How do children's early literacy experiences impact their first year of schooling?

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How do children's early literacy experiences impact their first year of schooling?

by

Ashley E. Morath

August 2007

A thesis or project submitted to the
Department of Education and Human Development of the
State University of New York College at Brockport
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education
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by

Ashley E. Morath
Table of Contents

Abstract: ......................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter One: ............................................................................................................... 4

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4

Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 8

Chapter Two: Literature Review ................................................................................. 9

Family Literacy ............................................................................................................. 9

Social Constructivism: Literacy Learning as a Social Process ................................. 12

Socio-Cultural Perspective ......................................................................................... 14

Funds of Knowledge .................................................................................................. 17

Home Visits and Parent/Child Interviews ................................................................. 18

Home-School Connection ......................................................................................... 20

Chapter Three: Methodology ..................................................................................... 22

Objective ..................................................................................................................... 22

Participants ................................................................................................................ 23

Measures ...................................................................................................................... 25

Procedure and Instructions ......................................................................................... 25

Parent Interview Questions, Source One ................................................................. 26

Parent Interview Questions, Source Two ................................................................. 27

Student Interview Questions, Source One ............................................................... 28

Student Interview Questions, Source Two ............................................................... 29
Data Analysis............................................................................................ 29

Chapter Four: Results.................................................................................. 30

Child One.................................................................................................... 32
  Home Visit/Parent Interview................................................................. 34
  Student Interview................................................................................ 37

Child Two................................................................................................... 39
  Parent Interview.................................................................................. 40
  Student Interview................................................................................ 42

Chapter Five.............................................................................................. 45

Discussion.................................................................................................. 45

Home Literacies and Home Genres............................................................... 46

Implications for School Environment........................................................ 47

The Power of Home Visits........................................................................ 50

Implication of Results................................................................................ 52

Strengths and Limitations of Study............................................................. 53

Recommendations for Future Research....................................................... 54

References................................................................................................. 54
Abstract

Through my research, I will explore the notion of family literacy. Students’ early literacy experiences don’t suddenly begin when they start their first year of schooling. What happens from the time children are born until they reach their first year at school? Early literacy experiences begin at home where children explore diverse family literacy experiences. The objective of my project is to take a closer look at students’ home literacy experiences. More specifically, I will be focusing on how when one discovers children’s home literacy environments and experiences it may offer opportunities to enhance learning during their first year of schooling.

Family literacy is the way in which parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their communities (Flippo, 2003). Denny Taylor first used the term ‘family literacy’ in 1983. Family literacy can be perceived differently by many. Some may look at family literacy in regards to educational professionals fostering parents’ knowledge about preparing their children for success in school. Others may view family literacy as the literacy events that children have with their families and communities. I am looking at the later to explore how these literacy experiences at home may differ from literacy experiences explored at school. Families and their children share funds of knowledge that teachers can discover and integrate into the classroom community.
In my research plan I utilize home visits and interviews to discover new and meaningful ways to incorporate students’ home experience to school to create a more developmentally appropriate learning environment.

**Chapter One**

Early literacy experiences don’t begin when children reach their first year in school. Once believed, was an understanding that children became ‘reading ready’ at an exact age, and one was considered a non-reader until 6.5 years of age. Before this milestone age was reached one was separated from the readers. Theories have changed and we now know that early literacy experiences begin at home, from birth onward, where children explore varying family literacy experiences. Oral language and literacy develop together and what children learn from listening and talking contributes to their ability to read and write, and vice versa (Strickland, 2004, p. 86). Young children learn the uses of print as they observe adults read, make lists, and make use of literacy as they go about their everyday lives. In order to strongly influence children’s language acquisition and literacy skills, schools should consider opportunities for collaboration with families and communities, creating networks of literacy that value and reflect cultural and linguistic diversity (Hadaway, 2000).

Sadly, many children’s literacies are ignored, rather than valued and extended, in school environments (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). A key risk remains in the political and school exchange that often shapes education. What matters as literacy in politics and
schools is often prepackaged and defined by the dominant culture as worth knowing. How can we then create an environment that fosters individual students' literacies and ways of learning? It is my hope that I can discover this possibility through investigating family literacy.

Family literacy is the way in which parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their communities (Flippo, 2003, p. 366). Denny Taylor first used the term 'family literacy' in 1983. Family literacy can be perceived differently by many. Some may look at family literacy in regards to fostering parents' knowledge about preparing their children for success in school. Others may regard family literacy as the literacy events that children experience in their daily lives with their families and community where families and their children share funds of knowledge that teachers can discover and integrate into the classroom community. I will be referring to the latter, broader definition as it pertains to my research.

Interviewing parents and making home visits are practices that teachers don't partake in often enough. These missed experiences leave teachers with missed opportunities to learn more about their students' family, interests, home literacy experiences, and sociocultural background. Especially in classrooms that are linguistically and culturally diverse, effective classroom teachers seek to understand and build on the particular ways parents and children use literacy together as they go about their daily routines (Paratore, 2005, p. 394).

I chose the topic of family literacy to achieve my goal of discovering ways to incorporate what students already know and can do into the school curriculum. After
completing a project in my graduate studies, where I explored my own literacy autobiography, I acknowledged a deeper understanding of myself as a learner and as a teacher of literate practices. In her book, *Conversations*, Reggie Routman (2000) recounts her beliefs and practices about teaching and learning as they are influenced and supported by her own literacy experiences. She says that her own behavior—thoughts, goals, and practices—as a reader, writer, listener, speaker, inquirer, user of technology, evaluator, all impact how and what she teaches. She invites teachers to ask themselves, “How can I make my classroom practices more authentic, that is, more like literacy practices and events in the world?” (p.16)

I feel strongly in exploring the topic of family literacy in that when you truly know a child and how they learn best you can extend their learning to their highest potential. There are many factors to consider in a child’s literacy experiences such as linguistic experiences, cognitive experiences, affective influences, and sociocultural considerations (Flippo, 2003). Linguistic experience with language includes all aspects of language development and acquisition: listening, speaking, print awareness, writing, reading, and viewing which children develop from birth on. Children come to school with considerable linguistic experiences from their daily lives, routines, and activities. Cognitive experiences might include vicarious experiences (stories told by others, movies, videos, books, magazines, television, advertisements, and other media) and real life experiences from family experiences and activities (travel and outings, and other personal experiences and influences). These experiences build a child’s schema, or concept for a given idea, topic, event, person, or thing. Because cognitive experience
varies so much from individual to individual, it must be seriously considered by the classroom teacher. A child’s affective influences towards learning can be revealed by investigating students’ interests, needs, feelings, attitudes and motivation. These can be discovered through observations and student interviews. Lastly each of these factors is strongly influenced by a child’s sociocultural background. A child’s expectations and environment may be viewed differently in different sociocultural groups. The cultural difference paradigm supports that teachers need to use strategies and respect links to the children’s cultural individuality, lifestyles and values. Researcher Karen Gallas (1994) researched children’s thinking and ways of learning. She tells us that when given the opportunity, listen to the children because they will show us what they know and how they learn best, and sometimes that way is not the teacher’s way. (p. 132)

The objective of my project is to take a closer look at students’ home literacy experiences. The purpose of my research will be to explore the notion of family literacy. More specifically, I will be focusing on how children’s home literacy environments impact their first year in school, kindergarten. Using qualitative data I plan to observe, interview, and collect samples of children’s work to investigate their family’s literacy experiences and funds of knowledge. Through home visits, parent interviews and student interviews I hope to explore each child’s individual interests, abilities, learning styles, home literacies, family experiences and their family’s funds of knowledge. In my research plan I hope to discover new and meaningful ways to incorporate students’ home experience to school to create a more appropriate and meaningful learning environment.
My research will benefit my work with students in that, by discovering their home literacy experiences, this will foster their literacy experiences in school when a connection is made between the two environments. The use of home visits, parent, and student interviews will offer parents an opportunity to feel welcomed into the school environment and establish parent-teacher communication. I hope to impact teachers by inviting them into the notion of home visits as it supports family literacy.

