders about what to write and where. The child wrote as quickly as possible, with the mother admonishing her to "write nice". In contrast, another sixth grader wrote the diary alone while her mother answered the phone, talked to her son, helped her husband, and chatted with the interviewer.

Two parents didn't try to help their children fill out the diary because they felt that they themselves could not read or write English well enough. But four of the six parents who did not help clearly felt they did not need to; their fourth and sixth graders could do the task by themselves. In contrast to parents who gave no help at all, four parents actually wrote the diary for their children. Most of these parents presumably did so to spare their second graders the frustration of having to write so much.

The remaining 16 parents tried to help their children with the task in three primary ways: 1) structuring the physical environment (including preparing the child physically) and the task itself; 2) motivating the child to do the task; and 3) helping the child with form and content. The ways in which the parents helped the children are an indication of their implicit theories of education. Many helped their children in all three ways, others in only one or two.

The first way parents assisted was by structuring the environment and getting the child ready for the task. In order to do this, parents sometimes turned on lights, turned off radios and televisions, turned away visitors and phone callers, found seats and writing surfaces, and got pens or pencils. One mother told her older daughter to do the dishes and two cousins to go and play

so that the focal child could concentrate on the task. Some also made sure that they themselves had their glasses on and that the child was warmly clothed, fed, and had clean hands. One mother asked the interviewer if her daughter could write in pencil since it would be "cleaner" in case she made a mistake; several others helped erase mistakes. Many parents pointed out where the child should write and made sure all the boxes were filled in. The mother of a girl who was having extra difficulty remembering what she had done on Friday asked if Thursday would be easier. In some cases, parents, mostly of older children, left it up to the child to "get ready" for the task.

A second theory of education embraced by parents (as well as teachers) was that children need to be motivated in order to complete the task. Parents tried in various ways to motivate their children. Some parents patted the child or rubbed his back during the task. Several parents expressed confidence that the child could do the task or expressed approval of the way that various parts had been done. When the child hesitated, a typical mother said, "That's right." Parents' reassurance and emotional support of their children often seemed important to task-orientation and completion. When one second grader complained, looking at his mother, "I messed up on the 'b'," she responded, "That's okay." Another mother reassured her child, "I'll help you do it, don't worry, I'll help you." Several parents demonstrated pride in their children during the task. "He's so precise, this guy," "Spelling's his best subject," and "She does have good handwriting, considering" were remarks made by three parents. The expressions of approval were not limited to the children's behavior during the diary task. One mother showed us a gift her daughter had made for her; another smiled proudly when a younger child showed us his brother's drawing.

Only in a few instances were motivating comments in a negative vein. One

mother threatened to hit her sixth grader if she didn't "write nice"; another actually did slap her second grade daughter when she started to walk out after continuous conflicts over the task. Several parents made deprecating comments about their children, such as "She plays dummy, the dunce" or "I don't like your attitude, kid".

A third way in which parents demonstrated their own theories of education was by helping with both form--especially spelling--and content of the diaries. Correct spelling evoked much parent help, correction, and comment. Many parents just spelled out words, some with explanations; for example: "road, r-o-a-d, not as in animal, r-o-a-d". Others also tried to help their children with spelling by suggesting strategies or supplying rules, such as "Sound it out" or "It rhymes with mouse" or "Double the 'p'" or "Drop the 'e' before adding 'ing'," or "Supper is like Superman but with two 'p's." One parent told her child to look up how to spell a word in the dictionary so she would remember and not "embarrass" herself. Two mothers had to ask one of the researchers for help with spelling words like 'supper' and 'dining'. A few parents accepted their children's invented spellings, one referred to his child's "creative spelling" and another said, "Okay, do it your own way."

Clearly, both parents and children believed that spelling was very important. One mother said, "I always thought good spelling came with the genes. I won all the spelling bees. My kids read, but they can't spell." Another berated her child, "Your spelling is getting worse; what's the matter with you? It's supposed to be getting better." Another said simply, "I don't believe this" when seeing how her child spelled a word. One mother offered excuses for her child's spelling by saying, "Summer's here and he forgot everything Some children also made comments about their spelling. One fourth grader said, "I'm smart in everything but spelling....I wish I could spell." A sixth grader commented, "I forgot how to spell even easy words in the summer."

