

# Stories, Facts, and Possibilities: Bridging the Home and School Worlds for Nonmainstream Students

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In *Re-Reading Families*, Compton-Lilly (2007) continues the story of several urban children and their families who she first introduced to us four years earlier. The majority of the parents she portrays hold views similar to those of one, Ms. Rodriguez, who talks about the potential for children to slip through the cracks of school unless they have parents who “show up at school meetings and talk to the teachers” (p. 5).

Insights from parents and family members like Ms. Rodriguez characterize a personal vision of parenting as being the bridge between the learning that occurs for their children at home and at school. These views parallel those from well executed studies conducted over the last 60 years that conclude that children who have parents with knowledge about how schools function have a greater chance for success because their parents offer home learning experiences that are similar to, as well as supportive of, those occurring at school (Almy, 1949; Hart & Risley, 1995; McMillon & Edwards, 2008). Aware that schools experience higher academic success among their students when the parents and faculty share a high degree of communication about how to foster children's literacy, educators continually strive to develop these authentic relationships (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2007).

In fact, the significance of the home–school relationship was established years ago from the findings of a 1966 federal study that was conducted by Coleman and a team of researchers (Coleman et al., 1966) to determine the

relationship between student achievement and school spending. They found that how well students do in school is dependent primarily on their home environments and secondarily on their peer groups. The significance of the home environment in a child's literacy development was also identified by Guthrie and Greaney (1991) as a factor of significance that correlated with students' independent reading habits. Notice as you read the following quote the importance of the family as a major factor in what most would view as very positive independent literacy practice.

The amount of independent reading for both boys and girls is positively correlated with the availability of printed material, ownership of a library card, reading achievement level, methods of reading instruction, recreational interests, language/literacy interactions, and *parental example and home values*. Children's self-generated purposes for reading have been classified as utilitarian, diversionary, and enjoyment. The amount of reading for enjoyment is influenced by achievement level. (p. 90, emphasis added)

More specifically, findings from bodies of research support the conclusion that students who most frequently succeed in school have parents who actively support their children's school participation by helping with homework; attend PTA meetings, parent's night, and other school and classroom functions; and consistently communicate with the teachers in an attempt to craft a shared plan for success. They are also very often from more prosperous homes that can provide them with simple but significant opportunities like Internet connections, books, and travel experiences (Goldin & Katz, 2008) while also exposing them to beliefs that bathe them in examples of the power of the development of one's human capital. In short, these parents act as the child's first teacher by preparing them with funds of knowledge that guarantee them a successful school trajectory and then act as their partners on their school journeys.

Children in these homes are growing up in what Gee (1996, 1999) calls *mainstream homes*, where there exist similarities between home and school social practices. Gee refers to these social practices as discourses. These discursive social practices (with their underlying norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes) are primarily acquired through enculturation or apprenticeship (1996, 1999). His distinction between discourse (with a little *d*) and Discourse (with a big *D*) is helpful when we consider the families who are school savvy and those who are not.

For Gee (1999), discourse (with a little *d*) refers to language in use, or the ways in which people use language in oral or written encounters. Language in

use involves much more than just language, however. It is melded integrally with nonlanguage “stuff,” such as behaviors, values, ways of thinking, clothes, food, customs, and perspectives that are used by members of a group, to enact specific identities and activities. When this melding occurs, big *D* Discourses are involved. Therefore, Discourse (with a capital *D*) characterizes such things as “one’s body language, clothes, gestures, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, symbols, tools, technologies (be they guns or graphs), values, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions.” (p. 7). One’s Discourse then provides a profile of one’s ways of using language as well as symbolic expressions and artifacts of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that connect the members of a social group.

Because the momentous role that families play in the early and continuing literacy development of children has been well documented (Purcell-Gates, 1995; Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996; Sulzby & Teale, 1991), the focus of this chapter is instead on the children of parents who do not have within their “figured worlds” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) a view of themselves as having responsibility for their children’s early literacy learning. As depicted by the one family in focus, many of these parents, although well intentioned, are not aware that children are well on their way to succeeding in literacy when they have the opportunity to learn its functional uses through authentic daily family life experiences (Flood, 1975; Goodman, 1986; McTavish, 2007; Taylor, 1997). If parents do have this understanding, many are unsure of the exact role they should play (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Moore, 2002; Neuman & Caperelli, 1998). This view is often arrived at as a result of socialization within their Discourse community, uncertainties about exactly what this role would constitute, insecurities about their personal knowledge base, limited schedules, overwhelming responsibilities, and beliefs about the roles of the school and teachers.

