

Connections between child and adult literacy, regarding learning, skill levels and practices

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Examining the link between adult and child literacy is a more complex task than it might be, because adult and child literacy are so often treated and studied as distinct fields, in isolation from each other. They have developed as separate fields of research, policy and action, with their own structures, programs, practitioners, intellectual production and community (Torres, 2001). When the links are drawn between child and adult literacy, the concerns of one field, either adult literacy or child literacy, often dominate.

The extent to which the two fields are developed and productive is linked to the relative status of each field. In the richer countries, child literacy is a substantial enterprise, attracting funding and investment from government and corporations far in excess of adult literacy as an enterprise. The reasons for this imbalance are easy to find. Child literacy is commonly regarded as an investment for the future. The resources that go into the study and development of child literacy are directly related to the importance of schooling as a social institution for the production of human capital and a national citizenry, and to national anxieties in contemporary times about national productivity and competitiveness in global markets. Adult literacy as a field is associated with social welfare and marginal groups of people, despite adult literacy practitioners' claims of its critical importance to economic and political considerations. Child literacy activities (research and development) in the wealthier countries have thus benefited directly from attention and investments in times of political crises around questions of economic competitiveness or political stability on the part of nation-states.¹ While such crisis-stimulated developments in the early childhood literacy field reflect their origins and bias

¹ For example, the launching of the sputnik satellite in the 1950s led to major investments of funds and research in child literacy in the USA, for purposes of lifting national competitiveness under the conditions of the 'Cold War' with the USSR. In the 1960s, the 'war against poverty' in the USA, concerned with reducing the levels of social inequality and social instability, led to a further expansion of research and development in child literacy, this time concerned with addressing the inequalities in outcomes between rich and poor, and particularly between black and white children in that country.

in that they come out of industrialized and affluent settings, they have nonetheless had global influence.

There have also been moments of cross-influence between the two fields of adult literacy and child literacy, and the concept of functional literacy is an important example of cross-over influence. The concept of functional literacy as regards adults emerged in the Second World War and, following the Experimental World Literacy Program, was a key concept in UNESCO literacy interventions directed at adults for two or three decades thereafter. The concept drew attention to the importance of focusing on the uses and applications of reading and writing in the real world. The child literacy field was then dominated by 'reading readiness' and phonics-based orientations to the teaching of literacy, which focused on a restricted behaviorist understanding of literacy as consisting of a set of core processing skills. The concept of functional literacy opened the field up to consider the social and communicative aspects inherent in early childhood literacy, and made space for entry into the early childhood field of influences from cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics and communication studies. Such influences opened up the field to ideas that written communication was a complex, multi-layered process involving reflective and strategic meaning-oriented activity.

On the other hand, the adult literacy practitioner field has continued to operate with narrow understandings of literacy, despite the impact of the concept of functional literacy. In particular the field has typically used and applied criteria for assessing functional literacy that have nothing to do with function whatsoever. For example, there is nothing functional in the wide use of sometimes questionable data on school exits, that assume four or five or more years of schooling correlate with a level of 'functional literacy'. Such measures tell us nothing about the relative quality of the learning, nor about its application to reading and writing tasks and practices in the real world. Even more to the point, such correlations do not compare people who can read and write with those who can't. Instead they contrast people who went to school with those who didn't. Scholarly research in literacy studies since the work of Scribner and Cole (1981) has shown the error of equating school effects with literacy effects. Such equations make

invalid assumptions as to the quality, effects and consequences of schooling across all contexts. Secondly they assume a uniform concept of literacy, its acquisition, uses and effects. Current thinking about literacy, on the other hand, relates literacy use to its social context and suggests that it is not helpful to think in terms of a single literacy when multiple literacies may co-exist for the performance of widely varying personal, social and economic functions.

Quantitative correlations of adult literacy with other social indicators have characterised the field: between 'literacy levels' and broad indicators such as economic productivity, fertility rates, children's health, nutrition levels and success in school. Such correlations have distracted the field from paying attention to what and how, under what conditions, adults reading and writing can contribute to such broad social indicators, none of which are directly about adult literacy, or at least are seldom shown to be. However, critical perspectives emerging from the adult literacy field (e.g. Street, 1984, 1995; Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Gee, 1996) have gone on to have impact on the child literacy field and contributed to the developing perspectives in that field (Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2003).