Handwriting was also important to some children and parents. An older child said, "I have to practice my handwriting; it's so gross." Several younger children commented on the difficulty they were having forming individual letters, one saying he had forgotten how to make 'g's' and another saying, I get my 'b's' and 'd's' mixed up." A mother commented to her fourth grader, "You're getting sloppy."

The accuracy of the content of the diaries was of utmost importance to most parents and children. It was the reason for most of the suggestions, corrections, and discussions between parents and children. To elicit accurate content, parents often prompted the children with questions:

Mother: "When did you have supper?"
Child: "5:15."
Mother: "Wait a minute. Write on this line, 'Ate supper or had supper.' When did you start your homework?"
Child: "About 6."
Mother: "When did you finish?"
Child: "Around 6:30. What do I write?"
Mother: "'Finish homework'. What happened at 6:45?"
Child: "Nothing."
Mother: "Nothing at all?"
Child: "I was listening to the radio."
Mother: "Okay, then write 'listening to the radio'. Did you go out to play?"
Child: "Yes."
Mother: "What time?"
Child: "Around 3:15."
Mother: "You didn't write that down."

Other examples of "tutorial questions" in our field notes were:

Father: "Did you talk on the telephone yesterday?"
Child: "No."
Father: "No? How many times did you call me to bring your clothes? Not once, three times."

and

Mother: "What time did you wake up?"
(Child wrote.)
Mother: "Who were you with?"
(Child wrote.)
Mother: "Who was in the room while you got

dressed? Who else was in the room?"

Some of these questions were to spur the child's memory since the parent didn't know the answer, but some were clearly didactic questions. In our observations, these tutorial questions were frequently used in both home and school and thus did not represent a source of discontinuity between home and school for these children as they did for the Trackton children Heath studied.

In the course of filling out the diaries with their children, several parents acceded to their children's versions when there were disagreements over what had really happened when, or with whom. Some of these instances happened when the child apparently convinced the parent that he or she was right; for example

Mother: "You got up at 9."
Child: "First I got up at 7."
Mother (smiling): "I'll mind my own business."

In other cases, the parent admitted he or she did not really know what the child had done, having not been there. An example of a typical comment by a mother to her child was, "You know better than I do; I was at work." For whatever reason, in both situations power was given to the child in doing the task. Even when the parent actually filled in the diary for the child, the parent always asked the child some questions about his or her activities and wrote what the child answered. The one fourth grader (a below-average reader) whose mother wrote the diary for him corrected her account of his activities, saying that he had gone to the library before returning home.

Continuities between Home and School

Observational data. Many of the specific behaviors, as well as the ideas that motivate these behaviors, exhibited by the low-income parents in interaction with their children were very similar to the behaviors and ideas of the children's teachers. Like teachers, the parents were simultaneously

teaching ways of structuring the environment and preparing oneself to do the task. They were displaying attitudes toward literacy tasks and toward their children which could transfer, usually positively, to other, school-related situations. In several instances, parents instructed their children in ways which improved their children's literacy skills and were furthermore similar to the teaching strategies used by good teachers in classrooms, such as modelling problem-solving strategies.

There were many opportunities for school-like teaching and learning during the diary task. Several children, when reading the checklist, asked their parents what "chores", "errands", and "relatives" were, and some parents checked to see that their children knew the meanings of words. In the course of the task, some parents also introduced their children to the use of ditto marks, abbreviations, arrows, and carats. For example, one mother said, "You were outside playing ball....Now put ditto marks because you didn't come in till 6." Helping with abbreviations, one mother suggested, "You can use 'sq.' for 'square'"; another mother asked her child what 'MDC' stood for when the daughter wrote "went to MDC swimming pool".

In addition to vocabulary development, several parents aided their children in decontextualization, a skill Scollon and Scollon (1979: 14) emphasize as important for "essayist" literacy. For example, one mother said, "If you put 'Mrs. F', they ain't gonna know who you're talking about." Another suggested, "Put 'brother' instead of 'Jimmy' because they won't know he's your brother."

