Understanding the Home-School Interface in a Culturally Diverse Family

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ABSTRACT

We present the cases of two families from the same middle-class community and conclude that home and school are more connected for some students and families than for others, even in the middle class where seamlessness is assumed. Home and school are more closely aligned for middle-class European-American students who read at home, engage in writing on the computer, and who have parents whose work schedules allow them to volunteer in their child's classroom to gain *hidden* knowledge of school-based practices. In contrast, students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the *mainstream* participate in home literacy activities that do not match school experiences. We suggest that schools and communities support non-mainstream families who lack a high degree of sophisticated parental involvement required for children to be successful in schools today. We delineate some of the challenges that face teachers and schools who lack an understanding of how to create equitable spaces for all students and their families and how to provide educational experiences that are relevant to each student's culture and class-based patterns of living.

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INTRODUCTION

Andrew caught my attention (first author) on the first day of the new school year in my second-grade classroom. Andrew's first-grade teacher had considered him a behavior problem and he was enrolled in the school's reading intervention program. During the first weeks of school Andrew had difficulty staying on task during independent reading and independent writing workshop time. I soon noticed Andrew struggled with reading and writing and "acted out" to avoid engaging in the tasks during these scheduled times. I decided to call Andrew's parents to invite them to school in an effort to learn more about Andrew and his life at home. I gained valuable information from numerous meetings and phone calls with Nilesh Nguyen, Andrew's father. This was the beginning of a strong parent–teacher collaboration with the Nguyen family.

One year later, Andrew was in the third grade. I was no longer his teacher, but he and his family were participants in my research study. I wanted to learn more about teaching students who were learning English as a second language and their relationship with the school. I made weekly 2-hour visits to the Nguyen's home and gained even more valuable information about the nuances of the Nguyen family's literacy and cultural practices, many of which related back to their original home in North Vietnam. Andrew wants to like school and wants to be successful. Andrew's parents, Nilesh and Lee, also share this dream for Andrew. This article is the story of Andrew's struggle with literacy learning and his parents' struggle to build a relationship with the school.

When Rachel arrived in my second-grade classroom on the first day of the same new school year, I could not help but compare her to her older sister, Allison, whom I had taught 2 years earlier as a second grader. I had a strong parent-teacher relationship with Rachel's mother, Mrs. Smith, that had continued over the years through phone calls. Mrs. Smith was a consistent volunteer in the classroom and in the school. Rachel wants to be successful in school. Rachel's parents, Mary and Rick, also share this dream for Rachel.

One year later, when Rachel was in third grade and no longer my student, I began my weekly 2-hour visits to the Smith's home, as they were also participants in my research. I gained valuable insight into Rachel's journey from home to school and the cultural and family literacy values that are woven into the intricate fabric of the Smith family life. This article is also the story of Rachel's literacy learning and her parents' relationship with the school.

The most valuable information I learned as a researcher is that schools can be foreign and dislocating institutions for students and families who are learning English as a second language. We also learned that home and school are more tightly connected for European-American students and families who speak fluent English. The purpose of these comparative case studies is to illuminate intersections of theory, research, and practice on family literacy, English language learners, and culturally responsive teaching. The study

demonstrates ways in which one student, Andrew, struggling with reading and writing, faces and copes with literacy learning challenges with the support of his family and simultaneously how the family struggles to find a place in the American school. By comparison the study reveals and documents the more *seamless* experiences for a successful reader and writer, Rachel, who comes from a home where literacy practices are more similar to those at school and where family participation in school life is also relatively seamless. The findings draw attention to the importance of parent-teacher collaboration with all families.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

There is widespread agreement among researchers that a child's literacy learning process is complex and situated in multiple layers of context and it cannot be understood by looking at his school experiences alone (Gadsden, 1994; Heath, 1982, 1989; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 1993, 1995; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The public, however, continues to perceive and link literacy learning with schooling without the acknowledgement that virtually all children in a literate society have a multitude of experiences with print before coming to school (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Taylor, 1983).