Unfortunately, teachers often view this lack of knowing as a sign of disinterest and are therefore unsure of how to establish a bridge to connect the child’s home and school experiences (Lee, 2007, 2008). Because of this difference in beliefs and perceived roles, these parents are often at odds with their children’s teachers about what characterizes appropriate parenting, effective parental involvement, and suitable at-home literacy experiences (Edwards & Turner, 2009; Paratore, 2001).

In this chapter, while acknowledging the power of the home as the foundational support for a child’s school experiences, I first discuss why such support cannot be a pronouncement of failure for those children without these

early experiences. I then offer suggestions that use the wide variability among families as a rich context in which successful learning experiences can be built universally, one child at a time, in one classroom at a time, by one teacher at a time. When all forces in a child's life unite to support their success, we will truly realize the meaning of the African proverb, "When spider webs unite, they can tie a lion."

## Theoretical Framework

The family story I tell in this chapter is situated in a sociocultural perspective of literacy that is much broader than an individual's personal home and school reading and writing events. Rather, it spotlights one's identity kit (Gee, 1990), which tells the story of each person's personal view of self within a family or community as well as the perceptions others hold about the individual or group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within each community there are behaviors, expectations, and processes that characterize the group's shared literacy events as well as the values placed on these events (Heath, 1983). Because each individual's literacies are well developed within these community contexts, children come to school with literacy practices and resources that reflect those of their home, their first community (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). This scenario works well for those children whose early literacy practices validate the prescribed literacy practices they are about to meet in the world of school.

Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) note that the literacy practices of school are often characterized as those designed to transmit a segment of cultural values that are depicted through the canons of Western society's literature and religion (Hirsch, 1987). It is a belief of many that success in acquiring this canonical knowledge of western society is rewarded through monetary gains played out by one's opportunity to use this informational base to function in a larger capitalist society (Hollingsworth & Boyer, 2008). Unfortunately, many students who are not the recipients of these rewards have not been exposed to the beliefs or the entitlement of capitalism by older members of their cultural groups. These elders have been historically physically and financially enslaved by others and more recently by a lack of their own mental emancipation (Garvey, 1986; Regosin, 2002; Wertsch, 1998), caused by labels and stereotypes being placed upon them (Ladson-Billings, 1994) when they have attempted to remonstrate against these inequities.

### *Different Is Different—Not More or Less, Just Different*

Lareau (2003) believes, as a result of insights gained from her studies shadowing a range of parents from those who were less financially wealthy to those who were very financially wealthy, that wealthier parents fill their children's time with activities and conversation that make them comfortable with adults, authority, and the academic language they will meet at school. She notes that even when events like visiting libraries and museums are free, less economically wealthy parents do not take advantage of these experiences. For many reasons, including schedules, lack of transportation, and unfamiliarity with these cultural events, it is not part of their parenting repertoires. Children from less financially wealthy homes do not view school experiences and language as familiar, unlike wealthier children who from the time of their birth view school success as a shared responsibility.

What happens when the children from these less financially wealthy homes get to school and meet their teachers who have preconceived notions, as a result of their own experiences, about what the children have or should have been doing during their first five years of life? The unfortunate results of this incompatibility of beliefs, experiences, and expectations is borne out by data from the California Department of Education (2008) during the 2006–2007 school year, which notes that one of every four students drops out of high school. Who are the students in this crisis situation? What are their profiles? By ethnicity, 40.2% are African American, 35.4% are Latino, 20.1% are White, and 13.4% are Asian. The majority of them are economically impoverished; many speak English as their second language, and academic English, which is school talk, is an unfamiliar discourse.

As Rumberger (2008) has said about the situation, “These statistics highlight a problem that is getting worse in California. Even using the old system of measurement the number of dropouts has grown by 83% over five years while the number of high school graduates has gone up only 9%” (p. 1). This crisis will likely expand, because growing numbers of English language learners are pursuing an education in American classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, 2005). Thomas and Collier (2001) estimate that by the year 2040, 40% of the students in American public schools will speak a first language other than English. This is already true in California, where more than 50% of the students in public schools currently speak a first language other than English (Garcia & Montavon, 2007).