**Definition of Terms**

**Affective Influences**: The child’s interests, motivations, attitudes, self-image, feelings, and needs.

**Cognitive Experience**: A child’s existing knowledge and related experience.

**Cultural Difference Paradigm**: A paradigm that supports the idea of teachers using strategies that are consistent with children’s cultural characteristics, showing respect for their cultures, lifestyles, and values, as opposed to a deficit (fix-it) theory of children’s needs.

**Enculturation**: the process whereby individuals learn their group's culture, through experience, observation, and instruction.

**Family Literacy**: The ways that parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in their communities.
Kidwatching: Taking note of what students know and can do, attempting to understand their ways of constructing and expressing knowledge, and using the information to shape curriculum and instruction.

Linguistic Experience: A child’s experiences with language.

Qualitative Data: Data that emerge based on studying the “quality” of children’s responses and their work.

Schema: A person’s concept or mental picture and organization for a given idea, topic, event, person, or thing.

Social Constructivism: A theory about learning that includes the ideas that reading and writing are an outgrowth of and part of social context, and that readers actively construct their own understandings about what they read.

Sociocultural Considerations: Unique qualities, lifestyles, and values.

Chapter Two

Family Literacy

Even as schools strive to provide the best reading instruction, educators are aware that factors outside the school influence their student’s success in learning to read (Holloway, 2004, p. 88). Research confirms the importance of children’s home environments and literacy experiences. The term literacy can be narrowly perceived by some as reading and writing tasks. Actually, literacy comprises five areas: listening,
speaking, reading, writing and viewing. Early literacy experiences are generally embedded in the home experience. In general, family literacy is a concept that encompasses the ways that people learn and use literacy in their home and community lives (McGee & Morrow, 2005).

As teachers we often see one context, one world of the children we teach; the school world. From t-shirts to bubble gum wrappers, children live in a world fashioned in print (Taylor, 1998, p. xi). Few can escape the wealth of words that permeate their homes, and still we may know little about that world or its impact on learning to read and write in schools. If students come to school already with literacy experiences how do we come to understand what each child has to offer to the classroom community? Denny Taylor first coined the term, family literacy, in 1983 in her book *Family Literacy*. Yetta Goodman refers to Taylor’s research as instrumental in that it heightens our awareness that people become literate not simply from instructional practices within schooling but because literacy is central to human lives in today’s world. Taylor used qualitative research as she studied the literacy experiences of six families. As children interact with their families they are openly shaping their literacy experiences before school begins. Marie Clay believed that children learn much about literacy in their home environments and that they come to school ready to apply this knowledge of reading and writing (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). The child’s family is their first teacher. Teachers need to believe in these early literacy experiences in order to make meaningful literacy experiences in the classroom.
Interest in the literacy of home is not new. Teachers and researchers have long recognized that the literacy children experience at home and in their communities has a significant impact on later literacy success at school and in the wider world (Cairney, 2002, p. 154). Most teachers’ experiences with family literacy have to do with making concrete connections between the home and school environments (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). While efforts to acknowledge family and community literacy are beneficial, they have not gone far enough in acknowledging the richness of literacy outside school and the need for sincere partnerships between teachers and families (Cairney, 2002).

A collaborative project between the Dallas Public Schools and the University of Texas Arlington worked to connect teachers and administrators with families and community members to discuss the promise and process of family literacy (Hadaway, 2000). Before a family literacy project came about, the teachers, administrators and parents formed study groups. One of the activities that they participated in required them to reflect on their own literacy experiences. They began with a writing prompt where they were asked to reflect on their own early literacy experiences and share their family stories. This opened up many heartwarming examples, including a principal who shared how her early literacy was shaped by growing up with a mother who was deaf. The study groups began to come to an understanding that literacy learning can take place in many settings, without direct instruction, and the diverse ways that literacy instruction occurs at home (through storytelling, songs, traveling, etc.). One of the biggest lessons named was the need to work more closely with families and to listen to their input and feedback, rather than basing programs on only the school’s perceptions. Within the context of the
family, the literary styles and values are dispersed experiences, often occurring at the margins of awareness. From her research Taylor (1998) found that even when parents quite consciously introduced their children to print, the words were locked into the context of the situation. The label on the shampoo bottle, the recipe for the carrot bread, and the neon signs in the street were not created to explicitly teach reading; they were part of the child’s environment, and the child learned of their function as well as of their meaning (Taylor, 1998).

Many family literacy programs only teach parents to do school-like activities at home and how to assist children with homework, a deficit view of parent’s ability to promote school success in their children (Cairney, 2002). The unique efficacy of family literacy goes beyond the particular reading instruction methodologies taught to the families and lies within the process by which literacy is learned and shared within the family (Cook-Cottone, 2004, p. 208). We need a broader definition of family literacy that acknowledges the family’s social reality and focuses on the family’s strengths; one that considers social context and cultural practices of the family and community to inform curriculum development.

Social Constructivism: Literacy Learning as a Social Process

Learning is ongoing, involving the mutual interplay among the learner, other individuals, social systems, and culture (Pransky & Bailey, 2003). Grounded in Lev Vygotsky’s work, social constructivists seek to find ways in which children can discover the world around them and make understanding through the construction of their own
meaning. Literacy is in theory, a set of social practices placed in sociocultural contexts defined by individuals of a group through their actions by way of and through language (Cairney, 2002). Teachers, students and parents construct their own representations and definitions of literacy, and pass individual understandings, norms, expectations, and roles that define what it means to be literate.

Lev Vygotsky emphasized, the significance of the educational and social structure in the development of a person’s thinking (Korat, 2001). According to his theory, the social context, particularly interactions among human beings, is the central axis upon which development of thought revolves. Bruner (1983) believed that there are learning communities within which knowledge is the fruit of numerous interactions between adults, children and among groups of children in various life contexts, including those that take place within school. This is precisely what Denny Taylor’s (1998) research yielded. In her book she shared her beliefs that literacy is deeply embedded in the social processes of family life and is not some specific list of activities added to the family agenda to explicitly teach reading (p. 92). To understand these literacies, we need to understand the groups and institutions that socialize us into specific literacy practices (Cairney, 2002). Looking at family literacy in this way would help shift thinking towards helping parents at home to discovering an understanding of literacy of the home and community as a starting point for informing classroom literacy experiences.

Meaningful learning in the kindergarten and school transpires during a host of activities—activities that in many cases arise out of joint work among the children.
themselves, collaboration between children and educators, and among children, educators, and parents (Korat, 2001, p. 228).

**Socio-Cultural Perspective**

Culture can be defined as the webs of significance we spin as human beings: Who we are and how we interact with the world is an intriguing intersection of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors that pervade every aspect of a person's life, while continually changing and evolving (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 218).

Vygotsky (1986) laid the foundation for the cultural pedagogical approach where as teachers we would seek the ways in which our students and their families create meaning in their lives. As children develop, they internalize the way of life imbedded within their family carrying its own rules, values, and language that reflect and highlight the family’s norms and values (Pransky & Bailey, 2003).