Twenty years have passed since Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) landmark work, *Ways With Words*, documented the impact upon children when their literacy practices at home are unrecognized by the school community. Heath's seminal study of language socialization and family literacy in the Piedmont Carolinas demonstrates how even in a small geographical area, *multiple literacies* exist—all with cultural significance because they are embedded within daily lives and are valued by the families. Over the years a robust literature has developed this notion of the highly contextualized nature of literacy across many cultures and socioeconomic communities (Finn, 1999; Hale, 2001; Heath, 1983, 1989; Hicks, 2002; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). This diversity highlights the need for schools to understand how to reach students from cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the *mainstream* (Hull & Schultz, 2002). In short, not all families share the same reading, writing, and speaking practices, but schools generally carry out mainstream, middle-class literacy and discourse patterns.

Educational researchers have taken three distinct directions in their attempts to build an understanding of diversity that can make a difference in the lives of children and families in schools. One major theme in the literature has been referred to as the *intervention/ prevention* perspective on family literacy (Auerbach, 1995). A second major perspective builds on the multiple-literacies perspective of family literacy described above (Moll, 1992) and the final direction takes a *social change* view of family literacy (Gadsen, 1995).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Intervention Prevention Perspective

When there is no apparent solution in the school setting for some communities' persistent low literacy rates, unemployment and inadequate work skills, attention has often turned to the parents' role in their child's literacy development at home (Auerbach, 1989, 1995; Shor, 1986). Reflecting a deficit-oriented image, some parent involvement programs are designed as if parents are to blame for their children's literacy problems. This underlying image in many models of family literacy programming is reflected in comments such as this one made by former Secretary of Education Terell Bell in 1988, "Not even the best classrooms can make up for failure in the family." In this perspective, parents who do not adequately use or value literacy, "perpetuate a cycle of undereducation which is at the root of America's social and economic problems" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 644). In turn, many family literacy programs have a "focus on teaching parents to do school-like activities in the home and to assist children with homework" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 165).

Critics of the intervention/prevention approach resist the assumption that minority families are uninvolved in their children's literacy and school achievements, nor do they accept the focus on the imposition of school-based work upon families without also building upon families' sociocultural strengths and capabilities (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). A significant amount of research exists that refutes the belief that poor, undereducated, and language minority children come from literacy impoverished home environments (Auerbach, 1989; Purcell-Gates, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Most marginalized families not only value literacy, they often believe that it is essential for success in school and society, and they work hard to help their children become academically successful (Purcell-Gates, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Researchers in English learning communities report consistent findings. Parents who are not literate in English can and do support their children's literacy acquisition in multiple ways, despite impressions that they cannot provide such support. Puchner and Hardman (1996) highlight the different strategies that immigrant parents have for helping their children succeed in school. While poor English skills can prevent parents from helping with homework, the researchers discovered immigrant parents support school work in other ways such as organizing routines around homework, monitoring homework, and offering incentives for good grades. Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore's (1992) study of Indochinese refugee families indicates the parents' lack of English proficiency has minimal effect on their children's academic success but that parental support for cultural maintenance may enhance their academic achievement. In another study of the literacy values of Mexican Americans, Ortiz (1992) found parents were very concerned with their

children's academic achievement and spent significant amounts of time reading and writing with their children. Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham perhaps best summarize the literature: "there is as much (or more) variation in home literacy patterns within selected socioeconomic levels and/or cultural/ethnic groups as among them" (1991, p. 192).

Multiple Literacies Perspective

Educators who use a sociocultural perspective call for more meaningful strategies for working with families based on research conducted with diverse families (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1993; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Family literacy programming goals are commonly associated with school-based practices. Critical educators, however, understand the literacy lens needs to be widened to include literate activities in homes, communities, and workplaces (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Building from the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992), culturally responsive educators recognize, learn about, and draw from the many people who are a part of a child's world outside of school. Moll (1992) explains that regardless of educational background, homes of poor and language-minority families are rich with *funds of knowledge* which are often unrecognized and untapped by the educational community. When educators recognize the resources or funds of knowledge of *all* families, communication and trust is improved and the classroom is perceived as more accessible by more parents.

