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## CHAPTER 4 Funds of Knowledge and Culture

### *Literacy Moment*

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#### **Why is this night...?**

by Larry Swartz

When might family members gather in their homes to read texts aloud together? In the Jewish tradition, the Passover holiday provides a context for parents and children, relatives and friends to join and spend time lingering over a text. It is a celebration that provides an authentic shared reading experience in the home.

The first two nights of the holiday are celebrated with rich meals called Seders, in which the history of Passover is recalled. Special foods, plates, and silverware are all part of the Seder service. The word *seder* means “order,” and the events of the evening follow a particular order to relate the story of the Jewish people’s escape from slavery by the Egyptian Pharaoh more than 3000 years ago. This order is laid out in a small booklet called the Haggadah, usually in both Hebrew and English. The word *haggadah* means “tell or to relate.” Each participant at a Seder is offered a copy of the Haggadah to follow the narrative, a narrative set in the context of a parent–child dialogue.

Early in the service, it is required that the youngest at the table ask the Four Questions that are answered in the Haggadah: Why is this night different from all other nights? Why do we eat bitter herbs at our Seder? Why do we dip foods twice tonight? Why do we lean on a pillow tonight? The youngest was usually the shyest and the most nervous at the table and often needed to be persuaded to stand up in front of all and “just give the questions a try!” After the mumbling of the words the child had practised for days, everyone would “ooh” and “aah” and say, “That’s terrific!” Sometimes, a volunteer would be called upon to recite the questions and show off what was learned in Hebrew School classes. Cousin Terry would always read the questions quickly in Hebrew. Cousins Marcia and Zelda would attempt to read the questions in unison. I usually chose to sing the Four Questions, using the tune every child learned.

After the Four Questions were asked, we would follow the order of the service to tell the story, to say prayers, to sip wine and taste small bits of food, each with its own significance in reminding us of the struggle of the Israelites in their quest and journey to freedom. For example, we would each taste Haroseth—a mixture of chopped walnuts, wine, cinnamon, and apples—that is intended to remind us of the mortar the Jewish slaves used to assemble the Pharaoh’s bricks.

Each Passover, my father, would lead us through the Haggadah storytelling, spontaneously assigning each of us at the table to read a part of the story aloud. We never knew when we would be called upon, but every one of us needed to be ready to read our assigned portion in Hebrew or English as everyone at the table followed along in his or her own copy of the booklet.

My father passed away many years ago. In our family, the Seders have been carried on at my brother Stan’s house. Over the years I have listened to my nieces and nephews as they have become part of the Four Question tradition. Now, my grand-nephews are responsible for carrying on the tradition, for reciting the Four Questions just as millions

of Jewish boys and girls throughout the world have done for centuries. I am aware that every Jewish family customizes the Seder rituals in their own fashion, drawing from traditions that are thousands of years old and shaped from practices realized from generation to generation. Some may celebrate Passover for one night, some for two, but for a tiny fraction of the year, it is an occasion to read text aloud, to listen to stories about the past, to pray and sing, to eat and drink, to laugh and gossip, to reunite, and to give life to authentic family literacy.

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“Reading is something you do with your whole self ... We have come to understand much more about the role of the reader in reading, the way in which different readers bring different things to texts and all readers bring themselves ... their identity as a man or woman, a black or white person, a person from a particular social background or class—their social identity.”

—Myra Barrs

Family literacy is a way of viewing teaching that builds on the communities in which you teach. Family literacy is a way of describing how parents and children read and write together or alone during everyday interactions. Families in your community represent a tremendous range of living arrangements, and we can build on the strengths and resources of households. To do so, we need to view our students’ literate lives outside of school as funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) that we can draw on and harness to our teaching. As observable interactions involving print or “talk over texts” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), literacy practices are distinctive because they draw on people’s lives.

Culture is central, as a resource we need to pull on to meet student needs. Culture relies on tools, beliefs, and rituals that mediate our thinking. From birth, there are ways of being and belief systems that surround us and inform the way we see the world, interact with others, and mediate thoughts. What is more, we are socialized into ways of speaking, viewing, writing, and understanding through our cultures.

Teachers can elicit funds of knowledge in their teaching and build on cultural resources in their planning. Children are not passive bystanders, but instead active participants in the home, and we need to acknowledge and draw on these interactions in our activities and our lessons. As a teacher, you can access funds of knowledge in several ways:

- Go on home visits to your students’ households to learn about families and their literacy practices.
- Regularly speak with students about what they do at home.
- Have students bring in and present family artifacts.
- Have students interview family members about their experiences. For example, if you are doing a unit on biography, have students interview members of their family about their biography and migrations from one place to another.
- Build a family component into open houses and parent-teacher nights. Have parents chat with each other and create an open, friendly forum about what goes on in the home.
- Incorporate vocations of parents into teaching and units.
- Find out where parents work and arrange field trips to their workplaces.



