Breaking the barrier of blame

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BREAKING THE BARRIER OF BLAME

Parents as literacy brokers

Victoria Purcell-Gates

Central to this chapter is the concept of home literacy culture, which I developed to describe the patterned ways that reading and writing are used within homes as literacy mediates social lives. I illustrate the different ways that home literacy cultures vary across different social, linguistic and geographical groups, and review the research that supports the argument that parents can and do serve as brokers – cultural brokers as well and linguistic brokers – for their young children as they develop early literacy concepts and skills in families and homes, outside of formal instruction. I cover the research on parent–child book reading through this cultural lens and broaden it to include the many additional and different literacy practices to be found in homes and families. The chapter concludes with descriptions of research that is beginning to document the positive effects of family literacy programmes that work dialogically with parents to embed early literacy learning activities within everyday (i.e. culturally congruent) family practices.

‘Parents are a child’s first teacher.’ This belief has become accepted and embedded in how we think about child development, literacy development and school policy and pedagogy in most Western, developed countries. What happens in families during the first five years of a child’s life is now seen as critical and foundational to children’s success in school. Thus, it becomes important to examine family practices to better understand how they do and do not facilitate development.

Learning to read and write in school is dependent in many ways on emergent literacy development before school. How parents can support and develop that development is the topic of this chapter. The argument I will make with this review of research on family practice and early literacy development is that the scope of literacy practices in homes that can facilitate early learning of foundational concepts goes beyond parent–child book reading to encompass wide varieties of literacy practices that young children experience in their homes.

In this chapter I will develop the construct of home literacy culture and, within that frame, I will review the research that supports the argument that parents can and do serve as brokers – cultural brokers as well as linguistic brokers – for their children as they develop early literacy concepts and skills. I will focus on the brokering that takes place within families...
before formal literacy instruction begins in kindergarten or first grade. This focus will include the thoroughly reviewed research on the cultural practice of reading with young children. It will expand, though, to include literacy practice in homes and families in addition to, or in place of, book sharing. I will conclude with descriptions of research that is beginning to document the effects of family literacy programmes that work dialogically with parents to embed early literacy learning activities within everyday (i.e. culturally congruent) family practices. I begin with a brief description of the theoretical frame for this review.

Theoretical frame for review

I am situating this review within a sociocultural theoretical frame. Within this frame, all human behaviour, including cognition and learning, is understood as socially and culturally situated (Vygotsky, 1980). The construct of literacy practice is central to the sociocultural theoretical frame for behaviour related to literacy. When one considers literacy practice as compared to literacy skill, the focus shifts from individual in-the-head traits to social acts – literacy in use, in practice. This reflects a multiple literacies perspective (Street, 1984). Street argued for a definition of literacy that acknowledges its multiplicity – the ways that literacy is always socially and historically situated and patterned by social institutions and power relationships, resulting not in one, universal, literacy but in many different ones (albeit overlapping in different ways) as social, cultural and political relationships change and develop. Literacy practices are best thought of, according to this perspective, as cultural practices, and are larger than print-based reading and writing events in that they also reflect values, beliefs, attitudes and social relationships (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004).

Within frames of power, different socioculturally constructed literacy practices mediate the social lives of people. People who read and write do so to get things done in their lives. They read the news (whether in paper newspapers or online); they purchase items to wear or to eat; they practise their different religions; they conduct business; they pay taxes; they maintain social bonds through cards and letters; they relax over a good book or read movie reviews before going out to a movie, and so on.

Literacy cultures

Researchers like Barton and Hamilton (1998) have introduced the notion of an ecology of written language and literacy (Barton, 2007). Within this I have developed the construct of literacy cultures or literacy worlds to capture the ecology of literacy within homes and home lives of different families (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 2013, 2014). The use of the term literacy culture rests upon a broader definition of culture, a contested term with definitions that have shifted over the years. For purposes of this chapter, I will present the definition of culture that frames my use of the term literacy culture.