The adult literacy field might be thought to be in crisis presently, and it might usefully examine and redefine some of its assumptions and practices, in particular the questionable construction of adult illiteracy as a singular social problem that includes a clearly defined target population which can be reached and addressed by way of cheap, short term interventions of a limited nature. Whereas the field of early childhood literacy is concerned about the physical facilities within which learning takes place, with the quality of training, career pathing and work conditions of its educators, with the quality of materials and artifacts used for teaching and learning, and with the ongoing research and development of their field, adult educators are sometimes less concerned about these, treating the lack of many of these as virtues relating to the cost effectiveness of interventions. Adult literacy initiatives, including government, international agency and non-government organization initiatives have tended to underestimate what is required to produce meaningful success and over-estimated what can be achieved with limited resources. These conditions have produced a crisis in adult literacy delivery and the field

might well look to the early childhood field for lessons learnt at this time. (However, one of the potential strengths of the adult literacy field is its focus on out-of-school literacies whereas the early childhood literacy field is dominated by schooling concerns.) Recent developments suggest that detailed examination of the links between adult and child literacy is a timely thing to do. Such developments include the growth of concerns about links between adult literacy and child literacy, particularly with regard to how children's learning is affected by home literacy practices. Within the field of child literacy, the focus on children's "emergent literacy" emphasizes the familial dimensions of early literacy. Similarly Early Childhood Development and Initial Education strategies emphasize home- and community-based strategies, and give a considerable role to parents and caregivers. Within the adult literacy field, the growth of interest in 'family literacy' initiatives which target the literacy learning of both children and adults are indications of these rising synergies. However, the adult literacy field should be cautious about oversimplifying these connections, or reducing them to recipes for new kinds of general programmes which oversimplify the relationships.

I go on in this paper to examine what the field developments in early childhood literacy have been, and what they can show us of what the links might be between adult and child literacy. I conclude by examining a range of initiatives of research and teaching that have focused on adult-child literacy, particularly those initiatives which are known as family literacy initiatives. The paper is weighted towards discussions of child literacy and their relevance to concerns in adult literacy, rather than the other way round. This bias is a result of the relative underdevelopment of the adult literacy field as regards the concerns which I identify as critical at this time. My hope is that a later attempt at such a synthesis will be able to offer a more balanced analysis. For that to be possible a substantial development at the research and conceptual level of the adult literacy field must take place. I suggest that the adult literacy can show substantial advance by taking the arguments and insights of the child literacy field and applying them to research and examination as regards their application to the adult literacy field.

Early childhood literacy research

The substantial field of child literacy studies has been led by the rich countries, with some development of research and methods happening in the poorer countries. Such an imbalance puts a particular slant on the field, because the problems and issues are different across these contexts. Researchers working in the poorer regions of the world cannot ignore the substantial debates and development of methodologies and resources that takes place in the richer countries but have to be careful about importing resources and perspectives that might be less appropriate in the very different contexts in which they are working. Similarly, methods and orientations which have been developed in urban contexts do not always have the same coherence or relevance when transported to rural contexts. However, the linkages between these various contexts are undoubtedly important as well, and it will not do to treat them as entirely separate.

With these qualifications in mind I summarise what I see as the most important debates and claims as regards the links between child and adult literacy. Where the resources and perspectives I draw on emerge from the 'North' (from North Atlantic and English-dominant settings), I examine as much as I can in the space and time available how much they apply to the poorer regions and peoples of the world.

Early childhood literacy: From reading readiness and systemic phonics to emergent literacy

In early childhood and early school literacy, a focus on *reading* has received far more attention than any of the other language and literacy processes, including that of writing, though this position has shifted in recent times. A result has been a technology of reading that isolated reading from other communicative processes and meaning-making practices. The early childhood field was greatly influenced by *reading readiness* concerns for much of the previous century, into the 1970s in scholarly debate, and through to the turn of the century in teacher's working theories that were shaped by these debates.