## **The Literate Lives of Urban Children**

by Catherine Compton-Lilly

My 18 years of teaching suggested to me that students' learning was not only determined by methods, materials, programs, or pedagogy but by the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which children live and learn. As an urban teacher, I felt the need to understand the literate lives of my students and their families.

The ten children who were involved in my longitudinal study were my first-grade students during the 1996–1997 school year. They attended a large urban school that served children from the lowest socio-economic section of a mid-sized northeastern city. Every three years I have returned to interview the students and their families. The data from the initial study included four semi-structured interviews with each of the ten parents and children. Interviews focused on people's experiences with learning to read, self-assessment of their reading abilities, critical events in their lives as readers, and their feelings about reading over time. Student portfolios, audiotapes of class discussions, lesson plans, and daily field notes were collected. In the second and third phases of the study, interviews were conducted with each parent and child. Student writing was collected and student reading ability was assessed. Field notes documented each interview and case studies were constructed for each family.

The study reveals unquestioned dominant discourses that surround reading and explores contradictions and complexities that surround reading practices in urban households. A major finding of the research suggests that poor urban families are often more literate than is generally assumed, and that much needs to be done to confront the myths that surround urban families and literacy. Later phases of the study explored various discourses that surround reading and urban families:

- While parents were highly critical of urban parents in the abstract, when they described their own neighbors and acquaintances a much more positive picture emerged. It appeared the parents often subscribed to the same negative assumptions about urban parents that are often voiced by the larger community.
  - Parents and children often described sounding out words when reading, yet running records revealed that children rarely sounded out words sequentially.
  - Although parents placed great faith in computers and technological toys, the actual computer experiences of children generally involved playing low-level games or were nonexistent.
  - While parents praised the recent high-stakes testing movement for documenting children's progress, few of the parents in this study actually knew how their child performed on these state tests.
  - Children's designations as successful or unsuccessful readers often involve forms of capital that extend beyond reading ability.
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## **Home Literacies**

Within families, there are many different ways in which we read and write, and make meaning more generally. For example, we create bulletin boards with tasks we need to do and notes to ourselves; we write personal letters, e-mails, and cards to people close to us; we manifest our identities in the home through the placement of furniture, posters on walls, photographs on display, objects children create, etc.; there are manuals and reference materials on display, not to mention books, newspapers, and magazines.

We have rituals in the home associated with literacy, such as reading excerpts from the newspaper. Sometimes, as Barton and Hamilton have noted (1998), our ideas, beliefs, and values we display in the home are as much a form of social participation as protesting with placards.

Over the 2004–2005 academic year, Broad, Diiorio, Rowsell, and Tessaro conducted a series of focus groups in an inner-city school in Toronto on how to bridge home and school literacies. The following themes emerged strongly from their study:



1. **Familial Literacy Patterns:** Six out of ten parents in one focus group made a direct link between literacy practices (Heath, 1983) that take place at home and their understanding of literacy at school. One mother claimed that it was a family tradition to read books together at night, and vestiges of this tradition have been noted by classroom teachers in the child. This same mother has three children at the school and each one prefers spoken or oral literacy activities over silent reading or writing activities. Another parent has a boy who struggles with literacy.
2. **Crossing Generations:** Three out of ten parents talked about literacy practices in the home being carried over generations, becoming a generational literacy practice. One talked about the tradition of writing thank-you letters crossing generations.
3. **Emotional Literacy:** Three out of ten parents mentioned that literacy can be tied to emotions. For example, they each talked about how their children write letters after having a disagreement with a friend or parents to resolve the issue.
4. **Choosing Parental Literacy Mentors:** Several focus group participants noted that their children chose a parent as a literacy mentor and modeled their literacy habits. One parent spoke about how her child at a very young age read books in bed just as the mother had. Early on, her son saw his mom as literate and a reader because she reads novels. His father, an academic, reads all the time, but somehow did not seem as literate.

A large body of literature indicates that parent–child interactions in the home are associated with school readiness. It has been shown in research that parent-and-child book reading is associated with language skills, reading ability, and school achievement. Interactions around problem-solving and playing with toys also are associated with school readiness. However, we do not know if these associations are stronger for some teaching situations than others.