## *Why This Mismatch?*

Rumberger (2008) identifies three primary reasons for this dropout trend: “an increase in Latino immigrants, who are one of the groups most likely to drop out; the raising of academic standards; and insufficient funding for public education” (p. 18). Are you wondering why immigrants who come to a new country to pursue a “better” life would be one of the primary groups considered the most likely to drop out? This seems to be a conundrum. Do these new immigrants not see education as the ticket to success? Or is it that, as I have earlier noted, our educational system after all of these years is still unable to adjust to student and family differences? Are the stories of these families who are new to the United States different from those of the socially and economically less privileged African American and European American students from families who have lived in America for centuries? Could it be that literacy differences of all of these students are really seen as literacy deficits by their teachers (Taylor, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988)? Are these educators not being prepared to help children from economically insecure groups build new Discourses as extensions of their cultural knowledge and existing literacies (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994)? If so, then “we must arm teachers with the knowledge and cultural appreciation and then give them the autonomy, authority, and freedom to teach each and every child” (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 196).

In actuality, teachers need experiences that enable them to more fully understand and value the familial practices, language, hopes, and fears of non-mainstream, less financially mobile students (Delpit, 1995). Armed with such knowledge they will be able to support these students as they validate their culture in all its diversity and use it to move toward self-actualization by developing an expanded vision of personal, social, and financial opportunities (Tembo, 2000). Teachers will also be able to initiate home–school partnerships that acknowledge all parents as the first teachers of their children as well as value the cultures of the homes and the experiences occurring within them.

As a teacher educator I am filled with hope by the work of Yang and Gustafsson (2004), who found that family economics and opportunities were not as significant a predictor of success as was the child’s cultural capital in the family. If we can use this finding as a thematic starting point from which to draw inferences and build a school climate that also supports venues of success, then we will ensure that there will no longer be a cultural mismatch between schools and some of the children they purport to serve. This is more than an extrapolation bathed in idealism, because I have personally seen the in-school

successes achieved by students who have become graduates of programs like Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID; Swanson, 2005). Within AVID, students are treated as having high cultural capital by their teachers.

While AVID is often described as a college-prep program for students who are from homes with no college graduates, it does much more than teach skills like meeting deadlines and taking notes, which are associated with school and professional success (Nelson, 2007). It also connects students with teachers who believe they will succeed both academically and socially. The teacher assumes the role of a cheerleader who encourages, supports, and models in many cases life-expanding behaviors. Experiences of this type must be made available to all students if we ever hope to reverse the devastating dropout rate among nonmainstream children, especially children of color.

The remainder of this chapter will build this hope into a construction of reality by considering stories, facts, and possibilities that eliminate barriers between teachers and their African American Vernacular English (AAVE)–speaking students who are one segment of this nonmainstream school population and the focal population of this chapter. I have no intention now or ever of imposing a white intellectual conversation on a black experience. Rather, I am highly motivated to continue to get to know more fully this cultural group, because these are the families of the students I mentor and teach.

## Stories: Getting to Know One Family by Joining Them

To promote early learning, many parent education programs have been designed to introduce parents to ways to support their children's literacy development experiences. These have met success nationally for those parents who have had the good fortune to attend. Critical relationships between families and teachers that have been established through these linkages have served as the stepping-stones toward future literacy success for many children. When families and teachers are involved in these mutually supportive programs as a community, they bond in the understanding that they are jointly supporting the child's learning experiences (Comer, 1998). They work as a collaborative team, with trust and respect for one another in a harmonious partnership that has been well documented as a contributing factor to children's school success (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; International Reading Association, 2002; Neuman &

Celano, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1993, 1995, 2000; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Tutwiler, 2005; Yaden & Paratore, 2002).

Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1950s well-known tune "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you. Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me..." should be the underlying theme of parent and teacher interactions. This isn't always the case when parents and teachers come from different cultures and economic levels and have not gained an understanding and a respect for one another's cultures, experiences, and home language. Fortunately, this song is the reoccurring chorus of an experience a family and I have shared for the last 11 years.