The difficulty in gaining parental involvement may stem in part from cultural difference between schools and the communities they serve (Waldbart, B. Meyers & J. Meyers, 2006, p. 774). Although there is no easy correlation between powerful literacy acquisition and teachers and students coming from similar backgrounds, teachers who are unfamiliar with who their students are outside of school often frustrate both their students and themselves (Spielman, 2001, p. 762). According to Howard Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences, different people are gifted in different proficiencies that they utilize in symbolic systems for gaining meaning and for carrying out meaningful interactions (Korat, 2001). Individuals learn best when they are using their intelligences;
their ways of learning best. Certain societies tend to foster specific intelligences more than others through their schooling (Korat, 2001).

Each family has its own values, rituals, and ways of knowing. Each child goes through the process of enculturation, the process whereby individuals learn their group's culture, through experience, observation, and instruction. Children often have to negotiate their outside world with the classroom world, almost a form of cultural code switching. Each person's cultural identity both shape and is shaped by their experiences of literacy education (Cairney, 2002, p. 153). A child who enters an early childhood or school setting will be met by social practices that may or may not be familiar to them. These differences, or mismatches, work against the literacy learning of students whose home culture does not reflect that of the school.

Each classroom is distinguished by its own culture; an ever-changing system of values, beliefs, and principles, developed through understandings which the teacher and the students share (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers & Smythe, 2005). As a teacher, how do we come to this point in our understanding of our students?

In a study in an urban community in Dallas, Texas, researchers wanted to know what literacy experiences took place at the homes of urban students (Vardell, 2000). They surveyed students with open ended questions exploring literacy in terms of reading, writing, listening and speaking. They wanted to recognize a range of family literacy options and included non-print media and computers. They were surprised by the range of literacy experiences present in the homes and the opportunity that was there to link home activities to school. Children and their families were not only reading books but
other printed material such as the newspaper, magazines and the Bible. The children also mentioned "everyday" or "environmental" print such as the mail, cookbooks, instructions, computer text, the dictionary, TV Guide, cards, and bills. They found their reading material at the home, library, grocery store, neighbors, garage sales, church, and even at the barber's. The students also participated in authentic writing such as journals, poems, directions, cards, invitations, and money orders. Oral storytelling was common place as grandparents, parents, and siblings told stories at home. When the researchers discovered that literacy was taking place in this urban setting, they broadened their view of what literacy meant. Rather than devise a plan for literacy development projects they were able to build off of the literacy experiences that were already in place in the community and occurring in the homes of their students. They turned their deficit view of family literacy where they tended to look at urban literacy as a glass half empty to looking at a broader view of what the students were experiencing at home in their daily lives.

We are all stuck in some way to our own views of the world and respond to it from our own point of view (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). As teachers, we do not need to try to conceal these perspectives; we just need to examine the ways in which our own status affects our decision making in the classroom and to continue to develop a multicultural perspective.

The cultural experiences of students significantly impact how they respond to classroom experiences. Classrooms are likely to be more effective in developing the capacity of students from a broad range of backgrounds if teachers understand how
culture shapes learning and how teachers can develop classrooms that tap into the intrinsic motivation of culturally diverse learners (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 218).

**Funds of Knowledge**

The concept of funds of knowledge can be defined as the strengths and talents—academic, civic, or technical—that are characteristic of families (Ginsberg, 2007, p. 57). As it is beneficial to the children’s learning, teachers need to invite family members to come to school to share their funds of knowledge, or the information, strategies, tools, and technologies they use to accomplish their daily tasks of living. Collaborating with families is a strong way to meaningfully expand the curriculum (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). Funds of knowledge are not possessions or traits of people in the family but characteristics of people-in-an-activity. This means that they are not handed to children, but passed on through scaffolded activities and experiences, becoming a unique and memorable part of children’s histories. In this way, connecting home, community, and classroom, brings into creation, a curriculum that reflects the rich knowledge of the family and culture. When teachers actively discover their students’ and their family’s funds of knowledge they are capitalizing on household and community resources to organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 132).

Teachers need to offer families the opportunity to come into the classroom to share and exchange these funds of knowledge. With each family contribution, adults help children tune into and make connections among the varied language and literacy
practices associated with life in their families and communities (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 22). Children come to value the literacy of their homes, and hopefully the classroom community will enrich these literacy practices of the children.

**Home Visits and Parent/Child Interviews**

Teachers have been visiting the homes of their students for years (Worthy & Hoffman, 2001, p. 516). However, for this day and age, for a teacher to visit the home of one of his or her students is not common practice. Where teachers once may have viewed home visits as a vehicle for teaching parents how to do school-type activities at home, the focus of visits now seems broader. Educators view home visits as learning experiences for themselves as well as informal opportunities to get to know students and their families (Worthy & Hoffman, 2001). Not only is the teacher in the role of the learner but it offers an opportunity to visit a child’s home and community environment for a close-up view of the interests, values, and social mores that are important to members of the classroom community (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). These visits can also reveal rich social fabrics, fascinating oral histories, ways of organizing complicated lives, and technical expertise that can enrich everyday curriculum (Ginsberg, 2007, p. 58).

In a recent study of a rural school district during the 2004-2005 school year, 26 early elementary (K-2) teachers were asked to participate and conduct a home visit with each family who had a child enrolled in his or her class prior to the beginning of the school year (Meyer & Mann, 2006). When the teachers were asked to reflect on the most
important changes they observed during the school year related to these visits four themes emerged. The first theme was that home visits contributed to an improved relationship with parents and the child. One teacher stated that the visits made all her parents feel that she was more approachable. This teacher received notes, phone calls and visits from parents throughout the year. Another theme was that the students were more comfortable and less anxious at the beginning of the school year. Many teachers felt a major affect of the home visits was increased communication with parents. One teacher stated that because of the home visits, communication between this teacher and this teacher’s students was better than previous years and this teacher knew about the students’ families and things they liked. This teacher became a more understanding and empathetic teacher who was better aware of students’ home lives, houses, and backgrounds. The snapshot obtained by a visit in the natural environment can provide essential information necessary for understanding the family and an excellent means of strengthening home-school relationships (Meyer & Mann, 2006, p. 93).

Interviews with parents/family serve two important purposes (Flippo, 2003, p. 101). First, they provide the teacher with opportunities to learn more about the child’s sociocultural background, family history, medical history, and emergent literacy background (including the families’ values and beliefs about literacy). Parents and family members are a big part of the child’s life, literacy, and culture, and they can contribute much to your information about the child because they have been involved with their child’s emergent literacy from the beginning. (p. 101)
It is also equally beneficial to use student interviews as these interviews can be especially supportive to ones teaching. It is significant and also pertinent to assess what students’ interests, attitudes, motivations and feelings are surrounding literacy as it impacts their success in school (Flippo, 2003).