In Britto et al (2006) two distinct groups emerged: storyreaders and storytellers. Surprisingly, it was not the storyreaders, as they anticipated, who talked moved around the text and made real-world connections, but it was the storytellers who clearly demonstrated a more interactive pattern, interspersing their discussion around the book. Mothers who treated book-reading interaction as an opportunity to have a conversation with their children beyond the pages facilitated more language use and understanding. As a result, children’s vocabulary development appears to be associated with more interactive maternal book reading patterns. What emerges is the integral role of talk in literacy in the home, and more broadly in literacy learning. Preschoolers whose mothers provide them with high levels of support and guided participation have greater school readiness and expressive language.

## **Literacy and Learning on the Move**

by Yvon Appleby

Research carried out at a bilingual family literacy centre in Liverpool, England, showed how literacy and learning traveled between different domains in the lives of women who came to the centre (Gilbert & Appleby, 2005). We used a social practice approach that recognizes that literacy is not a simple universal skill, to be acquired through learning, but is something that is part of people's lives, their culture, and their identity.

The bilingual centre works with people from many language communities, some recently arrived and some from settled communities. Most of the women want to learn English to be able to support their families, particularly children at school, and to be able to become more independent themselves. The centre recognizes that where learning is connected to what learners want to learn, as part of their lives, it is more meaningful and relevant. In their everyday lives some of the women spoke, read, and wrote in different languages, within and outside their families. For example, several women spoke but were unable to write Arabic, and were learning to speak, read, and write in English. Many were teaching their children how to speak Arabic, giving them quizzes and using games, while their children supported their mothers' spoken and written English.



We found much intergenerational learning between adults and children at home as well as within wider support networks and communities—what Denny Taylor calls family strength and community practices (Taylor, 1991). Everyday objects like the television, shopping lists, junk mail, and letters were used to teach and learn language and literacy skills. Sometimes these were for everyday practical purposes, like dealing with the school or buying material, and sometimes these were to make links with families and communities from “the old country.” The centre developed a large resource of bilingual storybooks, including nursery rhymes with character puppets, for the women to use when practising with each other. This crossed the language divide in the classroom and created a fun way to learn, which the women took home and used with their children. Traveling into the home domain, these resources enabled them to practise and gain confidence in reading and speaking to their younger children, who also benefited from this early language and literacy experience.

The women's everyday experience also traveled into the centre and became embedded in the teaching materials, which became part of their everyday lives. This is clearly shown in the example of the Notebook. Women were each given a small blank notebook with separate reference and contents pages to be glued in when completed: names, addresses, children's names, birth dates, names of schools, and telephone numbers. The Notebook also included spaces for practical topics, such as Hospital, School, Pregnancy, Money, and Time, with relevant vocabulary and language structure. It contained general and local information, including maps and language pages showing things like letter writing. As each woman completed her Notebook, it became not just a learning tool but also a useful personal reference. Having information—often required for forms at school or the hospital—written in the Notebook provided the women with a sense of security and independence.

The women carried their Notebooks everywhere, in their bags or pockets. Several of the books wore out and had to be replaced—they had become part of the women's lives and supported their increased literacy and language social practices. The Notebooks, embedded in the concrete existence of each learner, provided language, grammar, and expressions from the real world, connecting lives and learning. Unlike the graded course primer, the Notebooks connected the purposes and uses of language and literacy

from everyday life, family, and home to learning at the centre. Traveling between these domains, they were valuable to and were valued by the women.

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## Culture

### *Literacy Moment*

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#### **Writing Letters to Loved Ones**

by Barbara Bolyi, Limpopo Province, South Africa  
(shared with the kindness of Pippa Stein, University of Witswatersand)

In 1968, I was ten years old and in Standard 1 (Grade 3) when I came to Petanenge (Put Leg) village in Limpopo Province, so named because of the river one has to cross to reach the place. The community in Petanenge was illiterate, if I may use the word in its traditional sense. It was without a single school, teacher, or doctor. Our house, like many houses surrounding us, was mud built. The fathers worked on mines in Johannesburg and Pietersburg—many never came back to their families, and left them destitute. There was little or no motivation to learning. My two sisters and I were among the few who stuck to school. Since the place did not have any electricity or telephones, communication was limited to letter writing. Many people would come to us every week to ask us to read or write letters for them. The majority would be women who wanted to communicate with their husbands, children, or boyfriends.

These were the most humbling moments I could remember from my youth, humbling because many of the old people would entrust me with the most private and intimate stories of their lives. Old men squatted and old women kneeled when asking for my services—gestures usually accorded to elderly people or important members of the community. Old people would ask me to write letters to their sons who were enticed to the city and were no longer prepared to come home. What I dreaded most was to read letter, telegrams, and messages informing the relatives about deaths in the family. This was not uncommon for a community where people worked on the mines. I would watch helplessly while my aunt tried to comfort the poor father, mother, wife. At the tender age of ten, I was a letter reader and a letter writer for my village.