The notion of *readiness* appears to have been first used in the late 19th century and remained a dominant concept in the field for the next seventy-or-so years (Gillen and

Hall, 2003). Readiness concerns were about identifying the pre-reading abilities that children should display before formal reading instruction started. *Reading readiness* was closely linked to mental age, and to assumptions that children needed to have reached an age of around seven to be able to use phonics, and that reading instruction should not begin before that. Gesell (1925) likened the cognitive development of children to physical growth - maturation occurred as a result of the biological process of neural ripening. The prevalence of the scientific method and the story testing movement of the 1920s and 1930s resulted in the development of standardised readiness tests that were designed to measure whether any child was or was not ready to read (Crawford, 1995). Reading was understood as a set of skills that were a matter of visual processing, involving characteristic eye movements, perceptual span, letter shapes, word gestalts, and so on (Stubbs, 1980, 5). Readiness was at first seen as something that could be measured exactly by tests, and brought about by simply waiting for nature to take its course. The influence of these ideas in contemporary times is illustrated by this remark made by a trained teacher at a well-resourced South African school:

Each child as an individual develops at his or her own rate. Maturation cannot be accelerated. Reading and writing must not begin before true readiness is reached or untold damage may occur (quoted in Prinsloo and Bloch, 1999, 16).

From the late 1950s in the USA these reading readiness concerns began to change under the influence of developmental concerns. It was argued that appropriate pre-reading experiences could hasten a child's readiness to learn, while a lack of these experiences could inhibit readiness. Activities which were seen as bringing about reading readiness were many of the activities which still characterize pres-school education in many settings internationally. They include perceptual games, hand-eye co-ordination exercises, fine and gross motor training activities such as cutting, pasting, gluing, tracing, painting, coloring, threading beads; reading and telling stories, teaching rhymes, songs and poetry to encourage a love of written language and to build vocabulary; encouraging a positive self image; teaching how different letters relate to their sounds; and activities which encourage left and right movements. The emphasis thus came to be more on the

nurture side of the nature/nurture debate, through assertions that children's readiness could be influenced by way of the right sorts of pres-school experiences. Earlier and more rigorous skills-based education for young children was a key focus of curriculum theory and innovation in the USA in the 1960s and these developments came to have international impact through the exporting of methods and materials, and the training in the USA of teacher-educators from other parts of the world. These developments revised but did not replace the concerns with the focus on 'readiness'. Accompanying concerns with readiness was a reliance on systematic phonics instruction. For example Flesch's view was that "[we should teach the child] letter-by-letter and sound-by-sound until he knows it—and when he knows it, he knows how to read" (1955, p. 121) and "learning to read is like learning to drive a car.... The child learns the mechanics of reading, and when he's through, he can read" (1981, p. 3). While the influential work of Chall (1967) and Adams (1990) paid some attention to the meaningful dimensions of reading, they retained this phonics-driven focus.

The key assumptions on which the theory of reading readiness and reading development can be summarized as follows:

A period of preparation is necessary before formal reading instruction can start, that develops necessary pre-reading skills; reading is a separate skill and must occupy a content area of its own in the early schooling curriculum; the learning of reading should take place by way of the learning of discrete skills within a skill hierarchy; these should be taught by direct systematic instruction, in the correct sequence; children have to be taught to read, and this teaching process is a systematic, scientific and value-free process delivered by skilled professionals (see Crawford, 1995, 75).

This 'readiness' orientation has had a strong and lasting influence on the way that both teachers and parents view the way that young children become literate, and teachers' roles in the process. Literacy and 'reading problems' have come to be seen within in a limited, curricularised view of literacy. As regards the question of the links between adult and child literacy which is the focus of this paper, these skills-based understandings of children's literacy development leave almost no role at all for parental influences or

family literacy, except as causes of the problems which children have with reading. They set up children's early childhood reading as a school-based and teacher driven process. Problems associated with children learning to read and write are seen in terms of individual differences and skill deficits that could be addressed through systematic instructional materials and models that were school-based, scientifically designed and teacher driven. An early childhood reading industry of books, methods, programs and materials has developed under these influences, involving the breaking down of reading into narrow skills and linking the learning of those skills to reinforcement systems (Skinner, 1957; Gillan and Hall, 2003). An example of these 'teacher as reading-expert' influences is evidenced in an account of a Canadian school teacher, confronted with a child who began school with a sense that she knew about books and reading. The teacher told the child: "School is where you learn to read", and then informed the child's parents that she wouldn't learn to read and write "properly" until she understood that reading was something which she learnt at school from the teacher (Luke and Kale, 1997, 13). Such understandings assume that children could learn little for themselves and that children's agency is not relevant to the task at hand.