**Home-School Connection**

A teacher’s attitude deeply impacts the amount and type of learning which will transpire in students (Soderman, Gregory, & McCary, 2005). When we believe in the children, they will in turn believe in themselves. Planning must be based on their backgrounds, the information they already own, the goals they hold, and the developmental goals we hold for them. Not only are teachers vital to student success but parents play an equally important role in strengthening a child’s literacy experiences. Parents are their children’s first teachers and the foundation is the home environment. A child entering kindergarten is about to grow between two social environments where it is vital to maintain a cooperative link between the child’s two primary environments: the home and the kindergarten (Korat, 2001). Literacy learning that begins at home must be explored by the teachers, so that the learning can be enhanced in the school environment (Soderman, Gregory, & McCarty, 2005). Through experiences in all areas of literacy, children are exposed to multiple genres in both environments. Knowledge about print at school entry varies from child to child and from community to community, nearly all children, including those from low-SES settings, have had repeated experience with print in their homes and communities and develop significant literacy knowledge because of
this (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003, p. 30). Literacy learning takes place through the five areas represented in multiple genres. Genres that children experience through the five areas of literacy can be defined subjectively such as shopping lists, reading books, watching television, working in the garden, writing poetry, baking, reading signs, creating greeting cards, letters or invitations, conversations at the dinner table, singing songs at the kindergarten meeting rug, or playing in the block area, among others. Being aware of genres young children encounter at home and at school offer opportunities to bridge home and school literacies and enhance children’s literacy development. Parent-child communication takes place over texts in the home, in the car, in the supermarket, at the movies—almost everywhere that is part of the daily routine and lives of the family and community (Korat, 2001). Whether at home or at school, children’s literacy experiences vary and can’t be easily defined. Literacy in classrooms is not just a set of culturally neutral literacy activities, and to consider literacy as a series of isolated tasks that can be moved from one classroom to another without adjustment is to fail to understand that literacy is more than just a limited range of reading and writing events that can be reproduced for any class in any context (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers & Smythe, 2005). The kindergarten and the school are the first institutions, after the family, that play a critical role in the shaping of an individual. Children in kindergarten and school should receive encouragement from their teachers to study subjects of personal interest to them—subjects that can develop their identity, that have meaning for their lives on a personal, family and community level and can be expressed through
various ways of learning: written language, graphic language, mathematical language, musical language, or other avenues of communication.

We need to know more of the learning styles, coping strategies, and social support systems of the children we teach if instruction in reading and writing is to be a meaningful complement to their lives (Taylor, 1998, p. 93).

As educators, we must be supportive of the experiences that parents have and are already providing for their children to develop literacy learning, and communication is the key to building a solid base of support and understanding between these two environments (Soderman, Gregory & McCarty, 2005). Children’s lives are filled with language and literacy. Delicately they come into your classroom with diverse knowledge and ideas, each having the ability to connect them with new knowledge, new ways of knowing, other children, and the teacher (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). A strong web of classroom literacy grows as, with each day, teachers and children capture opportunities to expand their developing competencies and make learning connections with one another (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 26). The literacy web matures and develops as children and their families discover that what matters as reading and writing at home, also matters as reading and writing at school.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Objective
The purpose of my research was to explore the notion of family literacy. More specifically, I focused on how children's home literacy environments can influence their first year in school. The objective of my project was to explore the home environments and literacies of kindergarten students and their families. My goal was then to investigate the use of literacy in the students' home as it relates to their daily lives. I hoped to discover the families' funds of knowledge and the students' uses of literacy in their home environment. Through home visits, parent interviews and student interviews I had expected to expose myself to the children's literacy experiences as it related to their home environment. In my research plan I anticipated that I would discover new and meaningful ways to incorporate students' home experience to school, to create a more appropriate and meaningful learning environment. I aspire to impact teachers by inviting them into the notion of home visits as it supports family literacy.

**Participants**

I chose a group of kindergarten students from a mid sized city, in upstate New York, in a suburban school district for my research project. The classroom teacher with whom I worked with had fifteen students in a half day kindergarten program at the beginning of the school year. The school district is located on the urban cusp of the mid sized city. The school district has a low class size initiative with each classroom containing no more than fifteen students. I had worked in the elementary school in the district throughout the 2006-2007 school year as a literacy intern where I provided supplemental reading support for students in first through third grade. Since I was in the
school each morning I was able to create established relationships with the fifteen students in the kindergarten classroom. At the beginning of the school year the teacher had eight boys and seven girls. Before I began my research three boys had moved out of the district, leaving the class with twelve students; five boys and seven girls. I sent home consent forms explaining my research to the twelve families in March of 2007. Based on the return of the parent consent letters I hoped to select five families. I received four responses initially and completed research with two families. The other two families I had lost contact with after the second response. For the purpose of my research I had hoped on conducting home visits with each family but left it open for parents’ flexibility and preference. My first goal was to conduct the interview as a home visit. Since this was not convenient for one parent, I offered to meet the parent at the school instead.

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<tr>
<th>(Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s Name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Female</td>
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The first student, Emily, lives with her mother, father, and sister right down the street from the school. I conducted a home visit with Emily and her mother. Andrea’s mother felt more comfortable meeting with me at the school as she volunteers quite often. In order to work within her schedule, I met with her at the school library. I also interviewed both students separately at school, in the library.
Measures

In order to measure the students' and families' funds of knowledge and home literacies I conducted home visits and/or interviews. The interview questions were taken from Goodman, Y. & Owocki, G. (2002) and Flippo, R. (2003). The questions can be viewed in the section for procedures and instructions.

The interview questions used were the same for both families but some questions lead to new questions with either parent as the conversations lead to follow-up discussions and new questions. With the use of a tape recorder I audio taped the conversations in hopes of creating an environment that would foster conversation, eye contact and a friendlier disposition. My means of assessing were the interview responses and my own observations of the home environment and parent to child dispositions. The interview responses were recorded by audio recorder and the conversations were later transcribed. The observations were recorded in a research journal after the visit had ended. During the student interviews an audio recorder was also used along with anecdotal notes.

Procedure/ Instructions

I contacted the parents and set up interview times at their convenience. When I met with either parent I first introduced myself and thanked them for their time. I began each interview by inviting the parent into my project objective before I began the interview. I explained that I was not only looking at what reading and writing activities their family uses, but also their daily rituals, routines and family life. I went through my
interview questions, taking more time on some depending on parental responses. Some questions would lead to new questions as I discovered more information about the family. The parent interviews typically took anywhere from twenty minutes to a half hour.

During the student interviews I walked each child down to the library at separate times. Even though I knew each student from working in their classroom, during the walk down to the library I established a friendly connection with the student to warm them up to me. I asked them about their day and explained the interview and the audio recorder. I asked each student the same questions. As with their parents some questions lead to new questions based on their answers. The student interviews typically took about fifteen minutes each.

I was able to triangulate my data based on my literature review, interview responses, observations and writing samples. This helped to establish validity to my results. I had anticipated collecting writing samples from the school and home environment but was only able to view these samples which will be later discussed.

The questions administered to both parents and students are displayed below:

**Parent Interview Questions**


1. What are some of the things your child likes to do and talk about?
2. What are some places your child visits frequently?
3. In what settings does our child talk most comfortably?

4. What do you read with your child or other children at home?

5. Please share any of the family’s favorite books, authors, characters, cartoons, or videos.

6. Does your child ever read TV advertisements or captions?

7. Does your child ever use or play on the computer?

8. What are some things your child likes to draw or write when given a blank piece of paper? What other writing does your child like to do?

**Parent Interview Questions**


1. Tell me about your child:

2. How does your child feel about school?

3. How do you think your child learned to read? How do you view your child as a reader?

4. How do you view your child as a writer?

5. What are you child’s favorite things to read about?

6. Does your child seem interested in daily writing that you may use such as shopping lists, notes, or letters?

7. Do you do storybook reading or storytelling in your home?

8. What are your child’s greatest strengths? Does your child have any needs?

9. What are you child’s favorite things to do, his interests, and desires?
10. How does your child learn best?

11. Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Student Interview Questions


1. What are some of your favorite things to do at home?
2. What are some of your favorite things you do at school?
3. Do you know any good readers? Who?
4. How do you know that he/she is a good reader?
5. How did you learn to read?
6. Do you like to read? Why?
7. Do you have any favorite books?
8. Where do you like to read at home?
9. Do you read by yourself?
10. Does anyone ever read to you?
11. Do you think you are a good reader? Why
12. Do you like to write?
13. What types of things do you like to write about?
14. Do you think you are a good writer? Why?
**Student Interview Questions**


1. What types of things do you like to do or play at home? At school?
2. What are your favorite books? Cartoons?
3. Who is a good reader you know? What made that person good?
4. Do you read TV ads or captions?
5. Do you play computer or video games?
6. Do you like to draw when you write?
7. How do you decide what to write about?
8. What do you write at home?
9. What do you write at school?