The Social Change Perspective

A third perspective—social change—encompasses all of the principles embedded in the multiple-literacies perspective and also emphasizes issues of power and culture. Cultural responsiveness is based on a supposition that schools and classrooms have a culture of power that values certain ways of behaving, thinking, and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). According to Auerbach, "The central assumption of this social change perspective is that problems of marginalized people originate in a complex interaction of political, social, and economic factors in the broader society rather than in family inadequacies or differences between home and school cultures; it is conditions created by institutional and structural forces which shape access to literacy acquisition" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 654). The social change perspective is influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1981) and others who believe that literacy acquisition alone will not lead to empowerment or provide economic stability. However, when literacy acquisition is part of a more elaborate plan to take action against oppressive conditions, social change is more likely to occur.

The current study is informed by both the multiple literacies and the social change perspectives. Further, we adopt what Weinstein-Shr & Quintero call a *stance of inquiry* that recognizes that "our own ways of knowing are no longer the ultimate authority" (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, 1995, p. 112). Instead, we take the opportunity to reposition ourselves as learners in order to listen and learn from students and families as a way to better understand their educational resources and cultural, and parenting values (Moll, 1992). This work is aligned with Edwards, Pleasants and Franklin's (1999) call for parent stories gained from open-ended interviews as a practical way for teachers to begin to better understand parents. This approach centers on sharing stories and provides participants an opportunity to read, write, and talk about their personal histories, their childhood memories, and experiences (Arrastia, 1995; McGrail, 1995).

Over the years, researchers with a multiple literacies perspective have examined and re-examined terms such as culturally relevant, culturally appropriate, and culturally responsive teaching (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Nieto, 1996). We accept Ladson-Billings (1994) suggestion that culturally responsive educators seek to understand the cultural-specific traits of their students and use them as resources for teaching.

The Current Study

In this study we explore through the interpretive approach the literacy behaviors in the Nguyen and Smith families. We use qualitative research methods to understand the meanings and values the Nguyens and Smiths ascribe to certain literacy behaviors. Qualitative research methods are the best suited to understand our research questions. In qualitative research, the researcher's ultimate goal is to become knowledgeable about the meaning and values of others by observing and interacting with research participants.

We take an in-depth look at the literacy learning journeys of Andrew and Rachel through an ethnographic and interpretive lens with a comparative case studies approach. These case studies were part of a year-long study that included a total of four case studies of families who live in a midwest suburb we call Homestead, population 24,230 (United States Bureau of the Census, 1991, 2001). According to a Citizen Survey conducted by the city of Homestead in December of 2002, the average income for the community was $23,749. The lead researcher of the study was an elementary teacher in the Homestead City School District for 8 years and thus had virtually automatic access to the families in the district. Her interest in and proximity to the families dictated the selection of participants. According to Homestead City School District historical information, in 1991–1992 there were 7,255 students enrolled in the entire (K–12) school district and in 2001–2002, there were 13,130 enrolled students. Along with this rapid increase in enrollment has been

an accompanying rapid increase in diversity. In fact, as reported in the 2002 general enrollment profile for one elementary school in the Homestead City School District, 12 native languages were spoken across the students' homes.

The Student: Andrew

At the time of the fieldwork, Andrew was in third grade and 9 years old. Andrew lived with his family (mother and father) and attended Highland Elementary School in the city of Homestead. Andrew's parents, Nilesh and Lee, both Vietnamese immigrants, met in the United States in 1992. Andrew's father speaks, reads, and writes some English but Lee, his mother, speaks and writes very limited English. Nilesh started working as a janitor for a CD factory and is self-trained on the computer. After a few years, his technology skills earned him a more prominent position in the CD factory doing computer work for the company. Lee packages CDs for the same factory. Both parents work hard to maintain the family's lower-middle class income.

The Student: Rachel

Rachel was in third grade and 9 years old. Rachel lived with her family and also attended Highland Elementary School. Rachel's parents, Rick and Mary, were born in a rural, midwestern town on the border between Ohio and West Virginia. They met in high school. Rick and Mary both read, write, and speak English fluently. Mary earned a college degree in nursing and Rick studied electrical design at a technical school. There are three children in the Smith family: Allison, the oldest child, is 11 years old and in the fifth grade; Rachel, the middle child is 9 years old and in the third grade; Seth is 5 years old and attends part-time preschool.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of these comparative case studies is to illuminate the interaction of theory, research, and practice on family literacy, English language learners, and culturally responsive teaching. The guiding questions for this study include: What do parents value in terms of literacy activities? What do children value in terms of literacy activities? How are home-based literacy activities understood by the school community? The primary layers of analysis (Patton, 1990) in this study focus on the social units of the Nguyen and Smith families and, within those units, on one child in particular (Andrew and Rachel). Fieldwork in the home of the Nguyen and Smith families was a year-long process with the lead researcher spending at least 2 hours per week with each family. Four approaches to data collection were employed: interviews with parents, children, and teachers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982); observations of conversations between children, parents, and siblings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982); field notes and