Emergent literacy perspectives

One result of reading readiness concerns was little consideration of young children's thinking. Under the influence of Piagetian studies of children's thinking a focus on *emergent literacy* developed from the 1960s. In New Zealand, Clay coined the term in her PhD study which demonstrated that well before schooling children in a literate environment develop considerable knowledge about the forms and functions of reading and writing (Clay, 1966, 1979). Her claims elaborated on earlier influential research conducted earlier by Read in the USA in the early 1970s. Read's study showed that children's early writing efforts, through their own explorations in informal, home-based drawing and play-writing activities, included invented spelling systems, or *invented writing*, that were strikingly similar in their differences from established orthography, and phonetically consistent. The consistency in the kinds of 'mistakes' the children in the study made (e.g., spelling the word *drag* as *jag*; using E for 'short i' as in SET for sit, A

for 'short e' as in BAG for beg) were neither random nor the result of auditory/phonological immaturity or deficit. Instead, they were quite logical, given the knowledge base the children were operating from (for example, the first phoneme in *drag* does sound like and is articulated like the first phoneme in *jet*) (Scharer and Zutell, 2003). Read concluded that, 'We can no longer assume that children must approach reading with no discernible prior conception of its structure' (Read, 1971, p. 34). Follow-up studies (see e.g., Clay, 1972; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986) both confirmed and amplified Read's original findings. The study of children's 'errors' as regards spelling and syntax turned out to be highly productive sites for studying what kinds of strategies they were following that were in conflict with conventional orthography.

These researchers studied how children of pre-school age in literate environments were paying a lot of attention to print, and that engagement with literacy was certainly beginning before schooling. A new field of study appeared – *emergent literacy* – focusing on how even very young children were strategic learners. Literacy came to be seen as a much broader set of print-related behaviors than those conventionally experienced in education. Ferreiro, Teberosky, Clay and others stressed that active, age-appropriate engagement with their surroundings is required for children's cognitive development. Cognitive growth is seen as being triggered by the child's encounters and responses. Children emerge as readers through immersion and participation in a print environment, through a series of learning experiences that encourage engagement with both spoken and written language, and these experiences are enhanced in supportive environments that encourage experimentation and risk-taking. This emergent perspective is based on the premise that children bring sense-making strategies to literacy events and actively make sense of their worlds (Clay 1969, Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982; Snow, 1983). Snow presented many similarities between language and literacy in the early stages of their development and argued that they are acquired in much the same way: both requiring a complex mapping of form onto meaning, and requiring the knowledge of and ability to increasingly use conventional forms (Snow, 1983, 209).

Many but not all of the arguments around emergent literacy come from environments that are literacy rich, and also reflect the child-centered, 'progressive education' concerns of English-language educators in those more affluent settings. However, the work of Ferreiro that has been so influential in this regard was largely carried out in work with children living in slum conditions in South America. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) described children's knowledge not so much as fixed facts but as sets of hypotheses from which they work: hypotheses about the role of graphic elements, about styles of language (genres) and what elements of language can be represented in print. One difference that they found in comparison to English studies of *invented writing* was that Spanish-speaking children presented vowel elements in their spellings, while English-speaking children at the same stage presented consonants, and these differences can be attributed to the different phonologies of the two languages. These observations suggested that teachers and researchers working in different, and more consistent orthographies than English, should not base their strategies solely on English findings (Scharer and Zutell, 279). Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) suggested that the low literacy levels of many adults in Latin America, especially among the poor, were the result mostly of the low-quality schooling received in primary levels. This can be contrasted with perceptions from Africa and elsewhere that adult illiteracy rates are a result of numbers of people having received little or no schooling. Ferreiro and Teberosky criticized the emphasis in Latin American public schools on decoding at the expense of meaning- and sense-making activities, and similar criticisms have been made by others of schools in African rural and urban contexts (Nelson Mandela Foundation/ HSRC, 2005; Prinsloo and Stein, 2004).