### *A Lived Partnership*

The importance of family–school partnerships became all too clear to me in 1998 when I decided to spend my sabbatical team-teaching in a first-grade classroom. Early in the year my host teacher colleague, Kelly Moore, and I were planning for the September back-to-school night. I was hoping to meet the parent of Anthony, a child I had been working with extensively. From my conversations with Kelly I knew that Anthony's mom had been hesitant to participate in any previous early school literacy parent programs for her older children. But before I continue telling you about the back-to-school night let me digress and tell you a little about Anthony.

### *Anthony, Also Known as Bossman*

Adorable Anthony came to first grade without having attended preschool or kindergarten, because in California kindergarten is not mandatory. When we teachers hear something like this we lean toward believing this borders on neglect, because we know how much is learned during these early years and also how much first-grade teachers rely on this early acquired body of knowledge to scaffold the new instruction.

Although we talk much about the importance of differentiating instruction to meet the needs of children, we also understand that being able to do so is complex, especially when the instruction being planned is for a child like Anthony, whose literacy base is not what is expected by teachers of first graders. Anthony didn't understand the concept of a last name. He thought his last name was his nickname, Bossman. He could count to 10 and he knew his colors but



not any letters of the alphabet. In literacy language, he was not phonemically aware.

Unfortunately, the school trajectory isn't very positive for children like Anthony who enter first grade with this less-than-anticipated academic knowledge base. Fortunately for Kelly and me, he came to our classroom and we had the opportunity to practice the instruction we preach about in the methods courses we teach.

During Anthony's first year at school he worked almost exclusively with either Kelly or me in individual and small-group settings. We also referred him to Reading Recovery, but his performance was so poor that he was dropped from the program. Through our interactions we were able to support his literacy learning and his belief that he was a very able learner. We have chronicled the functioning of this classroom in an article (Lapp, Flood, & Goss, 2000) and a handbook chapter (Lapp, Flood, & Moore, 2008). During the following year Kelly taught a first/second grade combination class and was fortunate to have Anthony once again as a member of this learning community. She continued to differentiate instruction in ways that positively acknowledged his home language register of AAVE and home learning experiences while supporting his academic learning.

Together we have guided his classroom placements for the last 11 years. His path has not been continually uphill because his shy personality is often seen as aloof and antiestablishment. At this time Anthony is an eleventh grader in a charter high school where, because of the quality of the administration and teaching staff, he is well respected for who he is. Kelly continues to be one of his teachers. He finds much humor as well as security in this fact. Even after all of these years he needs continual encouragement and nudging. Because of the support he has received from all of his teachers and the love of his family, he is succeeding at school and has career plans to be an ambulance driver, a paramedic, or, as of late, a jeweler.

### *The Other Half of Anthony's Story: What About Angul?*

Anthony is one of seven siblings who are growing up in a home with their mom, their aunt, and three cousins. Anthony is the twin of a girl named Angul who was in the first grade next door with a teacher with 20 years of experience. Angul had experienced the same early literacy experiences as had Anthony and therefore had also been dropped from Reading Recovery.

Unfortunately for Angul, her first-grade teacher did not use a method to teach reading that supported literacy learning for Angul. The teacher read wonderful stories to the children, but this was not enough for Angul. Learning to read happened for all of the children who were being supported in their reading at home. This, however, was not the case for Angul, who by the end of first grade could not read but did enjoy being read to. This enjoyment of listening to good literature is proof of the adage “children do learn what they are taught.”

Angul’s teacher came to Kelly crying and said she hadn’t known how to teach Angul to read. She didn’t want to retain her but instead wanted Kelly to have her placed in the first/second-grade combo that Kelly was preparing to teach. While Kelly was very willing, the administrative policy did not allow siblings in the same class. So Angul went to a second-grade class with a teacher who had 12 years of experience but also didn’t teach reading in a way that would benefit Angul. In fact, he suggested to the principal during the third week of the school year that Angul was not smart enough to learn to read.

Many economically poor children like Angul are incorrectly evaluated and labeled and are ineffectually taught because of a similar lack of understanding and knowledge on the part of their teachers. Both of her teachers likely had been raised in worlds very different from Angul’s—worlds where everyone spoke a close approximation of academic English. The teacher preparation programs and the professional development sessions they had attended had apparently not prepared them to teach Angul and other children like her (Kunjufu, 2002). Given their life experiences and professional backgrounds, it is not surprising that teachers like these, teachers with a correctionist view (Birch, 2001) of literacy instruction, are ineffective for children like Angul—children who come to school speaking a language register other than the one their teachers understand or find acceptable (Christenbury, 2000). Teacher education programs must continue to attempt to help teachers expand their pedagogical repertoires so that children like Angul do not suffer.