audiotapes recorded during and after data collections (Spradley, 1980); and documents and artifacts collected from home and school (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Using a variety of methods helps the researcher establish sound descriptions of the behaviors, events, and communications among individuals (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Data Analysis

A sociocultural perspective on the nature of literacy learning was the theoretical framework for guiding methodological assumptions and decisions for collecting and analyzing data. According to Graue and Walsh (1998), the aim of interpretive research ". . . is to keep ideas and understandings as close to the field as possible to provide both relevancy and vibrancy that generate interpretation close to the local source" (p. 159). Data analysis/interpretation occurred in two stages. In the first stage, the data from each family's case study was analyzed and interpreted in order to identify major themes that characterize the literacy practices within each family's home. Following each visit with a family, all data gathered in the field (fieldnotes and audiotapes) were reviewed and researcher *memos* were created following Miles and Huberman's approach (1994). Using Spradley's (1980) Developmental Inquiry Model for making cultural themes visible, all sources of data were systematically reviewed to develop cultural codes of meaning and to reveal what kinds of literacy practices were occurring in the homes, where and why they were occurring, and by whom (i.e., in Spradley's terms, "X is a place to do literacy", "Y is a way to do literacy", "Z is a reason to do literacy").

In the second stage, themes were analyzed across the families to provide a comparative framework for the development of interpretive theory related to several distinct analyses. The second author of this paper entered into the interpretive process in the analysis and interpretation of data related to the question of continuity and discontinuity for the Nguyen family in particular. Specifically, the codes for each family were organized into charts that were compared across the families in order to characterize the entire set of observations for recurring themes. In comparing the families, themes in common as well as those that are distinct become salient and available for interpretation. Distinct insights were gained by looking closely at each individual family while other lessons were learned in the comparison across them.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the importance of contextual validation through triangulation of multiple data sources. This study involved prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings and interpretations. While the Nyugens were not totally fluent in English, through the extensive nature of their relationship with the lead researcher, member checking processes, and the ongoing nature of our dialogue an interpreter was not necessary to establish

shared meaning. The ethnographic nature of this study and prolonged engagement provided the opportunity to become part of the family to better understand how local and situated meaning is constructed within the Nguyen and Smith families.

FINDINGS

Interpreting the experience of a school year in the life of the Nyugens and the Smiths crystallized how parents attempt to interface with the school in an attempt to build a strong parent-teacher relationship so that their children will be successful. Also made visible was the difficulty for a non-mainstream family like the Nguyens—immigrants from Vietnam with very different schooling experiences in their native country—to understand an institution like a middle-class, American school. At home, Andrew participates in reading and writing practices that do not always match school-based literacy practices. On the other hand, home and school are more tightly connected for a European-American student—like Rachel—who engages in similar reading and writing practices at school and home and whose mother easily accesses the institution. Two families who live less than 1 mile apart in the same middle-class community each experienced a unique and different journey from their homes to the same school—in fact, to the same classroom.

Students come to school with diverse experiences from different family, cultural, and social contexts. Each student's interpretation of the school curriculum and classroom participation is guided by his frames of reference (Green & Weade, 1987). Likewise, each family's frames of reference about literacy and schooling impacts upon their expectations and relationships with the school community (e.g., teachers, administrators, curriculum).

The Nguyen Family

Nilesh came to the United States as an adult refugee (in his 40s) from Vietnam. His greatest dream is for Andrew to become successful at school and to have a *good* life. He expressed that he learned to value literacy from his own father (Andrew's grandfather) who valued writing. Nilesh's mother (Andrew's grandmother) did not have the opportunity to go to school in Vietnam. Nilesh explains:

> Melissa: Did your parents read and write?
> Nilesh: Yes, mostly my dad. My mom, just a little bit, women in my country (Vietnam) don't have a chance to go to school if they were born before 1950. But now girls can go to school equal to boys but not in my mom and dad's time.