In sharp contrast to the readiness position, then, an emergent literacy perspective stretches the process of literacy development to include budding literacy-like behaviors (e.g. pretend reading) as legitimate and contributory, and treats social contexts as important venues for exposing children to literacy knowledge and practices. Through this lens, further shaped by the influence of Vygotsky's (1978) work on the social dimensions of cognitive processes, children's early hands-on experiences with language and literacy

in everyday social activities are seen to give rise to the internal mental processes that are needed to do the intellectual work of particular reading and writing activities. Early literacy studies with an emergent literacy and cognitive-developmental focus have included frequent examinations of home contexts because of the understanding that children's literacy development begins at home, long before they enter school. They have thus considerably shifted the understanding of how child and adult literacy is linked in family settings.

The influential work of Smith (e.g., Smith 1971) and Goodman (e.g., Goodman, 1968) contributed to the regeneration of reading research in relation to children. They identified reading as a complex multi-faceted activity and opened up reading research to a wider set of disciplines than cognitive psychology. In particular, both Smith and Goodman made strong cases that meaning could not be seen as simply sitting in the text. Reading was an active and situated activity where readers assigned meaning to text, drawing on their knowledge and interests, and children did this in similar ways to adults. Goodman, drawing on psycholinguistic resources, has convincingly argued in detail that writing and reading involve the making of meaning with available resources, and such meaning is made or taken not one word at a time, in mechanical fashion, but with a sense of contextual specificity drawn from the wider text and context that is being produced, invoked or interpreted. Both reading and writing involve the constructing of meaning from the signifying resources at hand, which in the case of writing involve grapho-phonetic information, syntactic information relating to processes of grammar and design, and with semantic strategies that can represent highly complex social and personal meanings. Both reading and writing involve decisions to activate appropriate strategies and schemata, which allow appropriate and selective focus in the activity. Meaning is taken in reading, following Goodman, by way of the cognitive strategies of *inferring* meaning, which he describes as "a general strategy of guessing" (1984, 105) where meaning that is explicit as well as implicit is taken; by strategies of *prediction*, based on both implicit and inferred information, as well as syntactic clues; as well as processes of *confirming*, *disconfirming* and *correction* of meanings taken.

In something of a similar vein, Heath argued that readers and writers use a previously established framing system to guide them through the text and to organize and link incoming information to previously known information. They approach a text with a learnt frame, script or schema that acts as a monitor as they progress through the text. She saw readers and writers actively engage with a text, hypothesizing about future development of the text and testing incoming information against previously known sources (Heath, 1986, 157).

Dyson invoked a related sense of the complex and situated practices involved in reading (and writing) where she described the problems that inexperienced readers have, where “their difficulties lie not in the words but in understanding something that lies behind the words, embedded in the sense” (Dyson, 1993, 133). She suggested that the dialogue between ‘composers’ and ‘addressees’ occurs against a backdrop of other voices – already uttered texts – without which the composers’ own voices cannot be heard. A brief illustration of these points can be seen in the following sentence, adapted from Halliday and Martin (1993, 77) and discussed in Gee (1996, 30-34).

Lung cancer death rates are clearly associated with an increase in smoking.

To a particular kind of experienced reader who is familiar with the arguments that smoking causes lung cancer and who is also familiar with a particular kind of academic and scientific writing, the one, clear meaning of this statement is unmistakable. But its sense does not at all lie on the surface, in its grammar. In fact it can be read to give “at least 112 different meanings!” (Gee, 1996, 31) For example, an outsider might read the statement as saying that nervous citizens are so worried about lung cancer that they are smoking more. ‘Lung cancer death rates’ could be a compaction of numerous, alternative pieces of information, depending on how you parse the phrase. Also, ‘an increase in smoking’ might mean that ‘people smoke more’ or ‘more people smoke’ or ‘more people smoke more’. This example makes the point that the sources of meanings in a text don’t lie in the word itself but in “the social matrix within which discourse is produced and understood” (Hanks, 2000, 166 quoted in Dyson, 2001, 13).

If children and adults encounter literacy without also developing the resources to make and take particular meaning from the activities of reading and writing, then they are receiving very little. Prinsloo and Stein (2004) describe the teaching of the alphabet to isiXhosa-speaking children in a pre-school in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, where the focus was on collective chant-recital of the English alphabet, as follows:

Mr. K (teacher): Siya phaya ke ngoku (*we are going there now*) (he points to the alphabet chart).