Based on the interview responses with the students and their parents, my literature review, and my observations and discussions over the year with the classroom teacher, I was able to discover the school literacy experiences and home literacy experiences with each child and their family. I was then able to use this information to compare home and school literacy experiences and explore ways to connect the two for a more meaningful learning environment in the school setting.

**Data Analysis**

29
The information that I have gathered was all qualitative in that I only focused on the quality of the child's and parent's responses. My assessments were informal and included observations, interviews and writing samples which were all process oriented, where I looked at the development and procedure of the ways and uses of literacy in their lives. The assessments included naturalistic data that emerged from authentic literacy experiences that occur in the daily lives of the students and families in my research project. Although quantitative data is often useful, it was not a part of my research purposes as I wanted to discover the student's literacy experiences including the genres that they participate in at school and at home, the ways of learning and uses of literacy, affective influences, and cultural and sociocultural influences.

To analyze the data I began to listen to the audio tapes and transcribe the responses. I began to sort the responses by categorizing what I discovered about the student's literacy experiences including the genres that they participate in at school and at home, the ways of learning and uses of literacy, affective influences, home environment, parent/child dispositions and cultural and sociocultural influences. Next I would soon discover what this data meant for these children's first year at school.

Chapter Four

Results

The objective of my project was to take a closer look at students' home literacy experiences through exploring the notion of family literacy. I focused on how children's
home literacy environments impact their first year in school, kindergarten. Using qualitative data I interviewed and made home visits with parents and students to investigate their family's literacy experiences and funds of knowledge to explore each child's individual interests, abilities, learning styles within their home literacies and experiences.

Not only did I observe the home literacy environments of the participants but I also observed the classroom literacy environment of the two participants throughout the school year. Both student participants were in the same classroom and exposed to a rich literacy environment. The teacher immerses the students in language throughout the morning authentically through balanced literacy in shared reading, read alouds, shared writing, guided reading, independent reading, word study, song and movement, and a print rich environment. The writing that the students compose at school consists of making cards, coupon books, recipe books, journal pages or writing prompts.

These school literacies are beneficial to her student's literacy development but I felt a stronger connection could be made if she had exposed herself to the student's home literacies. Not to say that she has negative relationships with parents because she seems to have positive ones. In fact, many of the parents come into the classroom as helpers throughout the week. These parents aren't just cutting and making copies, rather they are working directly with the students; facilitating centers during guided reading. In this sense the parents are familiar with school literacies in this teacher's classroom but the teacher isn't necessarily familiar with her student's home literacies.
The teacher's approach to family literacy should be acknowledged, as she keeps consistent communication with parents. She also sends home literacy activities as homework, such as sight word recognition worksheets. She calls these “word roads” as there are words in each block of a curvy road that leads from start to finish on a worksheet. The students have to make it to the bottom of the word road as they learn their sight words. Once they complete a word road they are given the next level to start working on. She also has the students bring their independent books home to reread to family members as a familiar read. She also connected the families by having the parents send in a family recipe. She then had the students write their own version of the family recipe. She combined all the parent and student recipes into a class book that traveled home. This teacher has some authentic ideas and it was my hope to use my research from my home visit and parent/student interviews to offer this classroom teacher a closer look at the students home literacy backgrounds and experiences.

**Child One**

Emily:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home Literacies &amp; Home Genres</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visits the library every week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artwork displayed on walls in each room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books located on shelves in each room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses the dictionary with her sister to write and find words</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefers writing over reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys making up and writing stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing outdoors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Like to craft, cut, glue & create things  
Mom and her go grocery shopping weekly  
The family doesn’t watch television often except for  
Friday movie night and Saturday morning cartoons  
Family plays games and cards  
Emily enjoys make believe, playing with her toy kitchen & dress up  
Family has a computer and Emily plays computer CD games but doesn’t use it often  
Quiet time is spent reading  
Mom and Emily enjoy garage sales and the library  
Dad reads to children at night  
Emily reads to her stuffed animals

| Ways of Learning | Creative & active learner who likes to be hands on  
|                  | Learns at her own pace  
|                  | Learns from her sister  
|                  | Is an active questioner & inquirer  

| Affective Influences | Is very social  
|                      | Loves art & writing  
|                      | Needs reassurance  
|                      | Is a good reader but prefers writing  
|                      | Doesn’t like being told what to do  
|                      | Enjoys mathematics and numbers  
|                      | Rather play with friends than alone  
|                      | Favorite books include Christmas stories, Bible stories, and books about animals (except sea animals)  
|                      | Loves stuffed animals and her dream catcher  
|                      | Doesn’t like to sing or dance  
|                      | Doesn’t like to read things that are “boring”  

| Socio-Cultural Influences | Mom works at night  
|                          | Family is Catholic  

| Observations of Home Environment | Emily and her mother appear to have a playful and loving relationship  
|                                  | Children’s artwork is taped up on the walls in each room  
|                                  | Book shelves are in each room  
|                                  | Emily has several journals are that are kept sporadically around the home  
|                                  | Computer is located in the living room  

Home Visit/ Parent Interview

As I was approaching my first home visit many questions were at mind. Would the parents feel threatened? Would there be uncomfortable moments or silence between questions? Would I be invading their personal space? As I walked up to Emily’s home I felt immediately at ease. Their pale green house was surrounded by a wrap-around porch, wild flowers and wind chimes. I soon discovered that this would reflect the relaxed atmosphere of the family environment. Emily opened the screen door off of their porch that led into their living room. As her mother was putting the vacuum away she welcomed me warmly as I took a seat on the couch and chatted with Emily. Their cat ventured out from the kitchen to join us and Emily told me about their pets. Emily’s mother soon joined us at the couch and Emily jumped in her lap. I had anticipated just sitting with Emily’s mother, for I was interviewing the students in school the next day. I would soon realize how much more information I would gain watching the mother and daughter interact together as they answered the questions and how natural it felt as they responded together. Emily’s mom would confer with her daughter for most of the questions and elaborate into greater detail. It became clear that they had an open and playful relationship with love and communication present.

I soon learned about the various literacies that were valued and present in the home. What I noticed immediately was that Emily’s mother was open to each of her children’s individuality, welcoming each child’s ways of exploring the world. I learned that Emily loved to craft. Her mother told me that where Emily’s sister loves to read all the time (even when she puts her shoes on) that Emily doesn’t read as much but loves to
"cut, glue, paste, and make things". In the living room there were pieces of artwork that the children created, taped up on the walls. Emily is a creative learner, one that enjoys being outside, actively exploring the world around her. Her mother told me that she learns at her own pace and listens to her sisters theories of how things work. When it comes to listening to her parents she tends to argue and ask more questions such as “Why are the leaves coming in?” or, “Why is the sky blue?”