Melissa: Did you have reading materials around your house? Did you see your parents doing much reading and writing at home?
Nilesh: It depends on what type, my dad liked poems. He would write about poems and stories. He learned a lot about oral traditions of my country (Vietnam), he liked to learn about old people.

Typical of the immigrant families described by Puchner and Hardman (1996), Nilesh focuses on organizational routines to help Andrew since, in his view, his limited English skills prevent him from helping with homework. Organizing routines around homework, monitoring homework, and offering incentives for good grades are strategies that have been noted by others (Puchner & Hardman, 1996). This is certainly true for Nilesh Nguyen who establishes highly structured and very organized routines for Andrew's out of school time. Andrew's father talked about his values around academics and morality and his belief that it is his job as a parent to teach Andrew these values. He also feels Andrew will maximize his success if he adheres to a set homework routine each day. He believes that he has a critical role in developing Andrew's morality so that he can grow up to become a well-educated, caring person who will be successful in life. Nilesh described his view of the parental role:

Nilesh: In my country it is a little different. A child has to learn from the parent. The parent is the example of everything. That is why I tell him that he has to be a good person. He cannot make crime outside on the street. Inside his home he must respect people, most of all old people need respect. I raise him until he is 18 years old. Eighteen years is a long time for a child to respect a parent. Some families are different, they have children who are 15 and 16 years old and they have more power than the parents. Some of the parents listen to the children so this is a little bit different. But school is very important for the child, he learns so much from it. Morality is learned from the family first.

Toward these goals, Nilesh has established a daily reading and writing routine in their home. Andrew has a snack after school and watches television But, at 5:00 p.m., Andrew sits at the quiet dining room table to complete all of the homework assigned by his classroom teacher. After Andrew completes his school homework, Nilesh gives him additional work. The daily reading work Nilesh assigns is for Andrew to read one chapter from a book he selects for himself (e.g., R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps: Horror and Camp Jellyjam*, 1995). These books are not always at Andrew's independent reading level, but after Andrew reads the chapter he is expected to copy the entire chapter verbatim in his

writing journal, a composition notebook. Twelve to fifteen of these composition notebooks filled with his transcribed books were stored on a shelf in Andrew's bedroom. When the lead researcher asked about the purpose of the writing journal assignment, Nilesh explained this was the way he was taught to read and write in Vietnam. Andrew has been doing his reading and writing routine for 3 years, since first grade. Andrew explained to me how he became interested in reading and writing:

Melissa: When did you become interested in reading and writing?
Andrew: It all started in second grade. In first grade, (Mrs. Hartley) gave me a book so I read it.
Melissa: How about writing, when did you start writing in these notebooks with your dad?
Andrew: It was when I was seven, when I was in first grade.
Melissa: Do you think that writing in these notebooks is helping you become a better reader?
Andrew: Yes, it helps and sometimes I read the writing to my dad. If I don't know a word, I say it back to him about five times and I remember it.

Nilesh finds additional work for Andrew on a specific fee-based Web site that has grade-specific educational worksheets for children. Nilesh listens to Andrew read every night. Since English is a second language for Nilesh, occasionally he is unable to read some of Andrew's words in his books and therefore is unable to help him. However, if Andrew comes to a word that he cannot read, Nilesh asks Andrew to attempt to read the word several times to commit it to his memory. Nilesh explained that he learned this way in Vietnam.

Nilesh wants Andrew to learn English at school because he knows from his own personal experience as an immigrant that English is essential for work and daily living. Nilesh explains:

Nilesh: I do think it is necessary to teach him (Andrew) reading at home but I am not able to do it well because I don't think my English is good enough.
Melissa: What kinds of things have you done with Andrew at home to help him with reading?
Nilesh: We go to the library and I let him read every night. It is all I can do but I don't know if I pronounce good enough or not. I don't know the American sayings only the Vietnamese sayings so I listen to him read the whole book or half of the book. I want him to read hard books.
Melissa: Who picks out the books when you go to the library?
Nilesh: I take him but he chooses the books.