Culture as currently defined

Over the years, many anthropologists have shifted the definition of culture from a more essentialized perspective to one that recognizes the fluidity and multiplicity of what can be thought of as culture. At base is the general consensus that cultures involve shared beliefs, values and patterns of behaviour. The current perspective, though, rejects the essentialized view of culture that leads to statements such as ‘Mexicans do X’ or ‘Koreans do Y’. Further,
it does not treat culture as ‘traits’ of individuals (Purcell-Gates et al., 2010). Rather, the current perspective, and the one that I take in this chapter, considers culture as dynamic and patterned ways of organizing everyday life

A culture of literacy

When I use the term literacy culture within families or homes, I am not thinking of the ways that literacy in the home is contextualized by cultures; rather, I am naming the patterned ways that reading and writing are used within the home as a type of culture – a literacy culture. This captures the ways that literacy mediates people’s lives (Vygotsky, 1980) and can be thought of as being both a ‘culture’ present in individual’s/family member’s lives but also as heavily reflective of community ways of incorporating literacy into everyday lives.

Literacy cultures within family groupings are also fluid and multiple and shift over time as family members move between roles, responsibilities, education and so on (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). In this way, therefore, just as with broader conceptions of culture, one cannot essentialize literacy cultures according to race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and so on. However, literacy cultures do reflect patterned ways of reading and writing texts, which texts are read and written, by whom and for which purposes within homes and families (Purcell-Gates et al., 2011). Within the theoretical frame presented above, we can explore the variety of literacy cultures within which young children live and grow.

Literacy brokering

Perry defines literacy brokering as ‘a complex activity that may involve one aspect of a text, such as translation of word meanings, mediation of cultural content, or explanation of genre aspects of a printed text, or it may involve many of these aspects all at once’ (2009: 257). I am appropriating the term for our purposes to apply to the ways that parents, through various means, broker early literacy concepts for their children. As literacy brokers they provide informal support (Durkin, 1966) to help their young children learn about the ways that language and meaning are represented in print and the ways that literacy mediates their lives: which texts are read and written and by whom, and the functions that are served by those texts for the people reading and writing them as well as the social purposes that are served by the different literacy events.

Emergent literacy research

Early emergent literacy research was often descriptive in nature. Taylor provided an early ethnographic description of the ways that literacy mediated the lives of six middle- to upper-middle-class families in the United States (1985). She described how children in the families appropriated practices that they had experienced within their homes, using emergent spellings to produce texts for their play in clubhouses, games, pretend scenarios, leave notes to parents and siblings, and so on. They also experienced their parents and literate siblings engaging in a variety of literacy practices such as reading the newspaper, reading books to themselves and to their children, and writing personal letters. While descriptive research continued for other researchers, another line of research began to examine the relationships between types of home literacy and the development of what had by then been described as critical foundational early literacy concepts and skills (Purcell-Gates, 2000).
Foundational early literacy concepts

In a review of the emergent literacy research, Purcell-Gates (2000) concluded that, depending upon their home/community literacy experiences, young children learn about the different levels of decontextualization of written language (Snow, 1983; Sulzby, 1985), the genre-related characteristics and features of written language such as syntax and wording, and the different genre-determined forms (e.g. the forms of personal letters, grocery lists or written stories – Butler and Clay, 1979; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Goodman, 1984; Harste et al., 1984; Holdaway, 1979; Purcell-Gates, 1988; Sulzby, 1985). Further, according to this analysis, young children, through participating in literacy events within their homes and communities, learn that print is a language signifier and about the ways that print represents meaning – the ‘code’ – and the conventions of encoding and decoding the print (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Goodman and Altweger, 1981; Harste et al., 1984; Hiebert, 1980, 1981; Mason, 1980). The emergent literacy research also documented how young children learn values and beliefs about literacy and literacy practice (e.g. Heath, 1983) as well as concepts and cognitive models for how and why literacy is practised and who does and does not do it (Purcell-Gates and Dahl, 1991; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Reading to young children

The most thoroughly researched domain of literacy activity involving young children is that of parent–child book sharing/reading (e.g. Bus et al., 1995; Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; Isbell et al., 2004; Kassow, 2006; Lonigan and Whitehurst, 1998; Snow, 1983; Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Researchers have consistently found correlations with (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 1988, 1996) and effects on such critical early literacy components as vocabulary (e.g. Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; Whitehurst et al., 1994), decontextualized language (e.g. Bus et al., 1995), concepts of print (Newman, 1996) and comprehension of text (e.g. Isbell et al., 2004).