Fortunately for Angul, her mom and I had become friends, so I suggested putting Angul in a classroom of a first-year teacher who had just finished her teaching credential in a program that was designed to prepare teachers to teach children who come to school with the strengths exhibited by Angul and Anthony. This teacher believed that Angul had language and experiences of value that she could draw from to teach her to read. By the end of the second grade, Angul, who was by then reading like a first grader and feeling great success in doing so, asked if she could stay longer with this teacher. All agreed,

and Angul spent her third school year in this safe, caring environment where, similar to what was happening for Anthony, her school experiences were differentiated to meet her literacy development. At the time of this writing, Angul is a tenth grader who maintains a B average and says that she likes school so much that she wants to be a teacher.

Like many parents who have not succeeded at school themselves, Anthony and Angul's mom didn't come to the first parent meeting and still only feels comfortable doing so when I attend with her. She refers to me as her kids' "school Mom" and, indeed, all of her children look to me for help with their academic decisions. I have learned to look at many school experiences from multiple and contradictory perspectives as I have guided the academic experiences of Anthony, Angul, and their siblings. Hopefully these varied and often conflicting perspectives have helped me to be a better teacher educator.

For example, I was initially very excited that the San Diego Unified School district has a voluntary integration system, Voluntary Enrollment Exchange Program (VEEP), which allows children from low-performing schools in the less affluent areas to attend schools "across town" in neighborhoods that have a larger financial base. These more affluent neighborhoods can spend much more money to provide the children in the schools with additional opportunities, including music resource teachers which are paid for by the PTA. The district also provides transportation to these VEEP children. After sharing this information with Anthony and Angul's mom, we agreed that this excellent opportunity, which neither she nor any of her friends had known about, would be terrific for her children. I completed the appropriate paperwork and off the children went to the new school. All seemed to be going well in the elementary grades, even when the homework assignments were often beyond the scope of Mom's finances or academic base. Realizing this, Jim Flood, Doug Fisher, and I built into our preservice courses experiences that took future teachers into the homes of children, including Anthony and Angul, for at-home evening tutoring. These experiences offered the children homework support while enabling the future teachers to realize that although most children need homework help, they do not all have equal access to it or to the supplies to complete it. They also realized that although the homework being assigned is often viewed by the classroom teacher as an extension of what was introduced during the school day, in reality it often includes just enough new facts to make it unfamiliar to the children and their families.

A second contradictory experience happened for me when Anthony and Angul entered middle school and the infamous genre studies program which was touted as the program that would provide additional support to children who were not yet reading and writing at grade level. On the surface this sounded like the perfect answer to the need for differentiated instruction. But when I visited the genre classes, I saw that all of the children participating were the VEEP children. They spent all morning in these tracked remedial literacy classes while other children who were at grade level experienced electives and advanced study. From my conversations with the teachers and administrators, I realized that they could not understand that in this environment of discrimination, there would be little hope that the VEEP children would ever reach grade level literacy proficiency.

Fortunately, the genre studies program was dropped when the literacy scores of the VEEP children didn't advance. When I hear this program discussed among educators, two reasons that are often cited for the program's inability to raise test scores are the lack of motivation on the part of the VEEP children and the lack of school involvement by their parents. When I discussed the segregation that existed in the genre studies program with one of my friends, a principal in one of the schools "across town" in an affluent neighborhood, he confirmed many of the ideas about the class divide in American schools noted by Sacks (2007), when he said that many of the neighborhood parents who hadn't yet put their children in private schools would have done so if they had thought their children were being slowed down by having the VEEP children in their classes. The genre studies program allowed the school to accommodate the neighborhood families while appearing to look integrated and supportive of the academic differences among students.

A third multiperspective experience I have encountered is the insider's view of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. When Anthony and Angul's mom and I used to arrive at IEP meetings to discuss Ashley, an older sibling who in first grade had been placed in a special day class for children with "mental handicaps," the room was always filled with early arrival educators who were often already in conversation about Ashley. After this happened to us a couple of times I asked my colleague Nancy Frey, who in her earlier career had been a special education teacher and support provider and who knew all of the state rules, to attend with us. With Nancy as our advocate, we were on equal ground.