Since Emily is in the morning kindergarten session, her mother and her have their afternoons together. They visit the library each week as well as the grocery store. They had just gone to the library to return some books and discovered that they had missed the library book sale. What they discovered instead were boxes and boxes of books for free outside the library, left over from the book sale. Emily showed me her new books excitedly; they were placed on a book shelf in the dining room. In fact, there were books located all over the home on shelves and in cabinets. Emily’s mother commented on their story routine:

“I usually work evenings, so it’s usually her dad that reads to them. (Looks at Emily) You guys are reading Harry Potter. (Looks back up at me) He’ll sit down and read Harry Potter to them at night. We have books in the living room, in the kitchen, in the girl’s room and in my room. It’s mainly her dad that reads to them. (Looks back at Emily) Sometimes you read to your stuffed animals don’t you?” (personal correspondence, 5/09/07)

When Emily’s mother talked about grocery shopping Emily told me that she was her mom’s “shopping buddy”. Her mother told me that she helps her read the list with
the words she can begin to recognize and is always reading environmental print outside and in stores.

When I asked Emily’s mother about how she views her daughter as a reader she said:

“Emily is a creative learner who doesn’t read as much, but she gets in the mood once in a while, don’t you (looks at Emily and pats her leg).” (personal correspondence, 5/09/07)

She told me that Emily is a good writer, and that she loves to make up and write stories. She got up from the couch and went over to the computer desk to grab a piece of writing that Emily and her sister had been working on together. The loose leaf paper was filled with words in no particular order or fashion.

“Her and her sister actually took out the dictionary and were finding words. Ember would rather write and make up stories than read stories. (Looks to Emily) So you looked up words in the dictionary and wrote them all over the page.”

(personal correspondence, 5/09/07)

She then went into the dining room and pulled several book journals that Emily uses to create her stories. The two of them knelt down to the coffee table and flipped through several of the journals commenting on the contents. Emily’s mother would read them to me and comment or ask questions to Emily on her interests and genres of print. Several pages were filled with numbers, some pages were words copied from a favorite story and other pages were stories she had created.
When it comes to school, Emily told me that she likes playing at school. Her mother told me that she doesn’t like to be told what to do which made it a difficult transition entering into kindergarten.

“She just had to learn that outside of school she had to learn to behave away from the house and listen to the teachers. But she loves to socialize, (looks at Emily) a social butterfly. You love the artwork, (laughs and looks up at me) she does much better with all the fun stuff.” (personal correspondence, 5/09/07)

As a family, they enjoy being outside and being active. Since Emily’s mother works nights, her father reads to the girls at night and is currently reading them *Harry Potter*. Something unique about this family is that they don’t watch television nearly at all. Emily’s mother told me that they would rather “kick the kids outdoors to be active” or have quiet time reading on the couch than to turn the television on. Not to say that they have never experienced television but it isn’t something that the family spends a great deal of time doing. They allow them to watch Saturday morning cartoons and have family movie night on Friday. Each Friday the family watches a movie and eats T.V dinners. They call Friday, *frozen food night*.

My home visit with Emily and her mother was a fascinating experience and gave me much insight into who Emily is as a member of her family. My interview with Emily would add to this knowledge base and connect to what I already discovered.

**Student Interview**
When I walked Emily down to the library she began to tell me what she did the day before after I left her house. She was going to write me a story after I left but didn’t have time after lunch and her homework. During our interview Emily highlighted many aspects of my interview with her and her mother.

Emily told me that she enjoyed reading her library books and playing outside. At school she told me she that she enjoys playing teacher with her best friend Emma. She also told me that she would rather play with a friend because they are her favorite. Her favorite books are *Little Bear* and Christmas stories. She seems to know what her interests are and what she likes and dislikes in terms of reading material. She told me that magazines, posters and newspapers were boring to her and that she liked reading the bible and animal stories (excluding sea animals because those are also boring). When asked her if she knew of any good readers she told me that the third graders that are in the classroom next door to her class are the good readers.

“In the last corner by my classroom; that side is good readers” (personal correspondence, 5/10/07)

When I asked her if she thought she was a good reader she disagreed.

“I don’t think I’m a good reader because I can’t read these books (looks around the library). I read some of the words. Sometimes when I see that big word (points to the word “birthday” on the bookshelf) and I don’t know that big word I’ll look at the word and sound it out, but now I know that word” (personal correspondence, 5/10/07)
It seemed as if she viewed older children and adults as good readers and that she wasn’t one yet. This reminded me of the conversation I had with her mother where she told me that Emily needed constant reassurance that she was a “good kid”.

One particular question that stood out was not a question that I had intended to ask. When I asked Emily what type of writing she did at home I had already had a clear idea from visiting her home. Her and her mother showed me her different writing genres such as the many journals where she wrote various genres of writing. When I asked her if the writing she does at school is like the writing she showed me that she does at home she immediately told me that writing at school was different than the writing at home.

“At school I do real writing, like making real stories.” “I just make up stories at home and those (referring to school) are like mother’s day stories and all that other writing.” (personal correspondence, 5/10/07)

Her make believe stories that she creates in her journals at home she didn’t label as real writing.

**Child Two**

**Andrea:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home Literacies &amp; Home Genres</th>
<th>Visits the library every week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gardening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing outdoors and rides her bike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likes art, crafting and drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses the computer to make cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favorite authors are Eric Carl,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Watches television in moderation including Curious George, PBS and Animal Planet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Mom and her go grocery shopping weekly
• Loves to sing and dance
• Reads signs, cereal boxes, soap bottles
• Visits restaurants, brothers lacrosse games and grocery store
• Writes stories and poems

**Ways of Learning**
• Creative & active learner who likes to be hands on
• Equally uses all learning styles
• Can keep attention easily

**Affective Influences**
• Social child and outgoing
• Loves art, reading and writing
• Is a good reader and writer
• Is a perfectionist when writing
• Rather play with friends than alone
• Favorite books include Eric Carl, Arthur, Henry and Mudge, Magic Tree House,
  • Likes to sing or dance
  • Likes make believe
  • Rarely shy unless she is tired

**Socio-Cultural Influences**
• Attends church each week and spends Sundays with extended family
• Active members of the church

**Observations of Home Environment**
• Not Applicable

**Parent Interview**

I met with Andrea’s mom at the library one early morning before school. I had seen her in school many times but this was our first formal meeting. We sat in the back of the library as she told me about her daughter Andrea and their family. Their family consists of Andrea’s mother, father, Andrea’s seventh grade brother, fifth grade sister, and of course, Andrea.

Andrea’s mother told me that Andrea loves to read and is an equally great reader and writer. She loves school this year and is being challenged.
“She loves school; it’s been a great experience for her. She’s been challenged this year and has learned a lot. It hasn’t been boring. That was my main concern because she was so literate before school, so I wanted to make sure she wasn’t bored that first year and that she was challenged and pushed.” (personal correspondence, 05/24/07)

Andrea is a great writer who is a perfectionist at times where she wants her letters to look just right. At home she loves to make cards for Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and birthday cards for cousins. She composes cards and art on the computer as well. As a learner Andrea is active who can keep her attention to tasks. Her mother doesn’t yet see one way that she learns best. She feels that she learns equally in all intelligences such as being active or visually learning.

Since Andrea’s mother works out of town two days a week, Andrea’s father has always taken the children to the library each week to pick out new books. They also have a fairly routine nighttime story time where they will read to her. Her mother took Andrea to the library program last year before kindergarten as they didn’t enroll her in a preschool program. Andrea loves to read, draw and color. She currently loves her trampoline, her Polly Pockets, animals, playing school and dress-up. She also loves being outdoors to dig in the dirt in the garden with her mom, ride her bike, or draw with her sister. Her mother told me that she loves collecting treasures outside such as bugs or leaves.
When it comes to watching television Andrea’s mother held similar views as Emily’s mother. Andrea doesn’t watch much television but enjoys programs on PBS or the show, *Animal Planet*.