Doing the diary task stimulated another child to relate his concrete activity to a larger and more general category: When filling out the checklist, he asked his mother, "Is going to the store an errand?...If I watch a basketball game, is that sports?" One mother suggested to her second grader who was laboriously writing "brushed teeth, washed face, put on pants", etc.,

that he write simply "got ready for breakfast." Another mother said to her fourth grade child, "It's all right to write it short like that--'in house, eating'."

The following is one example of several instances of a parent helping her child reason:

Mother: "What time did you come back?"
Child: "4:30."
Mother: "How could you have been watching TV?"
Child: "I watched the Pink Panther."
Mother: "When does that come on?"
Child: "4:30."
Mother: "So you probably came back about 4:15."

Parental attempts at organizing the task and using it for teaching were very similar to teachers' behavior in classrooms. Teachers too organize the physical environment, see that the child gets ready to do the task, and structure the task itself. Teachers try to motivate children to work by reassuring them, by expressing confidence or pride in them or approval of their work, and by conveying expectations and attitudes valuing literacy. Some also correct, reprimand, or even threaten. One teacher in our study said that she didn't feel she had taught anything if she hadn't screamed at the children. Many teachers spend a lot of time showing children how to do a particular task neatly and accurately; they emphasize correct spelling and form, as did the parents. They, like many of the parents in our study, often use tutorial questions to elicit the right answer. At the same time, however, they teach vocabulary and higher thinking skills,such as generalization, decontextualization, and logical reasoning, useful in literate activities. Thus the lower-income parents in our study were similar to the teachers in the ways they fostered the acquisition and development of literacy in the children. From the ways parents and teachers worked with children, we could infer their theories

about education and we found them to be strikingly similar.

Interview data. We learned about implicit theories, attitudes, and values from interviews with both parents and teachers as well as from our observational data, and again we found parents' and teachers' implicit theories to be convergent. Parents were asked what they felt should be the most important goal for schools. One third thought it should be basic skills, and one third of fathers and one quarter of mothers felt it should be reading. Only a handful said that discipline or social contacts were most important.

When parents were asked what a good teacher was, far and away the most frequent response was "someone who is caring and conscientious, who gives extra time to her work." The second most frequent response was "one who treats children as individuals, who helps them out with problems." One mother put it in these words, "A good teacher is one who takes her time with each kid...[who doesn't] just throw the paper on the desk and say 'do it'...[who explains] stuff so the child can do it right." "A patient and understanding person" was also mentioned by several parents. Other responses included, "someone who helps the children make the honor roll" and who has a "soft voice", who is "not grouchy".

Regarding their idea of a "good student", the most frequent responses by parents had to do with effort and attendance; good conduct and attentiveness were also mentioned frequently, as were good grades. Learning new things, being smart and curious were not frequent responses for mothers.

We found teachers' attitudes to be similar to those of the parents in our study. In interviews, teachers were asked to describe individual children in their classes. Their conceptions of what makes a good student can be deduced from their responses. Themes of task orientation dominate the teachers' descriptions of the children. Teachers, like the mothers in our study, were overwhelmingly oriented toward behavioral characteristics in their descriptions

of a good student. When teachers were asked what individual focal children were like in whole-group lessons, virtually none of their responses had to do with the content of the children's contributions or the level of the children's understanding. Instead, teachers gave descriptions like "disruptive", "day dreams," "quiet", "distractable", and "attentive".

Teachers' responses to questions about children's independent work similarly centered on behavior and task orientation. During independent work, teachers described the children as "needs prodding", "conscientious", "tries", "slow", "talks to friends", "sometimes does it; sometimes doesn't", and "works to get it done". Only two children's teachers mentioned their ability rather than their effort, citing "well organized" and "poor penmanship" in describing their independent work.

When asked to describe focal children's reading problems, teachers mentioned "not very involved", "has trouble getting work done", "lacks self-confidence", and "careless, rushes". Mention of these motivational problems reflects the teachers' view that reading is getting assignments done. The most frequently cited problems with reading were "rushes to finish assignments" and "not very involved".