In his telling of his life as Andrew's father, Nilesh reveals his reliance upon his personal family and schooling history in Vietnam and upon his own literacy background as his frame of reference to support Andrew at home with school-related work. What he reveals (choosing hard books and copying verbatim from them) is that he is not connected to the teaching practices of the school—instead, he conserves the traditions of his family and culture with Andrew (Taylor, 1983).

The Smith Family

In the Smith home, Rachel's parents, Mary and Rick, value school and like the Nyugens want their children to be successful in school and in their personal lives outside of school. Similarly, in the Smith home, Rachel has an established routine. In an informal conversation with Rick (Rachel's father) about his opinion on whether schools and families have changed in the last 20 years, he reveals his perspective on his role:

Melissa: Do you think that families and schools have changed in the last 20 years?

Rick: You need to give them (children) a good home life too because a lot, you have to spend time with them at home. You can't expect a kid to sit at the table and do their homework and everything on their own. You've got to spend time reading, doing math with them, talking to them, interacting with them. The teachers can't do it all; everybody says that wasn't a very good teacher. My kid didn't learn anything. Well what did you do with your kid, your teacher only has that kid 8 hours a day, and that is when they are young kids. Then after that, the teacher only has them for 1 or 2 hours each day. So you can't blame the teacher if your kid isn't doing so well, you have to teach a little bit of something at home too.

The value of education and beliefs about how schooling should take place are embedded in Mary and Rick's personal experiences in American schools in the small rural town where they both grew up. Mary's father was a principal and Mary's mom worked at home rearing the children. Mary discusses her parent's influence on her educational values below:

Melissa: What was your parent's role in school?

Mary: That is funny about today and then, they had a small student to teacher ratio. So they didn't need moms to come into the school to help. My mom did all of the PTA meetings and whatever the

school or church offered because there were lots of books and things like that that they (parents) could help with. They (parents) never came into the classrooms. We had nuns and strict and orderly classrooms and nothing to distract the class, I don't even recall parents coming in to observe. Even talking to my mom now and I tell her I am going to the school to volunteer she says, "Oh my gosh!" They (her parents) just don't understand that. Plus I think back then that we had only one vehicle so she couldn't have gotten to school anyway.

Melissa: So what was your dad's role in your schoolwork?

Mary: He did flashcards or math. My mom did a lot of reading with us. But as far as homework it was my father.

In Mary's retelling of her family life she conserves the basic value of parent participation but *transforms* (Taylor, 1983) her role from the PTA support of the previous generation to a more hands-on, classroom-based participation (i.e., volunteer support to the teacher). Through her volunteer work in the children's classroom and her easy communication with the teacher, Mary has learned a lot about the school-based literacy teaching practices. At Homestead, writing is an emphasized aspect of the literacy program where writing journals store ideas for stories that are then composed on the computer and assessed though writer's workshop routines. Guided reading, independent reading and writing, interactive writing, (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and word study are the main strategies used in a balanced literacy approach. Books are carefully chosen at the student's reading level and writing is an embedded and natural part of all aspects of daily life and across the curriculum.

Mary's ideas about supporting her children's literacy learning are informal and embedded in their family life: encouraging them to keep story journals, writing and sending e-mails to family and friends, daily reading out loud together, sending e-mail to each other, family *dramatic play* (e.g., newscast/weather reporter/sportscaster drama), checking out videos from the library to support story comprehension of assigned books (e.g., Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, 1935), and reading the newspaper together each morning. These family literacy practices seem very congruent with those of the Homestead City School District.

PARENTS CROSSING THE BRIDGE BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

There are various networks of support that parents use to gain access to an institution such as a school and therefore insight into its practices (school-based knowledge). The networks of support that were revealed in this study include

1) the social support of communication with other parents who have school-age children, 2) cultural familiarity with the institution of school which creates easy access to and communication with its *agents*, and 3) the opportunity to volunteer at the school. Researchers Gee (1990) and Lemke (1995) argue that those born into the dominant discourses are prepared to feel comfortable throughout their whole lives within certain institutions—like schools—and they function in those institutions in very intuitive ways. Mary Smith is an example of a parent who has acquired the tacit school-based knowledge that will be beneficial for her children through the social participation of her children with peers from school, her own personal history with schools like Homestead, and her volunteerism in her children's classes. Nilesh Nyugen, on the other hand, socialized mainly with other Vietnamese families (through a local church), did not have the cultural familiarity with the American institution of *school* and even if he were so inclined to volunteer, his work schedule would not have allowed it.