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To appreciate that the cultures, interests, beliefs, and values students carry with them inform their reading and writing, we need to turn the telescope onto ourselves as teachers. Over my time in teacher education, I have encountered many different kinds of people who are ruled by their cultures, their convictions, their passions, their belief systems, their interests, or a combination thereof. No two students have ever been the same, and each one had a different take on what it means to be a teacher. With this in mind, identity can be seen as the prevailing force in teaching and learning, as the impetus for our planning and assessment of students. That is, is it possible with all of this multiplicity, to create a framework that can assess literacy development?

In my research and writing on my own and with Kate Pahl, I am particularly interested in how we bring our own identities to bear on our teaching, how we interleave our own experiences and backgrounds with those of our students. Kate Pahl describes this fundamental part of meaning-making *sedimenting* our identities into the texts and practices we use as we engage with print and other media (2002). The theory of New Literacy Studies is built on a belief that literacy is mediated by what we bring to a literacy event and practice. A prime example is Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) influential study of literacy practices in



the Carolinas, which demonstrated how three different households carried three different versions or models of literacy premised on oral language, written language, or read alouds. Importantly, only one of the households supported literacy practices that matched the local school's teaching of literacy. This groundbreaking longitudinal study powerfully illustrated how literacy takes place in each household, but it shifts based on culture, on the people and their household practices, and on the perspective. Each one equally meaningful, however, one is honored at the local school and the others are not.

In my interviews with teachers, time and time again, they refer to how their own experience learning to read and to write informed the way they teach and understand literacy (Rowse & Rajaratnam 2005; Rowsell, 2006). In this way, our identities are a lens through which we teach literacy skills.

Eve Gregory (1996) considers the role of social context in literacy. She notes that children learning to read may or may not identify with what is being said, depending on the underlying cultural assumptions in the text. She cites the example of a book that refers to marmalade, which makes complete sense to a child who is a native English speaker, born in the United Kingdom. Another UK-born child, whose first language is Cantonese, lacks the material reference for the word, thus making the text incomprehensible. Gregory points out that bilingual children "must lose their 'strangeness,' not only to the new language, but to a strange culture through experiencing everyday new routines and ways of life" (Gregory, 1996).

Thus, language assessments can never be simple tests of vocabulary comprehension, but are always entangled with cultural assumptions that may or may not be understood by the students (Gregory, 1996). Gregory, however, does not frame this strangeness to the new culture as a deficit. Instead, she leads us to consider the strengths that "emergent bilinguals" bring to the task of language learning.

#### *Literacy Moment*

### **Finding Language through Collage**

by Hilary Inwood

A new student, Sarita, has recently been added to Mr. Wong's Grade 7 class; she is a recent immigrant from India and speaks little English. Unfortunately, there are no other students in the class who share her native language, so communication with her is difficult and is accomplished by hand signals. Sarita has a hard time making friends in the first few weeks, as she is too shy to accept the invitations other girls extend to join them for lunch. She smiles and nods when Mr. Wong asks her if she understands an assignment, but then sits and stares vacantly once work time begins.

But Sarita finds her place during art class. Mr. Wong shows artworks to the class as a mental set for each lesson, this week showing self-portraits of artists as inspiration. Sarita looks at the works intently, focusing on their features, and seems to listen carefully to class discussion. She looks at the sample of the project that Mr. Wong holds up to inspire the class, and she nods and smiles when he asks if she understands the assignment. And this time she gets right to work, rendering her own collaged self-portrait using a combination of drawing and cutouts from magazines. She smiles shyly as a few of her classmates compliment her on her work. It is the first school project she has completed since her arrival in class.

"We, as teachers, share our various ethnic backgrounds with each other. This helps to enrich us as a group working together. And not only that—the children also share their backgrounds with each other and with the teachers. The whole basis of the subject content matter is who we are in this school."