Further, ethnographic research has noted the central presence of parent–child book reading in the literacy cultures of many young children, suggesting that this literacy practice is significant to the development of affective understandings as well as those psycholinguistic literacy concepts noted above (Bissex, 1980; Sonnenschein and Munsterman, 2002; Taylor, 1985; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

During parent–child book sharing events, parents serve as literacy brokers, demonstrating and sharing the ways that readers make sense of text, reading intonations, wordings (vocabulary) and syntax. They also demonstrate how reading different kinds of stories or information texts can serve as entertainment, relaxation and sources of information. Research shows that the nature of the brokering during parent–child book reading also reflect differing cultural beliefs, values and traditions (Purcell-Gates, et al., 2010). For example, in many middle-class European-heritage families, book reading is a structured daily routine. Parents ask questions that encourage children to participate in the co-construction of the story, to focus on the print and to move beyond the information presented in the book (Fletcher and Reese, 2005). In contrast, middle-class Peruvian mothers, who also value reading with their children, prefer to be the sole narrator, discouraging child participation (Melzi and Caspe, 2005). As the expert story readers, they expect their children to learn to be attentive and (see also Fung et al., 2004) by not interrupting the reader. Similar book reading routines have been noted with Mexican and Dominican immigrant mothers living in New York City (Caspe, 2007). Finally, in some communities, adult sharing of picture
books with children may not be a regular routine at all (Barrueco et al., 2007), but older children might read to younger siblings as part of their work as family translators (Orellana et al., 2003). In this way, they combine the cultural norm emphasizing sibling caretaking with the cultural value their new society places on storybook reading, and they provide exposure to English print that might not always be accessible to their predominantly Spanish-speaking parents (Orellana and Reynolds, 2008).

Parent–child book reading, itself, is a cultural practice and does not reflect the literacy worlds of many young children (Fletcher and Reese, 2005; Yarosz and Barnett, 2001). Unfortunately, much of the research that has been done on literacy in homes, with a focus on young children, has used the presence of books and book reading – both parent reading and parent–child reading – as proxies for home literacy (e.g. Frijters et al., 2000; Kuo et al., 2004; Sénéchal et al., 1998; Weinberger, 1996). The terms family literacy and parent–child book reading have become conflated, leaving us with a major conundrum: we cannot begin to design culturally relevant early literacy instruction and test its effectiveness if we do not know what home literacy practice actually looks like for many children.

**Documenting different literacy cultures**

To address this need, Kristen Perry and I established the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS) (see http://sites.education.uky.edu/cpls/) with the goal of providing a more complete portrait of literacy practices within different cultural communities, all with an eye on the home–school connection (Purcell-Gates et al., 2011).

The CPLS database for cross-case analyses currently includes coded literacy events in 23 different languages from more than 26 different research studies, representing 23 countries. Common coding across studies, resulting in the documentation of more that 800 different text types, read and/or written for more than 400 functions for more than 300 different social purposes. I present examples of these texts, functions and purposes below.

**Texts**

Examples of texts, identified with genre theory methods (Hasan, 1989), include manuals, medication labels, membership cards, minutes, names, news stories, newsletters, notes, notice/announcements, official status identifications (e.g. passports, greed cards and so on), order forms, orders of worship, package texts and personal reflection journals.

**Functions**

Each text is read or written for different reasons, or functions. Examples include: to inform neighbours that children will be alone, to inform of illness of child, to inform public what one is selling, to inform self/family about family, to invite someone to an event, to keep score, to know which keys to hit, to label location, to label object, to learn about activities in community/school/church, to learn about animals, to learn about characters of a game, to learn about houses for sale, to learn about prizes, to learn about an admission decision.

**Social purposes**

Reading and writing different texts to get things done (functions) are never done in isolation, but rather to achieve different social purposes. Examples include: in order to bless a child,
in order to borrow money, in order to budget expenses, in order to build a romantic relationship, in order to buy food, in order to celebrate a special occasion, in order to communicate when speaking would be rude, in order to pass an exam, in order to conduct a meeting, in order to cook a meal and in order to create a poem.

Clearly, data such as those just described help to broaden our knowledge of literacy as it occurs within families. We see literacy – reading and writing – thoroughly mediating the lives of families through the reading and writing of many different textual genres for different functions and social purposes. We do not see family lives bereft of literacy except for the act of reading to young children. Nor do we see family lives bereft of literacy when there is no reading to young children. This allows us much greater latitude to consider ways that parents – all parents – broker early literacy concepts for their children. Below, I will present brief exemplars of what I refer to as literacy cultures, drawn from research into literacy practice in different communities. Within these different literacy worlds, we can see the children learning about different text types, including their forms, language features, vocabulary, functions and purposes. All names are pseudonyms.