Mr. K: A for what (pointing at the letter, and its accompanying word and picture)

Children: A for apple

Mr. K: B

Children: B for ball

(through the rest of the alphabet, finishing off as follows)

Mr. K: X

Children: X for xylophone

Mr. K: Y

Children: Y for yacht

Mr. K: Z

Children: Z for Zip

The teacher told the researcher, that the children were doing fine, but were having problems with calling out the words *xylophone* and *yacht*. He had to help them to pronounce those words, he said. Because the task was that of recitation, however, he made no effort to translate or explain these unfamiliar words. Nor was there any effort to get the children to use these resources in any way besides their recitation as part of a list. In fact the only learning activities in this school were those of collective recital. Numbers were learnt in a similar fashion, as were numerous nursery rhymes, prayers and poems in both isiXhosa and English. Individualized pedagogy, when it occurred, was simply about getting the children to recite the sequence on their own.

Williams (1996) described the dominant pedagogic practice of both trained, experienced and inexperienced teachers in Zambia and Malawi, in the teaching of both first language as well as English reading, as being that of the 'look and say' approach with no attention

to the presentation or checking of meaning. The following extract serves as an example. It is drawn from a transcript which shows the same pattern repeated at much greater length.

Teacher: Read aloud.

Pupil 1: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Once more.

Pupil 1: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Yes. The sentence is "Look at that hippo's mouth father".

Class: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Class: Look at that hippo's mouth father. (Williams, 1996, 198)

Williams showed that the teacher's reading invariably served as a prompt for whole class repetition. He described the result as a 'reading-like' activity where successful repetition was indistinguishable from 'real' reading aloud. He described a lesson where the teacher scolded a child who recalled a sentence while looking at the ceiling: 'When you say it, you have to look at the words. That is what reading is.' Williams described teachers as consistently reporting 'correct pronunciation' as a major reading problem, while rarely mentioning meaning. The pupils therefore spent a great deal of time repeating aloud what they did not understand (Williams, 1996, 200).

In contrast, research increasingly describes interactional talk (about texts and using written texts) as a crucial form of support for mastery of both the oral and written forms of social languages, as well as the forms of thinking and problem solving they involve (Gee, 1999, 368). Learning to read means learning to read specific social languages connected to specific activities and identities. If children or adults come to the learning activity without the background social language (ways of signifying or making and taking meaning) that are appropriate for the particular context, they need to be helped, through dialogic interaction, to learn how to make and take meaning, drawing on the appropriate social language (or genre) for that setting.

As regards early childhood literacy, Dyson's several studies (1989, 1993, 1997, 2001) show how children from a variety of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, if allowed to by their teachers, draw deeply upon their out-of-school knowledge of non-academic social worlds to negotiate their entry into school literacy. Their family and peer relationships are social worlds that provide them with agency and meaningful symbols, and shape their decisions about what to write, and with whom. With the help of a supportive teacher who helps them weave their own stories, interests and experiences into the school curriculum, they reveal the breadth of their language and sense-making repertoire. Dyson advocates a permeable curriculum where responsive teachers can draw children into understanding and using symbols and resources in school-like ways, while continuing to develop their own agency as regards social relationships and meaning construction. Children's *writing* comes into focus in such perspectives, whereas the focus was on *reading* in earlier research. Such work is also valued for not marginalizing the resources and practices of children from varied social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds which are not regarded as 'mainstream'.

Literacy and children's play

A productive focus on children's play activities has followed from the understanding of children as active meaning-makers in the practices of reading and writing. Play offers a space for children to create imaginary situations where they can reshape concrete objects, actions, and indeed, their own voices. They can infuse their own intentions—their own meanings—into those objects and actions (Dyson, 1997). Children often replace the rules of ordinary life with precise, arbitrary rules of their own that govern the correct playing of the game (Vygotsky, 1997). In an African context Prinsloo (2004) described the activities of a group of children whose game playing allowed them to appropriate and adapt symbolic and linguistic resources from multiple sources. Their interactive play was characterized by a mix of languages, narrative resources, images and artifacts from local popular culture (including 'traditional' Xhosa and Christian church influences) from the mass media (TV and radio) and from schooling. The study of extended play sequences in different contexts showed these children actively experimenting with languages and

language registers drawing from the official school world, their peer social world and their home social worlds. In their home language, isiXhosa, they had a rich source of image, metaphor and music, and they modeled for each other various uses of the English language, gleaned from school, television and popular music. Such sustained peer-play was seen to be a resource for this particular group of children, encouraging them to be inventive, resourceful and reflexive in developing their sign-making potentials. In contrast, they encountered literacy in school in the form of highly directed skill and drill teaching which excluded their out-of-school knowledge and interests. While these children were coping adequately with the demands of the early primary school curriculum, they were not likely to receive guidance in acquiring and using those literacy forms and practices which are demanded in later years of schooling. Their chances of developing successful school careers as readers and writers were limited by their school experiences, rather than their home experiences.