— Courtney Cazden

## *Culture and the ESL Student*

In 2003–2004, Judy Blaney, Marianna Diiorio, Elaine Chan, and I conducted a series of focus groups with teachers and student teachers at an inner-city school in Toronto in which we discussed the role of culture in literacy teaching and learning. In particular, we focused on ESL teaching and learning, and how culture can be used as a tool in language teaching. The focus groups illuminated some key findings about the powerful role of culture in how we learn language skills:

- Talking About Cultural Experiences: “Having ESL students talk about their worlds is key. Like, if there’s a holiday or a celebration as opposed to just finding things on it. When they talk about it, they have ownership of it” (Mark, Grade 4)
- Relating your culture or ESL experience to student experiences: “I have a lot of ESL experiences, myself, all of my life. I started English when I was 12, so it’s not like I started early. I started in junior high, so I’m an ESL learner, and something interesting about an ESL learner is once you are an ESL learner, it doesn’t matter how old you are, and how many years you have been speaking English, you are an ESL learner all your life.” (Chi Mai, special needs teacher)
- Link with Home: “I would say link with home. No matter how hard it is, try to make contact with the parents, because I think, once they feel that there’s a link, they will talk to you. If there’s some kind of dialogue that can be done... a lot of people too, coming from different cultures and they aren’t aware that you get to talk to teachers. And I think that’s important, and then you have to have a consistent message.” (Rita, Grade 1 teacher).
- Translate school documents and correspondence: “We translate newsletters in our school so that parents know what is going on in the community.” (principal of elementary school)
- Cultural Sensitivity: “There is a shy ESL student in my class and we all know that giving her space is important, because in her culture women are not necessarily given as many opportunities to speak up, or expectations to speak and participate as often.” (Mark, Grade 4 teacher).
- Bridging cultures through book bags: “We purchased a number of books for our Kindergarten children. Then we purchased a number of book bags. In the book bags we put a copy of the book and a series of activities (on a laminated sheet of paper) to go with them. The Ministry expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education) were also put on the sheet along with the activity, which reinforced the expectation. Then all of the sheets were translated into a variety of languages appropriate to our community. I should also mention that in the book bag were included all of the manipulatives needed to complete the activities. Teachers gave out the books on Wednesdays and they were returned the following Monday. To minimize having the manipulatives lost, we had a checklist of all of the articles that were included in the book bag, taped to the outside of the bag. When the bag was returned, an older student in the school would review the contents with the Kindergarten student to make sure it was complete for the next child borrowing it... The rationale for the program was to have parents read and spend meaningful time with their Kindergarten child.” (Tanya Sterioff, principal of elementary school).



- Talk and the ESL Learner: “I think talk is very important, and our ESL students only have the six hours a day at school to practise their English. So there has to be that balance of wanting them to know that you appreciate their first language, that you support them speaking their first language, that you value them speaking their first language, having their culture, but also understand that this is their chance to practise their English. And there has to be that balance, and it is a fine line when you have students fresh from another country. As they are learning their new environment, you need to create a buffer for them.” (Suzanne, Grade 3 teacher)
- Giving space and finding buddies: “So you have to give students some space until they feel more comfortable doing that or doing small group work where there is some dialogue so that they can converse.” (Mark, Grade 4 teacher)

What emerged from the focus groups is the necessity for classroom teachers to be aware of their own culture as they work with students new to a culture. There was a direct tie between feelings of cultural dislocation and underachievement. We “lose strangeness” (Gregory, 1996) when we accept that entering and exiting contexts requires constant and insistent mediation. All of our students, perhaps particularly our ESL students, have a tacit awareness of language and how it shifts when we cross from one place to the next.

*Literacy Moment*

**Culture Goes to School**

Marianna Diiorio remembers a girl in her class who was so shy and quiet that she hardly ever put her hand up. During an activity called *Who are you?*, she stood up in front of the class with incredible presence. At recess, Marianna approached her and commented, “Mashid [a pseudonym], you did such a wonderful job on your oral presentation.” She responded, “Well, you know, I have to get up in front of everyone at Mosque and recite the Koran every day.” This young woman had been doing public speaking every day after school and Marianna had not realized it. She had public speaking mastered and much of it came from her practice at her local Mosque.

The way that we deal with language in schools plays a role in structuring inclusions and exclusions, in validating and marginalizing cultures. The findings of a study conducted on the role of culture in ESL teaching clearly demonstrate a need to bridge cultural practices in urban classrooms, both in teacher education programs and in teaching and pedagogy. The ESL experience is not only about a linguistic divide, but equally about a cultural divide. The findings of the study spoke not so much to cultural difference itself, but to how it is taken up and even constructed in the classroom environment. To overcome this divide, teachers need to build in recognition of similarities and differences:

- Discuss texts written in different languages from local store (if the school community has dominant cultures), from the Internet, or from the library. You can even ask children to bring texts in their own language from home.
- Ask students to bring in photographs of celebrations, such as Eid, to school to discuss what is happening and what it means to them.
- Find out about your students’ “literacy ecosystems” (Kenner, 2004) by asking them who helps them with their literacy at home. This information



will help you to put together a fuller picture of their home literacies, and also to know who to contact to discuss a student's progress.