Gaining School-Based Knowledge

As a parent volunteer since her oldest child started kindergarten, Mary talks to teachers throughout the year about what types of books Rachel should read that are at her instructional level and are interesting to her. In contrast, Nilesh had his first parent-teacher discussion about book selection when the lead researcher initiated the conversation about books when Andrew was in second grade. Based on informal conversations with Rachel's parents, it is obvious that Mary and Rick feel very comfortable with the American institution of school. In contrast, based on conversations with Nilesh Nguyen, it is obvious that he feels he is at the margins of school life. In fact, his difficulty with English and his lack of experience with an institution that is anything like an American school seem to limit the amount of school-based knowledge he can obtain. School-based knowledge is foreign for the Nguyen family; without personal history or school-based knowledge the family is pushed to the margins of school life. In short, even though the Nguyen family has middle-class aspirations and encourage Andrew to be successful in school, they are at a disadvantage because school-based discourse and practices are not familiar to the Nguyen family (Hicks, 2002). During the study, when the lead researcher asked Nilesh about his school participation in first grade he shared the following story:

Melissa:	Did you participate in school-related activities in kindergarten and first grade such as parent-teacher conferences, curriculum night, and attend school plays?
Nilesh:	Yes, I attend all parent-teacher conferences and curriculum nights; whatever the teacher asked me to do I did to help

> Andrew. I did not go into the school for Andrew's musical but I took him to the school and I waited in the car for him.

What Nilesh does not share in this anecdote is that while he waited in his car at the curb, all the other parents were inside the auditorium. The *hidden curriculum* as is often described (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1979; Lather, 1986) is synonymous with unequal power relations based on gender, class or ability in everyday school practices, curricula, texts, and technology. Nilesh did not have access to the hidden curriculum for parental involvement in the school.

Communication between teachers and families ideally allow parents to be more knowledgeable about the events that take place in school and teachers to be more knowledgeable about the events that take place in the lives of the children outside of the school. Strategies used by teachers, however, have to be considered for their cultural relevancy. For instance, Mrs. Johnson, one of the Highland Elementary teachers interviewed in this study, implements a home-school journal to provide meaningful communication between the teacher, parents, and the child. She accomplishes this by requiring the students to write a letter to their parents every Friday and in turn, the parents respond by writing a letter back to their child over the weekend. This form of communication has potential to be an effective form of communication for parents, teachers, and children (if the parents choose to embrace it). However, for Homestead's growing Hispanic population and for other culturally diverse families like the Nguyens who are learning English, this form of communication is a daunting task. In the comments made by Mrs. Johnson that are shared below, it is clear how privileging it can be to have informal contact with school and to obtain the *hidden* knowledge of school-based practices that are communicated to parents as they volunteer and visit in the classroom. Further, she shows us how parents can be misunderstood if they are unresponsive to the school-home journal:

> Melissa: How do you communicate to parents about reading and writing?
>
> Mrs. Johnson: A number of ways, most formally through report cards. More informally as parents stop by or when they are helping in the classroom. You know they say, "How is my child doing?" Through telephone conversations if that is necessary, usually more with a struggling child. Friday folders, if there is something that the parent needs to know about or whatever. In the Friday folders there is a place for actually writing a letter. So it would be in a note or letter format. The other way is that in the Friday folders they take their work home and I ask the parents to look through their

child's work. Read comments that I have written on the child's work.

Melissa: In the Friday folder, do you write a note to each child's parent every Friday?