Discussion

For the population of urban, ethnically mixed, low-income children we studied, failure of literacy acquisition does not seem to be accounted for by extreme discontinuity between home and school. The below-average as well as the above-average readers in our sample (see pp. 7-8 above) came from homes where the theories about learning and teaching school skills and the nature of interaction over school-like tasks was strikingly similar to what they experienced at school.*

*It is not surprising that "discontinuity" does not characterize the home-

school relationship for this population. Although low-income and working class, the families in our sample were in no sense isolated from mainstream North American culture; in fact, they were very much a part of it. Many of them had very high educational and occupational aspirations for their children (see Chall et al., 1982), and few were very strongly identified with their ethnic or religious subgroups.

Furthermore, the schools which the children attended were quite firmly integrated into their neighborhood structures; they were not strange or distant institutions. Many of the parents in the sample had attended the same schools and knew the teachers and administrators personally. Many of the teachers grew up in the same neighborhoods where the children were now living and some had not moved out. The schools, like the neighborhoods and the teaching staff, have long been racially and ethnically heterogeneous. The kind of discontinuity that occurs when a child from a homogeneous and culturally distinct community goes to a school that is not community-based could not have been expected for our population.

Thus, we are in agreement with McDermott, Goldman and Varenne (n.d.) and Varenne et al. (1982) in their rejection of the home-school discontinuity explanation of the school failure of working class children. Our data, like theirs, indicates that there is much continuity between home and school, particularly around school tasks.

Counterproductive interactions over homework? Our data, however, seems to differ from that of these researchers in one important way. McDermott, Goldman and Varenne (n.d.) suggest that it is the very continuity between home and school which accounts at least partly for school failure. They assert that the counterproductive dynamics in classrooms described by McDermott and Gospodinoff (1981)--low trust, organizing to learn instead of learning, dysfunctional

interactions--are reproduced in the home:

> While it is true that children from different homes enter school differently prepared for school tasks, we see no reason for such differences not being easily overcome, unless, in fact, school learning scenes are set up in such a way that has children working against themselves. Schools and homes seem so well integrated that even homes, when working on school tasks, can arrange for an interactional scene so complex that children and their own parents can work together while getting nothing done, to engage each other in the name of mutual help and learning and nonetheless to get nothing done. [McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne, n.d.:13]

While we too are "impressed with the similarities in goals, values and evaluation criteria [between school and home]", while we agree that "parents know how to play teacher," our data do not indicate that a majority of parents "know a great deal more about how to hold a child back." (McDermott, Goldman and Varenne, n.d.:13) Rather, the interactions we observed between parents and children during our homework-like task were, in general, positive, cooperative, and productive. Not only was the diary filled in, as requested, but often children had the opportunity to learn literacy, language, and reasoning skills as well.

Conclusion. Like McDermott and his colleagues we would emphasize the degree of continuity which some children, including low-income, working class children, experience when moving from home to school or when bringing school work home. Discontinuity cannot explain the problems these children have in acquiring literacy.

Unlike McDermott and his colleagues, we could not conclude from our data that interactions around school-like tasks are counterproductive to literacy acquisition. We found that some parents can provide their children with skilled teaching and task management, and that most can maintain a fairly positive emotional atmosphere during a homework-like task. Furthermore, we feel that their styles of interaction during the task are quite similar to their styles of interaction during other, non-literacy-related, activities and

that "bringing school home" need not disrupt communication between parent and child.

These conclusions leave us with the question of why low-income children experience greater risk of failure at learning to read. No doubt discontinuity between home and school and dysfunctional communication over learning tasks provide part of the answer for some of the children, but other sources of success and of failure must be sought in low-income children's home and school experiences.

*For an analysis of the relationship between parent-child interaction around this task and parents' educational level, see Chandler, 1982.

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Name_____ Day_____

Please write down everything you did from the time you go up until you went to bed. Put 'woke up' next to the time you woke up, and start from there. Try to fill it in before you go to bed, so you don't forget all the things you did. Please mail these to us when you have finished all four days.

MORNING	What were you doing?	Where were you?	Who were you with? (mother, father, brother, sister, friend, adult friend, relative, by yourself)
6:00			
6:30			
7:00			
7:30			
8:00			
8:30			
9:00			
9:30			
10:00			
10:30			
11:00			
11:30			
12:00			
12:30			