Through the years I have moved to the sidelines in all teacher–parent meetings, because Anthony and Angul’s mom now feels freer to chat with the teachers about her children. I realized in the early years that when we sat side by side the teachers often only addressed me and never looked at her. After the meetings she and I always discuss everything that was said about her children, some of which she accepts. She has told me that before we became friends she chose not to go to the parent meetings because she believed that all she would hear were negative things about her children. She felt the teachers didn’t really know her children because when they called they never told her anything positive about them. She said this hadn’t changed since her own childhood, when her mother got calls from teachers who always said negative things about her siblings and her, such as “They are too quiet” or “They didn’t finish their homework.” She says she didn’t finish her homework because she often didn’t know how to do it and her mother couldn’t help her after about fourth grade.

I believe that all parents who are not well versed in the workings of special education should never attend an IEP meeting without a knowledgeable advocate. I am convinced that Anthony and Angul and all of their younger siblings would have had unchanged, negative school experiences if my colleagues and I had not entered into a school partnership with them and their mom. Ashley, an older sister, went to school with the same experiential base as had Anthony and Angul and had encountered teachers similar to those of Angul who had suggested special education for her when they didn’t know how to teach her to read. Unfortunately, Ashley’s teacher was successful in placing her in a special day classroom and in blaming Ashley for not learning.

Blaming the child rather than learning how to teach the child who has arrived in one’s classroom seems to be the behavioral norm for about 20% of teachers who make about 80% of the referrals to special education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Fortunately for Ashley, her life took a more positive turn once Nancy Frey became her advocate. But what about others and the fact that while African American children account for 17% of the student population, almost half of all of the children placed in special education are African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001)? I wonder how much more of a crisis will have to occur in the lives of African American students before it becomes obvious that even though there exists a mismatch between the home and school experiences of these children, the burden for their success or failure can no longer be relegated to them, their families, and their early home experiences. It must be the responsibility of the school community.

A major mismatch that has occurred for Angul and Anthony, their siblings, and their mother before them is that their home discourse/language and the discourse that is expected from them outside of the home are very different. With the support of very knowledgeable teachers, the oldest child of the family successfully learned to code-switch from home language to school language and therefore, unlike many of her peers and siblings, was never stigmatized, relegated to special education testing, or placed in low-paying jobs as an adult (Richardson, 2003).

Anthony, who has not fully mastered code-switching, uses silence as a linguistic response. Unfortunately, silence is a dangerous literacy practice that is often interpreted negatively by teachers as insolence or opposition (Fine, 1995), which results in permanent identity damage. Anthony has come from a family and a neighborhood where:

People speak other languages or variant, non-prestigious forms of English and...while [he] has doubtless been sensitive to the differences between [his] way of speaking and [his] teachers', [he has] never been able to sort out or develop attitudes toward the differences that do not put [him] in conflict, one way or another, with the key academic tasks of learning to read and write and talk in standard English. (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 179)

Because of Anthony's placement in a school with teachers who are very knowledgeable about language, he is being encouraged through modeling, effective instruction, and continual conversation to expand the nuances of his school language in an attempt to eliminate this cultural problem, a problem that will exist as long as African American discourse and the dominant European American discourse of school are entwined and compared (Wheeler & Swords, 2006). He loves to read and write poetry and is very willing to share his voice through his poetry journal. Thank heavens for his teachers who support and encourage multiple ways of knowing and sharing.

## Facts: Getting to Know the Children and Their Parents

I started getting to know Anthony and Angul's mom because I really liked her children and wanted to take them to a movie that was popular among the other first graders. She trusted me and has since told me that she felt that I respected her children, her, and their home and that I knew she knew more about her

children than I did. She felt, however, that I knew more about the workings of school than she did and so she believed I would offer her children these educational experiences. This was and continues to be a relationship built upon trust and respect. This isn't always the case between teachers and families; and this is why many school-home relationships fail.