Andrea is an excellent reader and can readily read a chapter book. Her new interests are the *Magic Tree House* books and *Henry and Mudge*. These books are challenging for Andrea at her age because of how many words are on each page but it appears to be a challenge that she is ready for according to her mother. Andrea also enjoys picture books such as *Curious George, Arthur* and *Bernstein Bears*. Her mother told me that Andrea likes to help with the grocery list. As she has become a more proficient reader, Andrea is now able to cross items off and remind her mother of things she hasn’t put in the cart yet. One thing that stood out to me about their family is that they are active members in their church. Every Sunday they attend church with their extended family including Andrea’s aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins. Andrea is part of her church youth group. Every Sunday after church their entire family hangs out for the day and then has a big family meal at their Uncle’s house. During the summer they spend these days outside around his pool.

**Student Interview**

Andrea seemed quite positive about our interview as we walked down to the library. She told me about the chicks they were hatching in the classroom. She is a very social student in her classroom always with someone, smiling and laughing. She is very
outgoing and likes to sing and dance. She told me that she would rather spend time with friends than alone because with friends one can have a great time.

The first question that I asked Andrea regarded the things she liked to do at home. Andrea shared that she loves riding her bike outside but what stood out the most was the first thing she mentioned. She told me that one of her favorite things to do is to take a nap. With some surprise I asked her more about what she meant.

“I like them because you can rest after you have a long day.” (personal correspondence, 05/09/07)

During my interview with Andrea’s mother I told her that Andrea had mentioned enjoying naps. Her mother didn’t seem surprised and told me that Andrea knows her body and won’t hesitate to go off on her own to lie down.

When I asked Andrea what places she visits she told me that they go to restaurants, the library, her brother’s lacrosse games and the grocery store.

At school Andrea told me she likes playtime, snack time and activities. When I asked her more about the activities she told me they were like the ones they were working on that day. Those activities were centers that the students rotate through during guided reading.

Both children told me that they didn’t watch television very often. Emily couldn’t name any of the shows she watched on television which made it appear that she didn’t watch television very often at all. Andrea told me that she watches cartoons like Curious George or the show Tele Tubbies. She also said that she enjoys watching movies. Her mother told me that she enjoys reading scholastic books that feature
television characters such as *Clifford* or *Dora the Explorer*. I asked if she ever read anything other than books and she mentioned several other types of reading.

"Um, yah sometimes I read signs on the road. I read cereal boxes and soap bottles." (personal correspondence, 05/09/07)

She considers herself a good reader along with the other students from her reading group that she has heard read.

When it comes to writing Andrea told me she likes to write stories and poems. She likes to write stories about bunnies and ducks. She considers herself a good writer because she often writes long stories and her writing is neat. Andrea also told me that writing at home was different than writing in school. She couldn’t explain why but told me this:

"Um, it’s different. I write different things. Like if I’m making a book, I’d be at school. At home I’d write like “Ducky is cool”. Sometimes I write things at home that I didn’t even know I could write, that I might not write at school."

(personal correspondence, 05/09/07)

I was not able to view or receive writing samples from Andrea as I wasn’t able to visit her home. I did here about her love of drawing and writing stories. Emily’s home writing from her various journals, dictionary writing and art work on the walls was too valuable to her mother for me to take to make copies. Both children invited me into their worlds of knowing, their realms of interests and experience both at home and in the classroom. I found that through my home visit I gained a broader view of Emily and her family. These brief interviews with both parents and students helped me learn about each
child in terms of their home literacy experiences, family knowledge and affective influences.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Through my research in the area of family literacy, I was able to discover new and meaningful ways to incorporate students’ home experience to school to create a more appropriate and meaningful learning environment. I chose the topic of family literacy to achieve my goal of discovering ways to incorporate what students already know and can do to the school curriculum and environment. Each child has diverse experiences that shape their lives. If the teacher only knows the child in one context, the school context, they are missing many pieces of the child. The pieces include that of the family, extended family, funds of knowledge, and community influences as they shape the child’s development. When one truly knows a child and how they learn best, they can extend their learning to their highest potential. As a teacher one must understand how diverse the backgrounds and literacy experiences are of the students they teach. When a child enters kindergarten he or she comes to school with already having had four to five years of lived experiences. Even as adults we learn differently, have various interests, rituals, routines and personalities that make us unique. Just like ourselves, we can’t expect students to learn in one style or way. How do we then understand our students? By discovering student’s home literacies I discovered a way to truly know the individual
student participants and their lives beyond school. In this context I was able to get a closer look at the world that shaped the development of each child.

**Home Literacies and Home Genres**

During my visit at Emily's home I learned that she is a creative child in everything that she does. She loves to craft, use her imagination for dramatic play and write creative stories. Her genres of literacy and energy remind me of a wildflower. She is carefree and loving, and so is her mother. I could see that she comes from a very supportive environment at home where her family appreciates her way of learning and exploring the world around her. Emily's intelligences excel in logical mathematical, intrapersonal, linguistic and bodily-kinesthetic. I found it significant that although Emily doesn't love to read, she is still reading at grade level, and her mother sees this as wonderful. She views Emily as a reader but knows that she flourishes as a writer.

Writing in their home is not limited but rather explored in multiple genres from art to journal writing. I found it fascinating to see the different genres of writing in her home compared to at school. In the school environment, besides what the children do freely during play time, the writing style and topics are given to the students. Examples would include worksheets or projects that have specific prompts. At home, Emily has several personalized journals where she actively explores different genres of writing such as lists, stories, author study or drawing. She herself called her writing 'not real' compared to school writing.
Andrea is strong academically in reading and is an environmental print reader already at the age of six. I gathered that she enjoys reading signs as she mentioned reading soap bottles and cereal boxes. Her mother told me that she is able to check off the shopping list as they go through the grocery store. She is aware of her favorite authors and genres of interest.

Andrea is fully of energy and smiles. She is friendly to all of her classmates and can easily get along with anyone. She comes from a strong family in that they are very close as they spend every Sunday with their extended family members. Andrea doesn’t seem to have any trouble communicating her feelings, thoughts and desires. She doesn’t seem to be shy but is rather a social butterfly. She is an active learner and one that loves art, reading, writing, imaginative play and the outdoors. Her intelligences vary in that she seems to venture across the spectrum. She is a singer, writer, reader, dancer, poet, gardener and an artist.

**Implications for School Environment**

Research tells us that early literacy experiences begin at home, before schooling. When one discovers what students already know they can build on that knowledge, beginning with the known. If we know that students come to school already having literacy experiences why do we then not investigate what those literacies are? How do we expect to build off what they already know if we don’t know what that is? If we take time students will show us what they know, their schema, and we can then find ways to attach new understandings, making learning more meaningful. Finding ways to connect
the home environment to the school environment makes this more possible; creating a supportive environment to enhance learning opportunities.

If I were Emily’s kindergarten teacher I would take my experiences from my interviews and home visit to make these connections in my classroom. Connections could be as simple as knowing that her family doesn’t watch much television and when “turn off the T.V. week” comes in the school, Emily could help generate a list of all the other activities her family enjoys doing. Knowing that Emily needs reassurance I would want to especially make a point to give specific and supportive praise to her in everything that she does, especially reading. Emotions connect to learning and I would want to create this supportive environment for all students but be aware of this aspect of Emily’s learning. To encourage more reading opportunities, I would also bring in or allow the students to bring in stuffed animals to read to in the library center. Emily loves to read to her stuffed animals and this would foster more reading in the classroom.