**Laura’s world of print**

Laura and her younger brother Thomas live with a mother attending graduate school and a father, a data-processing manager for a large company. The parents are news junkies, and Mom often shares news with the two children as she reads. Mom and Dad also read books to both children several times during each day and always at bedtime from stories and children’s information books, and Laura has already made a tape to send to Grandma of *Green Eggs and Ham* (Seuss, 1960), ‘read’ from memory as she turned each page, with the intonation, syntax and vocabulary reflecting the storybook genre most well-read-to children acquire through experience with this culturally based literacy practice (Purcell-Gates, 1988; Sulzby, 1985). A quick glance through the house reveals such texts as textbooks, journal articles and notebooks as well as magazines, cookbooks, adult novels, children’s books, TV guides, newspapers, magazines, music albums, directions for constructing a music system and so on – all reflecting the lives and interests of parents and children.

**Robbie’s world of print**

Three-year-old Robbie’s home is one of activity (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Mom teaches sewing to adults and she continues to sew all of the clothes for the family. Books of sewing patterns fill nooks and crannies of the house. Robbie’s dad sells toys to department stores and is on the road a lot. When he is home, he is often to be found working at a card table set up in the living room, completing order forms, filling out invoices and drawing up travel plans for the following week – all the while watching the news on TV and commenting on it to the family. Robbie’s older brother is usually to be found in the garage taking apart an old car his parents gave him for Christmas one year. A few *Reader’s Digest* books sit on the shelves that are primarily filled with knick knacks and souvenirs of vacation travels. Cookbooks, whose pages retain traces of flour and other food ingredients collected over the years, line the shelves in the kitchen or are left open on the counters. Family time consists of long discussions around the kitchen dining table or gatherings around the television set. Mom and Dad always stay up for the 11.00 p.m. news.
Cecilia’s world of print

Cecilia lives in a migrant farmworker camp in the northern United States for six months and in Texas for the rest of the year. Her parents keep important documents safe in a box in their bedroom. These documents serve official purposes critical to the life and work of the family: visas to allow them to cross borders to work; vaccination papers for their children that need to be shown to avoid the common problem of revaccinating young children each time they enter a new school or programme; pay stubs that allow the family to access social and medical services for the poor, and so on. The Bible is also read and discussed in Cecilia’s home and print appears on religiously themed candles and calendars. Cecilia’s family receives many donations of food items, all with their own labels and printed instructions. The family also maintains contact with family members in Mexico and in Texas through birthday cards, wedding announcements and letters (Purcell-Gates, 2013).

Oscar’s world of print

Oscar is four years old and lives in El Salvador in a small one-room house made of mud bricks and a tin roof. His mother, Esperanza, is learning to read and write and often sits at the table outside the door and practises writing letters to her older son in the United States by the light of the lantern. There is no electricity or plumbing in the community. Oscar listens as his parents discuss the recent war and read the testimonials of the oppression and torture that affected their neighbours and family members. Oscar also observes his parents writing items for the upcoming agendas of the community meetings, common in post-war El Salvador, and reading past minutes and future resolutions for the meetings (Purcell-Gates and Waterman, 2000).

Early literacy concepts and skills are learned by children such as these through observation, apprenticeship and participation. Young children who are repeatedly read to as part of a cultural practice of parenting can demonstrate their knowledge of written story language through pretend readings that contain written syntax and written vocabulary, and that are decontextualized so that the meaning is inherent in the text (Purcell-Gates, 1988). Similarly, Harste et al. (1984) demonstrated how children who had experienced letter writing, grocery lists and other ‘everyday’ types of literacy practices could demonstrate through invented spellings the genre conventions and wordings of such practices.

Supporting parents as literacy brokers

The research exemplified above points overwhelmingly to the varied roles that parents play in brokering literacy for their young children and to the influence of such brokering on developing early literacy knowledge. However, to this point, there is almost no research on the effects of instruction that reflects the literacy cultures of the children and the brokering of literacy events present in these cultures. In this section I describe the few such studies that I could find listed in online databases. Although they are rare, I feel it is important to mention them in the hope of motivating more such studies in response to calls to honour and incorporate the sociocultural lives of all children (e.g. Guitérrez, et al., 1999). One study is described elsewhere in this handbook by Jim Anderson and colleagues with the IPALS project in Canada.