Differences and commonalities between adults and children as literacy users and learners

Research has shown in detailed situated studies of children's symbolic and social work, in play and in school settings, that children's participation is not simply a unidirectional movement in which they gradually take on board an already available social world. (Kress, 1997, Dyson, 1993, Prinsloo, 2004) Within constraints, and given the space, children at least partly follow their own interests and experiences as they choose what they want to represent and choose the modes, means and materials for their representative work.

Kress has usefully addressed differences between adults and children as to how they encounter, learn and use literacy (Kress, 2003). He suggests that the process of meaning-making is the same for adults as it is for children, in that they both use what is available and which seems most suited to make the meanings that they are interested to make. However, he argues that children encounter literacy differently to adults in some key respects: in social settings where literacy is around and part of everyday life, children don't necessarily attach the same status and importance to literacy as adults do. Where

adults are oriented towards what is 'correct', children are less constrained, partly because they are less informed than adults, but also because they are more willing to work inventively with what is at hand, and to explore the signifying potentials of a range of resources and materials. Whereas adults' orientation reflects the particular common-sense of their societies, children are concerned to understand the nature of their worlds and to engage with them, to examine what their place is and might become. Where adults see a ready-made path towards meaning-making, children make their meanings by drawing on available resources "governed by their *interest* at the moment of making the sign" (Kress, 2003, 155). Their interest, which is undoubtedly socially shaped as well, works to guide their selection of what they want to represent, and which aspects they use to operate as signs (e.g., circles drawn by a pre-school child to signify a car indicate the selection of the wheels and the steering wheel as emblematic for that child). For adults language, and language as writing, are the most highly valued available resources. To children anything at hand is apt as a sign-making and meaning-making resource – whether it be a stick, which readily becomes a horse (Vygotsky, 1978), a cardboard box which becomes a warriors helmet, a blanket and chairs which become a house (Kress, 1997) or an old pantyhose which the children call a 'wait' becomes a barrier rope, a key resource in an elaborate game activity (Prinsloo, 2004). Children's work in meaning-making is always transformative of the materials used.

While children are learning how to distinguish and combine various resources, such as singing, drawing, mime, and the potential of various things, adults have mostly, at least after a certain age, introduced children to just one, and mostly taught them to use just one: written language. Kress and Lemke (1997) suggest that this needs to change if we are to help students develop sophisticated multimedia literacies that have value in the contemporary world where new communications technologies have such influence.

Perhaps the most striking implication of these perspectives reviewed above is the importance of seeing reading as one part of children's language, knowledge and social activity, to see literacy embedded in adults and children's social lives. The teaching of isolated skills, such as phonic recognition, might help adults and children to read and

write but only in a restricted form, unless they are able to make sense of reading and writing as part of larger sets of situated practices.

The nature of childhood, childhood play and the influences of adult norms upon children need also to be understood as culturally and socially variable practices, where parents and social groups have different attitudes and responses to children's self-directed activities. Children and parents live in home settings where time and space are conceptualised and regulated differently, where routines are differently organized, where attitudes to children's play and literacy activities vary.

I now draw on the perspectives developed in this paper so far to examine key issues around family literacy, both in the form of everyday practices for reading and writing in families, and also as regards literacy interventions that hold the idea of family literacy as their focus and target.

Family literacy: research and programmatic intervention

The 'phrase ' family literacy' was introduced by Taylor (1983) who spent three years examining how children in six families developed ideas and knowledge about literacy in their homes. His work emphasized the way family literacy was embedded in the flow of family relationships and activities. The term family literacy has also come to apply to programs of literacy instruction that have the family as a unit of focus. I first review the research directions and then the programs of intervention.

Family literacy research

Family literacy research has generally covered two main themes, that of the study of reading and writing as they are embedded in the flow of everyday activity, and those that focus on how parents or guardians, in particular, but also siblings, orient individual children towards success and failure in school literacy.