- Link in with the valuable role of siblings as literacy teachers. If some of the siblings are in your school, hold a workshop for them to come and discuss strategies that they use. (Kenner, 2004)

*Voices from the Field*

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### **What about the English-language Learners?**

by Nydia Flores-Ferrán

Our schools, curriculum, and even pedagogy were all designed to meet the needs of a prototypical public school student—a classic, a standard, a one-size-fits-all mold. No matter how diverse the student body was, the general trend was to move all to be good readers, speakers, writers, and appreciators of only one language. Now, as a consequence of globalization, immigration, and changes in migration patterns, the United States' and Canada's local urban, and even rural, educational environments have changed. The public-school student body has become more diverse, and immigrant groups have ample ability to return home; increased contact with the native language and culture through fiestas, parades, and church-related functions; and a strong feeling of identity that was not overtly expressed by immigrants in the past.

However, the educational agenda of the students you teach probably remains largely unchanged. If you witness change, you are subject to adjustments that school planners make—such as lumping Spanish speakers into one group, Arabic speakers into one group, Chinese speakers into one, etc.—without taking into consideration the oceans of differences between Cantonese, Mandarin, or Taiwanese languages and cultures; Cuban Spanish and Mexican Spanish; etc. The educational perspectives and agendas have not yet been re-molded to accommodate or improve the learning conditions of the ELLs, which in many instances represent the majority in a classroom setting or a school. But let's ask ourselves these questions:

- Are our schools community schools?
- Do they represent the needs of the community they are located in?
- Should teaching and planning reconsider who is the majority versus the minority and then move forward?
- And finally, should you consider first the linguistic preparedness that ELLs come through your door with and plan an exit strategy within a reasonable timeframe having in mind the research that has been conducted in the fields of Second Language Acquisition and Sociolinguistics?

The responses to these questions, although affirmative, require change:

- If you know that a child is learning another language alongside English, you can ask her or him to show you how to write in that language. Then ask what is similar in English. This will help students gain insight into how writing works in different languages.
- Your school could extend its language learning curriculum by investigating opportunities for teaching languages already spoken by pupils.
- When observing children who speak two languages doing a writing task in the classroom, ask them to try to find the best way to represent sounds in English.
- Materials in a range of different languages can be used to raise language awareness. Such awareness prepares children to learn languages now or in the future.

- You can build a multilingual learning environment in your classroom by inviting parents, grandparents, or siblings to demonstrate activities such as cooking, crafts, or storytelling in different languages.
- Ask bilingual children to compare English with other languages that they know.

Bennet et al. (2002) examined the relationship between the family’s social network and the children’s literacy skills. That research was guided by three theoretical models: in the family-as-educator model, the family affects positively the language development of its children; the resilient family functions as an insulator against pressures while still providing time to foster language development; in the parent–child–school partnership, the parents are seen as activators in the home–school connection, working as agents to promote their children’s language and literacy abilities. The study reported that the family-as- educator model was significantly related to children’s book-related knowledge, and to receptive and expressive language skills.

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To assess students’ pathways into literacy (Kress, 1997) and their understanding of modes other than written ones, use the Observation Checklist on page 51 as a framework while observing students during their literacy activities.

## Cultural Resources

### *Literacy Moment*

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#### **Becky and Harriet**

by Suzanne Kaplan

When my sister and I were little, my mother read us stories as part of our bedtime ritual. One of our favorite series of stories was called Becky and Harriet. Becky and Harriet were stories that my mother made up based on our own lives. My sister was Becky, and I was Harriet. One of my favorite Becky and Harriets was “Becky and Harriet Go on a Picnic,” in which Harriet spills juice all over the picnic blanket. I didn’t realize that the stories were about my sister and me until years later when my mother told me. My sister claims that she always knew the stories were about the two of us, yet she always loved it when my mother told them.

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To discover how children learn outside of school, we need to observe with an open mind. The “stuff”—objects, books, artifacts, and mess—all represent prime meaning-making materials. Children can use almost anything to make meaning. We refer to these sorts of texts as “piles of ephemera” (Pahl, 2002).

As Kate Pahl expresses it, “early literacy activities rest on a complex sea of play, talk, writing, drawing, and modeling, among other things. All are forms of representation” (Pahl, 1999). As children enter and exit places, they bring cultural resources with them; sometimes they leave them behind. Our students use whatever is to hand—from religious books to Pokemon©—to make meaning, and we need to build on the skills these texts bring. All children write, draw, play, and symbolize within homes, and these activities are shaped by the contexts in which they were made. We need to pay attention not only to the text—how it is produced and with what kinds of materials and modalities—but also to the talk and movement around their play. We need to value what children bring to their making and composing activities. Play and using cultural

resources in the home allow us to see a child's pathway into literacy. Uncovering the meanings behind the artifacts children make in the home allow us to see into children's preoccupations and narratives.