Ladson-Billings (1994) notes that throughout the history of education

Even when the goal was to improve both student and teacher effectiveness, the use of such terms as “culturally deprived and disadvantaged” contributed to a perception of African American students as deprived, deficient, and deviant. Educational interventions, in the form of compensatory education (to compensate for the deprivation and disadvantage assumed to be inherent in African American homes and communities), often were based on a view of African American children as deficient white children. (p. 8)

Ladson-Billings (1994) further states that according to Cuban (1989), the term “at-risk” is now the replacement term being “used to describe certain students and their families in much the same way that they had been described for almost two hundred years” (as cited in Ladson-Billings, p. 9). With a resistance to address or investigate the “possibilities of distinct cultural characteristics (requiring some specific attention) or the detrimental impact of systemic racism” the two most popular explanations for low academic achievement of at-risk children are frequently identified as “social and environmental,” which then supports “locate(ing) the problem in the children themselves or in their families” (p. 9). Is it any wonder then that the American view that has been historically perpetuated with satisfaction and a lack of responsibility about nonmainstream children is that poverty and its consequence, “a lack of opportunity are the only plausible reasons for poor performance” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 9)?

Striving to more fully know families like Anthony's, who are living below the poverty level, a few years ago my colleagues and I (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Moore, 2002) decided to investigate the role that these parents believed they should play in the early literacy development of their children as well as their rationale for these beliefs. We wanted to better understand the families who are often labeled as invisible or considered difficult to reach because they infrequently attend school activities. Because their thoughts and beliefs are often unknown within the school community, they are frequently mischaracterized as having a lack of involvement by faculties attempting to draw from their funds of knowledge to interpret what they perceive (Deschenes, Cuban,

& Tyack, 2001). A brief review of what we found adds to the discussion being shared in this chapter.

To begin, the 341 parent group adults participating in our study were the parents or primary caregivers of 120 kindergarten and 120 first graders from 12 public school classrooms in which we worked as part of a University–public school collaborative. Of these families, approximately 70% lived in subsidized (Section 8) housing and their children received free or reduced-price lunch. One hundred forty-four (58%) of the children lived in a family configuration other than two parents; some lived with one parent, aunts and uncles, or a parent and grandparent. The ethnicity of the children, which represented that of the school area, included 45% African Americans, 21% Latinos, 18% Asian-Pacific Islanders, and 16% Caucasian.

The parent group was surveyed, and a random sample of 24 was also interviewed. The surveys, which included a stamped addressed envelope, were first distributed to the children by their teachers. Additional copies were also provided to the director of the community-based parent center, who maintained strong connections with many of the families and with other family center directors. He distributed these to the parents who had not returned the original surveys. A third attempt was made to collect the survey information from nonrespondents via the U.S. postal service. This final copy of the survey also contained a letter encouraging the families to return the survey to the school or the community center.

When parents did not feel comfortable reading the survey, responses were collected orally and recorded by the teachers and director. Following these three data collection events, 174 (72.5%) of the surveys were returned. Of those returned, 63 (36%) were returned to the teacher, 96 (55%) were obtained by the director of the community center, and 15 (9%) were returned in the U.S. mail. In addition, we interviewed at least one family member from a random selection of 24 families at locations convenient for them, including their homes, the parent center, and on the sidewalk outside the school building before or after school. All of the interviews and the questionnaires focused on identifying the following:

development



To briefly summarize, we overwhelmingly found that not every parent was aware that children who learn the functional uses of literacy through their daily family life experiences are well on their way to succeeding in school literacy events (Taylor, 1997). We also found that while many families had a very positive attitude about school and learning, they did not necessarily believe they had the skills, knowledge, or means to develop their children's early literacy awareness. They placed their trust in the schools. We found this to be very surprising, because many of these adults shared that as students they had not had positive school experiences because school personnel had devalued their cultural capital. Despite this past experience, these adults were placing confidence as well as their children's intellectual lives in the hands of their children's schools.

Through insights gained from our conversations with these families, we realized we were witnessing an example of what seemed to us to be an illogical Catch-22 situation in which parents who had been so devalued in their own school experiences also seemed conditioned or predisposed to believe that if they stayed away and didn't rock the school boat their children might have a better chance to succeed. Through the subsequent years as we have used knowledge acquired from this study to build school programs and curriculum for students from families in this community, we have come to more fully understand that one of the reasons for our being perplexed at the time was that different cultural groups have different norms, values, beliefs, behaviors, and ways of acting and interacting (Au, 2005).