Emily and her sister love to use the dictionary to hunt for words. They created a paper filled with words they found from the dictionary. Most of these words Emily may not have known how to pronounce, yet she was exploring and playing with letters and sounds as they form words. I would want to incorporate this into the classroom by placing a dictionary (adult and children’s) into the writing center and classroom library. This would benefit all students as they could explore beginning letter sounds and actively explore print.

Since I would consider Emily an expert at writing I would want to accentuate this in the classroom. I would provide her and her classmates with journals similar to the
ones in her home. Lucy McCormick Calkins, 1994, discusses the use of a day book in her book, *The Art of Teaching Writing*. She proposes that a writer’s notebook is a tool for the rehearsal of writing. She says that writing doesn’t begin with desk work, but lifework, advocating that students jot down favorite words, responses to reading, things they notice and wonder about, or their memories and ideas. These entries allow opportunity for rough drafts in writing to grow.

Emily specifically said that writing was different at school than it was at home. In fact, she didn’t consider her writing at home to be “real writing”. Even though she had a hard time explaining why I couldn’t help but wonder if it was the genres of writing that take place in either environment. If she had journal books in school, might this extend her learning? The notion of a day book is something that I want to incorporate into my classroom. Emily has several day books and this would allow an opportunity for her to be an expert and show the class her expertise.

Overall, when it comes to how Emily learns best I would want to provide multiple opportunities for her to learn with peers, to be active, and ask questions. I would also allow multiple experiences in that she learns at her own pace.

Even though I was not able to visit Andrea’s home I still gained valuable information about her and her family. What stood out the most to me was a concern her mother had regarding Andrea’s first year at school. Andrea is reading at a third grade level. Her mother wanted to make sure she was challenged and not bored. Even though Andrea is reading at a third grade level, she is still only a kindergartener. How do we create a balance and a developmentally appropriate environment for her? I feel that her
teacher is doing a great job with this in supporting her. As her teacher I would also want to support her and challenge her. I think that this is something that I would most definitely want to continually communicate with her parents since it is a concern of theirs.

As Andrea is a social learner I would want to provide opportunities for cooperative learning. She is normally social and active. Her mother told me that when Andrea becomes withdrawn or quiet, it’s a clear sign that she is tired, so I would want to be aware of this in the classroom.

Since Andrea enjoys using the technology of her computer at home to make greeting cards it would be beneficial to set this up in the classroom. She might enjoy typing rather than writing a card and could show other students how she does this. She also loves to sing and dance. This would not be difficult to incorporate into and early childhood classroom but I would know that I could let Andrea lead a new song or even create her own movements for the class.

Even though she is reading higher level chapter books she also enjoys reading books with familiar characters such as television characters. I would want to include these types of books in my classroom library.

Lastly, I learned that she loves to be outdoors, dig in the dirt and collect treasures. I would want to encourage her to share these with the class as we could classify and sort her treasures from the outdoors.

The Power of Home Visits
When I first discovered that I would only be conducting a home visit with Emily’s mother and not with Andrea’s mother, I must admit that I was disappointed. I would soon discover how much more I was able to gain about the family by visiting the home environment. Not to say that I didn’t gain valuable information about Andrea from my interviews with her and her mother but there was something uniquely different about the interview at the home and than interview at the school. Even though I didn’t plan on comparing a home visit interview against a non home visit interview I was able to clearly see the increased benefits that come from a home visit rather than a visit at the school.

The information gained from witnessing a child in their home environment is vast. Not only did I see how literacy was used in the home, but Emily’s mother was the person with the power, not me. I feel that this was an important aspect of the home visit. When a parent comes to the school he or she may feel intimidated by the teacher or school structure. In the home environment (at least for myself), I was the guest; the person who felt a bit uncomfortable. I was the one learning and the one gaining information with the parents as the experts.

I can still now physically picture the layout of her home, the places she goes to read, where her journals are kept and where her art work is kept on the walls. When her mother would talk about something, such as Emily’s dictionary writing sample or journals, she was able to readily grab it to show me. So many factors influence a child’s development. I was able to catch a small glimpse of Emily’s community and family. There is still so much that I didn’t get to see including her father, sister, and extended family members. However small a glimpse I was able to witness still leads to a big
impact for the school environment. Overall, the home environment was much more conducive to the questions and responses. It created a safe place for discussion to take place.

When an educator mentions home visits as a practice of choice the reactions can be of shock and disapproval. Typically, this is what I found when I discussed my research. Many themes emerged as reasons for non-approval. One is that visiting the home or a student’s tee-ball game is inappropriate. I personally feel that having the opportunity to view our students in a new context will show us much more about how to meet their needs in the classroom. Another view is that of invading the parent’s personal space. Some may feel that what happens in a student’s home is private and separate from the school. I myself wonder if some parents want their lives separate because we make them feel as if we are the ones who know what their children should know. After all, we are the ones sending home homework, reporting progress and teaching the parents how to extend the teaching of literacy at home. Why would they want to expose their home environment when they may fear judgment? I foresee great potential in home visits as ways to explore the unique ways of the family, their uses of literacy and their ways of exploring their community. In this way teachers can connect the home to school and in turn, connect the school back to home.

**Implication of Results**

The impact of home visits and parent and child interviews directly impacts the way we view our students which in turn, directly impacts our teaching and their learning.
The understanding that literacy begins in the home is not new, therefore we need to take further steps in discovering where our students come from and what they can offer the classroom community. I truly feel that qualitative assessment of a student directly impacts achievement. When one knows a child, not just how many letters they know or if they can write their name correctly, they are able to take that child to new learning. Each child has their own interests, their own ways of knowing, and their own experiences that make them who they are. When we discover these unique attributes we are able to tailor instruction to our individual student’s learning needs and affective influences.

**Strengths and Limitations of Study**

I was able to explore family literacy at an elementary school where I was interning from September through May. I had an established relationship with the kindergarten teacher and her students. The study was voluntary so the parents that were involved were open and willing. They didn’t receive any incentive besides the knowledge that they would be aiding my research and future teaching practices. Having in-person interviews and home visits provided strong data for my data analysis. Using a thorough literature review, viewing writing samples and interviewing both the parent and child aided in the triangulation of my data.

Since my participants were that of only two families it limited the results that I would have liked to yield. Having only conducted one home visit also limits my results to one family. In view of the fact that my population of participants wasn’t diverse, I was not able to fully explore the socio-cultural perspective of home literacies and families.
funds of knowledge. It was my intention of collecting several samples of writing that the students created at home but was only able to view Emily’s and I wasn’t able to look at any of Andrea’s. I feel this is because of my role as an intern where I didn’t have consistent contact to the parents. I would have liked to see this study go a step further in the implementation of these home literacies into the children’s classroom.

Recommendations for Future Research

My research will benefit my work with students in that, by discovering their home literacy experiences, this will then foster their literacy experiences in school when a connection is made between the two environments. Based on this study I hope to eventually be able to explore home visits as a future kindergarten teacher and connect these home literacies into my classroom. So much more can be explored within the topic of family literacy. In the time of No Child Left Behind more pressure is being put on teachers to be held accountable. What then becomes a risk are the students who aren’t able to explore who they truly are in school, but have to code switch into who they have to be at school versus who they are at home and in their community. I hope to inspire teachers to take on this challenge and push to meet both goals, those of the school and those of the greatest value; the students who we teach.

References


Spielman, J. (2001). The family photography project: “we will just read what the pictures tell us.” *The Reading Teacher, 54*(8), 762-770.