*Literacy Moment*

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**The Greatest Artist**

by Hilary Inwood

Zachary, a Grade 2 student, is often referred to by his teacher as "quite a handful." While he is obviously bright, his reading is well below grade level. He has struggled since Kindergarten with attention deficiencies and behavioral problems. Unable to stay focused on a task for more than a few minutes; he fidgets incessantly in his seat and plays with any object he can get his hands on. He uses any excuse to leave his desk, and has to be repeatedly told to return to his seat.

One afternoon an artist visited the room for a special program. She read a story and asked the students to discuss the illustrations. Zachary, who had been fidgeting during the reading of the story, puts his hand up to offer his responses to the artist's questions. He listened intently to her instructions for the drawing activity, and was one of the first to begin work on this drawing. Much to his teacher's surprise, he focused on the project, drawing for 45 minutes without leaving his seat. When the artist asked him if she could share his work with the class, he agreed, and his classmates whispered in awe at his detailed and imaginative drawing. He beamed with pride as a few claimed that "he is the greatest artist."

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*What are Cultural Resources?*

Cultural resources signify the cultural worlds of our students. They need to be present in some guise in our classroom spaces, and to be used, to varying degrees, in our planning. Cultural resources invite us into student worlds, and can include the following:



- Objects in the home: cushions, blankets, chairs from which children make meaning
- Arts and crafts: paper, different kinds of paint, markers, scissors, glue, clay, brushes, crayons, etc.
- Family artifacts: mementos, symbols, old jewelry, clothes tied to events (e.g., saris), heirlooms, dress-up clothes, family tokens that have become a part of family history and signify ways of being in the family.
- Popular culture: bedspreads, posters, CD covers, etc. that speak to student interests
- New media: handheld computers, smaller console games, game cards, etc.
- Toys: Lego©, puzzles, maps, action figures, Barbies, etc.
- Stuff: baskets, masks, binoculars, little soldiers, etc.

*The Power of Play*

Stories told—and read, watched, listened to, acted out—provide a basis for imaginative activities and valuable meaning-making. Consider the following activities for younger children to foster language development and to bridge a home–school divide:



- **Drama:** Place students into groups and have them set a story into a play. Ideally, they should know the story by heart and keep it simple. Incorporate art by having them create props for the play. For example, the story of Puss and Boots works well if some students create boots for the cats to wear, and gather material for the princess and ogre to wear. One group can serve as choral narrators of the story. Plays can be informal or they can be more elaborate, with sets, costumes, staging, etc.
- **Artwork:** Artwork is an ideal vehicle as a follow-up to a story. Artwork can take on a variety of formats, from friezes, to collages, to three-dimensional figures such as dioramas, to their own storybooks. Artwork provides a vehicle to spotlight students' ruling passions and to witness traces of home coming to school.
- **Role Play:** After reading a story, encourage role play by providing props and dress-up clothes to turn a classroom space into a different setting.
- **Music, Song, and Dance:** Stories or parts of stories can also be turned into action songs, set to music, or turned into mimes or dances.

With all of these activities, it is important to engage children based on what they know and what they are familiar with. With this in mind, try to incorporate familiar cultural resources that speak to their funds of knowledge. For example, if you live in a community in which saris or other traditional clothing is worn, try to have a parent or member of the community donate clothes to match the cultures in which you teach.

In *Transformations: Meaning Making in Nursery School*, Kate Pahl presents observational data from three years in a nursery school in North London. In her book, she details how children use cultural resources and how it offers a window into their meaning-making.

When children receive an idea, they take it in and it becomes meaningful to them. For example, from one nursery child's interest in the story of Peter Pan came the idea to make a Captain Hook's hook out of the inside of a toilet roll. This idea spread and the children became preoccupied with making hooks. In another observation, the children made wings to become the fairy Tinkerbell. It is possible to track the process of hearing the story of Peter Pan to the making of models. Children may also be observed acting out the story of Peter Pan and adapting it to become part of further play and model making. Children take ideas on and transform them in their own unique ways. Through watching children listen to stories, make models, draw and write, we can uncover a fascinating and complex understanding of how ideas can be received and translated into completely different activities. (Pahl, 1999)



Over time, children pay attention to features of print and emulate them in their own attempts at writing. In our planning and teaching, we should regard these observations and acquisition of skills as representational resources that we can use in our classrooms.