Mrs. Johnson: In the Friday folder I have several forms of communication. First I have a Weekly Teacher-Parent Report for general behavior in the classroom. I also have a Friday Folder Parent Signature Sheet. This is where I write a quick note to parents if needed. The parents are required to sign this sheet each week. The parents also write notes back to me here. Then the students use the paper to write a letter to their parents each week. I give them instructions about what they need to write about each week. Then the parents are instructed to write back a letter back to the child. So this is parent-child communication but I will occasionally write a brief note to the parents as well. More often, I tend to write more notes when there is something that needs attention, as opposed to when everything is going great. I have found that you can tell the parents who don't write back, their children are the ones who are not supported at home. I can just tell by the letters. By the end of the year they have an entire record of their whole school year, documenting what they have done in all subject areas. Sometimes parents write about personal things going on in their family. For instance a parent might write, "We had a bad week this week, hopefully next week will be better." The kids that get the letters back are the ones that succeed in school. Even the kids who are struggling in school, when their parents are consistently writing encouraging notes back to them they become better students. They have improved because of the parent-student contact.

So, this communication tool may be effective—but only for some families. The Smith family, for example, took this journal very seriously and faithfully wrote back to the teacher. However, the teacher doesn't seem to recognize that for parents who are learning English as a second language this writing task would be very challenging, as well as the reason for not responding (rather than the assumed lack of motivation and commitment to their children implied by the teacher in her comments).

It must be recognized that diversity in Homestead is relatively new and that school practices have not yet been transformed to meet that diversity. This is a common situation throughout this midwest city where linguistic and cultural

diversity has rapidly intensified over the past 5-10 years. New immigrant groups from Somalia, Sudan, the Middle East, Latino countries, and the former Soviet Union have literally and figuratively changed the complexion of the student body and family community in Homestead.

IMPLICATIONS

The metaphor of Nilesh at the curb waiting in his car illustrates the need for the school community to establish relationships with diverse families. This metaphor clearly illustrates how Nilesh is a parent on the *outside* because he is a diverse parent who is learning English as a second language. Nilesh either doesn't feel welcome in the school or simply feels too much like an outsider within the school community to join the other parents in the auditorium. Nilesh, and scores of parents like him, needs an ambassador, a cultural informant who explicitly helps him navigate this strange institutional world.

Teachers like Mrs. Johnson need help to see parents like Nilesh as striving to support their son's academic success but lacking the necessary knowledge of school-based literacy and parent/school practices. In this study, one critical method for gaining such knowledge is parent volunteer work in the classroom. While this method of communication opens up opportunities for some middle-class parents who are able to take time away from work commitments to volunteer, it does not provide opportunities for some parents—like the Nguyens—who are not able to volunteer due to work, daycare, or personal schedules.

In order to create equitable spaces for all students and their families, educational experiences need to be relevant to the student's culture and class-based patterns of living (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The critical question: How can communities and schools support non-mainstream families who lack the high degree of sophisticated parental involvement required for children to be successful today? (Hale, 2001). Further, how do we help all families learn to negotiate with schools in an effective manner?

Recognizing that schools and families often do not communicate effectively with each other provides the impetus to reorganize and work together to meet the needs of children in America. In doing so, schools create better systems of gathering and sharing information with parents and educators must build more effective relationships with families. The educational community must begin to understand the complexities of diverse students and families outside of school. Professional development for teachers, principals, and school staff will help the educators understand and interface more effectively with the cultural diversity within its community. A product of the professional development could be pamphlets translated into languages represented in the school that outline the hidden curriculum present in schools and provide suggestions for diverse

students and families to overcome these hurdles. By building a partnership like the relationship forged with the lead researcher and the Nguyen family, effective communication and collaboration can exist and educational success is more likely to occur. If teachers conduct open-ended interviews and provide time for parents to tell their culturally relevant stories then two outcomes may be achieved: schools and teachers can gain a better understanding of parent values and mutual trust will begin to develop; and teachers will become culturally responsive and focus on understanding the culture of students and their families and how this knowledge can be utilized in the classroom. While working with the Nguyen family we learned about the struggle of one diverse, English language learner's family experience at home and at school. Now more than ever, teachers must learn from parent stories to become more knowledgeable about the broadly diverse American culture and how to expand their own thinking to include diverse learners into their classrooms. After all, culturally responsive educators are teachers who show they care about their students by learning their culturally specific traits and by making school a place that is personally relevant to students and their families. Teachers who begin to listen to *all* students and families will learn more about culturally diverse literacy practices. This broad understanding of literacy will help teachers reach more students and ultimately help more students succeed. (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

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