Another study from Canada employed an action research design to study the effects on early literacy learning of engaging three groups of recently arrived immigrant parents and
their young children in culturally congruent literacy activities (Anderson et al., 2012; Purcell-Gates et al., 2012). The Literacy for Life programme included typical early childhood activities such as painting, playing games, making art projects and listening to stories. In addition, embedded into these activities was a meta-focus on print and texts. For each activity, the teacher would either introduce texts that would mediate the activities or create activities that would require the reading or writing of texts. For example, the class at one site was in need of play materials. In response, the teacher devised a plan for the children to make their own play mat where they could stage different games. The children drew pictures of houses, roads and so on. The teacher led them in inserting text such as ‘Start’, ‘Stop’ (on a stop sign), the children’s names on individual houses, store names on pictures of stores, and others. Children were encouraged to bring familiar literacy practices into the programme. One child from a Muslim family conveyed her father’s directive to avoid snack foods that contained gelatin (in some yoghurts) due to religious constraints. This initiated a demonstration of how one could find and read ingredients on food packaging.

The teachers brokered literacy in different ways: explicitly pointing to the print, reading it and explaining its purpose (e.g. ‘This word says “start” and it tells us where to begin with our pieces. S-T-A-R-T. “Start”.’), pointing out print in the environment, during outside walks or at play as well as in the classrooms; generating menus for snack times with the children and writing them, helping children ‘order’ from the menus; and supporting the children as they created birthday and get-well cards for family or other class members, complete with emergent writing. Pre- and post-tests on normed emergent literacy knowledge revealed that the children significantly increased their knowledge as compared to the norm. Attendance was significantly related to growth as was the number of times each child engaged in real-life literacy activities.

A study from the United States focused on training parents to broker literacy learning in the process of engaging in everyday activities (Roberts et al., 2015). This study addressed the following questions: (1) In what ways did parent–child home literacy interactions change over the course of five literacy-based family workshops? (2) Did children whose families participated in these workshops show gains that were significantly greater than control group peers on measures of language and literacy?

Three- to five-year-old preschool children (N = 124) and their families were recruited from preschool classrooms representing four districts and two states. Classrooms were randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions. Families assigned to the experimental condition were invited to attend five two-hour workshops over the course of ten weeks during which they were taught literacy strategies to use with their children throughout different areas in the home. These workshops were split into three parts. During the first part, families were provided with a snack or meal, followed by a parent-only segment in which (a) parents were introduced to the session theme (e.g. literacy in the kitchen, literacy in the family room); (b) watched a short video about specific areas of literacy development (e.g. letter–sound knowledge, oral language, phonological awareness), with footage of families engaged in literacy interactions related to the session theme; (c) discussed the focal area(s) of literacy development with session leaders; and (d) learned about specific literacy activities (two for each of the six literacy constructs) they could engage in with their children during and outside the session. The final part of the workshop was the parent–child activity time, in which families actively engaged in at least six literacy activities (one for each of the previously listed areas of literacy) that were provided in the session.

Child language and literacy measures included story comprehension, phonological awareness, vocabulary and a home literacy environment survey. Results showed no statistically
significant differences between the experimental and control groups on child early literacy measures at the beginning of the programme. Significant outcomes on all measures at the conclusion of the study for children in the experimental group suggest that the literacy-based workshop has positive effects for children and families. Measures included the *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening* (Invernizzi et al., 2004); the *Test of Semantic Skills—Primary*. University of Virginia (Bowers et al., 2002); and the *Test of Story Comprehension-Preschool* (Language Dynamics Group).

## Conclusion

Research such as the two studies described above offer hope for a new, broader and more inclusive paradigm for understanding literacy in families and how young children can develop early literacy concepts with help from their parents. Cultural practices, including literacy practices, shift and change as circumstances, experiences and educational opportunities offer new and different horizons. Thus, for many children, practices such as adult–child storybook reading may need to wait until formal schooling begins, and, fortunately, many studies support the efficacy of storybook reading in school for development of vocabulary and genre learning related to books (e.g. Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; Isbell et al., 2004; Purcell-Gates et al., 1995; Whitehurst et al., 1994). In the meantime, parents can, and do, support early acquisition of foundational concepts by engaging themselves and their children with the multitude of other genres that mediate the social lives of literate people around the world.

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