A five-year-old drew a picture just after her soccer practice. It depicted a man on a stage with bright lights and a curtain. She drew five other versions of the same picture, and consistently described the scene, as "a soccer man on stage." Each picture was an exact replica of the others and that was exactly how she wanted them to be. One of her coaches was sitting on another stage during practice so she used a sticky note to squeeze him into the picture; the other

coach would not fit at the bottom of the page, so she improvised with materials at hand.

The drawing is a use of cultural resources in the home to depict an important moment in the child's life. Questions that might arise from such artifacts are

- What can the image offer that words cannot express?
- How does this image resemble other kinds of texts that she sees on a regular basis?
- For a child who cannot yet read, what literacy skills are being exhibited?
- How can we help this child along her pathway to literacy to lead her into a written description of the scene?

As you work with younger children, these sorts of questions can frame your conferences with them. When working with older children and adolescents, invite them to use cultural resources in their written, visual, and multimodal work. Different genres have variable organizational structures and visual grammars. You should help students come to understand these features and have a meta-awareness of them. For instance, explore the notions of design and designing texts versus doing a series of written assignments.

*Voices from the Field*

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### **Literacy as Cultural Practice**

by Victoria Purcell-Gates

The theoretical presupposition of my research into early literacy development has two basic principles:

- The ease with which children learn from beginning literacy instruction is determined by their experiences with written language practice in their lives before they begin this instruction.
- These experiences with written language use are constrained by and constructed by cultural and social contexts within which the children, their families, and their communities live their lives.

The theory—that children use the concept knowledge gained informally from experiences with written language use by others in their environments—runs counter in many ways to the widely held theoretical assertion that reading and writing achievement in school rests on an oral language base. However, study after study, including all of mine, have found that it is

- the presence of books and magazines of an array of genres
- the presence of other reading materials
- habits of writing, such as personal letters and notes
- literacy practices that include children, such as storybook reading
- emergent writing
- answering child questions about print
- parent education levels that determine the level of readiness for literacy instruction, as well as the probabilities for satisfactory and higher achievement in school-based literacy tasks

Examining these types of written language activities reveals that the literacy practices of homes and communities reflect the social and cultural lives of those communities, i.e. reading and writing—including the types of texts, the purposes for reading and writing them, the norms for who reads or writes what, where, and when—mediate the

social activities of people, weaving in and out of other semiotic activities, such as talking, listening, viewing, and visual representation. This means that the early literacy concepts and skills with which children begin school are the product of the ways that literacy is practised in their communities. This, in turn, is the product of the social and cultural lives of the community members.

The literacy practices of communities change to reflect changing sociocultural realities of people, not the other way around. This theory plays out in my research in the following ways:

- First, I conduct numerous studies of literacy practices within homes and communities to ascertain the types of literacy practices that constitute the written language environments of the children of those communities (see [www.educ.ubc.ca/research/cpls](http://www.educ.ubc.ca/research/cpls) for a sample of those types of studies that fall under the umbrella of my larger project.
  - Second, many of my studies include tapping and measuring the types of early literacy knowledge held by young children within these contexts.
  - Third, some of these studies focus on examining the relationships between this knowledge and different types of socioculturally determined literacy practices experienced by children.
  - Finally, I have conducted studies examining the ways that children's emergent literacy knowledge at entrance into formal schooling transacts with different types of school-based literacy practices and instruction and how both of those are related to literacy achievement in school.
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## Observation Checklist

### Students demonstrate the following:

- Knowledge of which aspects of a text emerge from a student and their funds of knowledge.
- Knowledge of which parts of a text have more prominence than others (e.g., interactivity on a web site).
- Knowledge of the facts, skills, and issues that underpin a medium.
- Ability to discern which material, discursive aspects have most relevance for the medium.
- Ability to describe the process of making a text.
- Knowledge of practices used to create a text.
- Understanding of what different aspects/modes offer texts (e.g., doing an electronic portfolio vs a print-based one).
- Understanding of how different aspects/modes constrain texts (e.g., creating an electronic portfolio hinders holding it and looking through it).
- Ability to capture material effectively in the medium and communicate it to others.
- Understanding of skills that emerge from using different texts.
- Understanding of genres of texts and what they have to offer.
- Ability to reflect on the process and product and to build on this knowledge into the future.
- Ability to move principles of a genre onto another medium and genre of text.
- Ability to critically frame discourses and visuals in texts.
- Ability to represent their identity or parts of their identity in their literacy work.
- Understanding, knowledge, and ability to work with design and notions of design.