Because we know our own cultures so well, our cultural norms are often tacit and taken for granted; many of us are not aware of the norms that constitute others' cultural ways of being because we are all steeped in our own cultures. Reflection has made very clear to us that, although we believed that we were coming to know these families, we had instead been blindsided by our experiences as we entered into a culture which to us had unfamiliar rules and norms about how to behave and converse in schools and with educators.

However, one major finding of significance to the discussion being posited in this chapter is that there were significant differences between the perceptions of parents who were poor and those who were very poor about their role in their child's early literacy development. More specifically, although 70% of the students in this study attended schools where 70% of the student population received free or reduced-price lunch, 30% of the students attended schools with

less than 20% of the students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Parents were asked to identify who should assume the responsibility for tasks ranging from praying to academic tasks like saying and identifying alphabet letters and name writing. The more academic the task became, the more often the less wealthy of these parents looked to the school for their children's literacy instruction, with two notable exceptions—teaching reading and writing numbers. In both of these cases, the responsibility was clearly seen by all as that of the school. Here again the families placed their hopes with the teachers in the schools. Families clearly placed the responsibility for teaching their children to read with the teachers.

One additional finding of major significance that continues to guide our work with the parents of the students we teach is that the majority of the families in this study were very willing to be involved in their children's literacy development. Unfortunately, they were often unsure about what they should do as literacy supporters. While the majority of respondents acknowledged the importance of reading, they believed that learning to read begins in first grade with the teacher. They did not have an understanding of the importance schools place on a certain set of early (birth to first grade) literacy events.

We have also realized from continuing conversations with these parents that school faculties do not realize all of their missed opportunities to take advantage of shared at-home family experiences. These experiences include watching television, listening to music, or creating performances that should at least be acknowledged as significant and at best be propelled into early experiences that count at school. Instead, educators and many national leaders and celebrities—including Bill Cosby, Jesse Jackson, and Barack Obama (Sweet, 2008)—say that families must turn off their TVs. We disagree.

Because we have found from our research and experiences that these media-centered experiences are the constant shared activities of the parents and children we continue to teach (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Moore, 2002), we believe, as do many of our colleagues (Padak & Rasinski, 2006) that we must begin with what is family reality. We therefore propose that capitalizing on the television and movie media events families are sharing at home means respecting these language and literacy experiences by inviting students to bring them to school and using them as the foundation for expanded school dialogue and literacy development. By doing so we will provide opportunities and avenues for our students to communicate and critically evaluate “the knowledge, beliefs, practices, and roots of the cultures in [their] environments through their oral and

written discourse” (Severino, Guerra, & Butler, 1997, p. 106); as we come to know each other better no one will be discredited (Morrison, 1984) or labeled as lesser. Instead, each of us will be provided with opportunities to continually expand our cultural lenses and Discourse communities.

## Possibility: Partnerships of Equality = True Partnerships

The experiences shared in this chapter are very much in sync with the findings and suggestions of Henderson and Mapp (2002), who analyzed 51 studies addressing the influence of school–family–community relationships on academic achievement. The studies spanned diverse cultures and populations and the full range of K–12 grade levels. A major finding was that a key feature of effective school–family involvement programs is that they are *linked to learning*, and that information and messages about how parents can support their children at home should be woven into the existing family and community activities and events. As suggested by the African proverb “He who does not know one thing knows another;” all participants have much to share and therefore all voices should be heard in establishing and maintaining a partnership. To this end, Mapp reaffirmed in a recent interview (Fusaro, 2008) the importance of parent–school relationships that recognize that all parents regardless of income, education, or cultural background can in some way be involved in their children’s learning, because they all want their children to succeed.

Given that so many differences do exist among families we must do the following:

lamenting that which has not happened for so many children when they are being compared with children from economically well-to-do English-speaking families

and language that all families hold” (Whitmore & Norton-Meier, 2008, p. 450) if we are intent on creating home–school relationships where children are validated rather than castigated because of their uniqueness—where children as individuals or as groups are not discussed as a referent to any other group (O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007)

the basis of a partnership that supports continued learning for all members of the partnership

Finally, we must share our insights with future teachers by taking them into the real worlds of the children they will meet in their classrooms who have grown up in homes that are dissimilar from theirs. With this knowledge begins each teacher's power to teach the children in their classrooms and to forge partnerships with their families who, while different from them, are certainly not deficient.

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