Everyday family literacy has been described as a systemic literacy as oppose to school literacy, which is an individualized or personalized one (Varenne and McDermott, 1993,195). Familial literacy is not one for which the members are accountable in the

same way that children are held to account in school. One does not fail familial literacy as it is all but invisible, embedded in other activities, like shopping, writing to a relative, paying an invoice or applying for something or other. In reading the label on children's medicine no such activity would end with the comment 'Good! You get an A for being able to read the label. Now let's do some math.' (Varenne and McDermott, 1993,195) This 'passing' quality of family literacy has been noted by numerous researchers. For example, Kell (1996: 24) studied the literacy practices of a middle-aged, unschooled woman who was a community-activist in a shack settlement outside Cape Town. This example reverses the usual perspective of parent helping child, but nonetheless illustrates the routine or passing nature of the literacy practices:

a delivery man .. came around with the vegetables and gas cylinder that she needed. Winnie brought out her invoice book, and the deliveryman wrote down what she had bought... She said that her daughter Portia would check what he had written... As I left Portia came out of another room, picked up the book without a word between her and her mother and ran through the page very quickly.

Much of the research on family literacy research has focused on this 'passing' and embedded characteristic of family literacy, as well as on explicit kinds of literacy activity, such as shared book-reading activities amongst parents and children, and on homework and other school-directed activities. Literacy in the home, like other cultural practices, can be said to socialize children into specific ways of acting and thinking which are seen as appropriate by the family and cultural group, but are less or more compatible with school literacy practices. Heath's (1983) influential study of three distinct communities in one town showed them socializing their children differently with particular consequences for the chances of success for their children at school. Heath's work makes the case that there are multiple ways of taking and making meaning in reading and writing practices, and the selection of one of those ways as the standard, or as normative in school and in formal institutions, means that for people whose ways are different to the norm, there is an ongoing struggle to legitimize their own practices or to accommodate to those of the standard.

Several studies of Mexican and Mexican American families (Losey, 1995; Delgado-Gaitain (1987) focused on the interactional patterns and authority structures of Mexican families, describing them as co-operative and collective in contrast to the individualized and competitive nature of school literacy tasks. Influential work carried out for a number of years by Moll and colleagues (Moll, 2000) has focused on studying household and classroom practices within working-class and rural Mexican communities in the southern USA. The research aims to describe the *funds of knowledge* of the home environment. These are “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992, 133). They include family know-how in areas such as agriculture, economics, construction, religion, arts and repair. Families develop social networks that help them deal with their environment and develop and exchange resources. These networks are flexible and active and may involve persons from outside the home. The research is concerned to make such family knowledge and social relationships visible to educators as resources which can be used to enhance school learning. For example, children’s involvement in informal buying and selling activities was used by educators in school work that started with various aspects of buying and selling, including the literacy involved, and developed into other curricula activities, in maths and other areas. This work is concerned to show how the wider utilization of children’s cultural resources could assist the development of biliterate skills and practices in Spanish and English.

Family literacy oriented towards school success

It is common in many contexts for teachers to see parents as a problem in children’s literacy learning, particularly those from marginal social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, research consistently shows that parents generally do not just simply value education for their children, they work at it. They worry that their children might not succeed, they celebrate when they do. They influence their children’s attitudes to reading and they attempt to teach them in school-like ways.

Stein and Slonimsky (2001; in press) found that parents actively worked to support their children's literacy even when their own years of school education were limited. They described one poor family, unemployed and living on a child grant, who wanted their daughter to get education and become a social worker. The parents actively coached the child in her reading activity and they drew on their own experiences of being taught to read and write when doing so. In one observed event, the father guided his daughter through the reading of a Sotho text, and his engagement was overtly directive and pedagogical. Reading through a Sesotho school primer, the father was very concerned with the *sounds* of the written text. He paid a great deal of attention to his child's inflection and intonation patterns in her reading aloud; he was very sensitive to her pitch and volume, coaxing her to enunciate the words carefully. He stopped her repeatedly in the flow of her reading to model how she should be inflecting her phrasing. In his reading with his daughter of an English passage from her Geography book, he again focused on her reading aloud 'correctly', although his own knowledge of the English language was apparently less than his daughter's.

In a comparative example in the same study, Stein and Slominsky described the literacy interactions of a grandmother who was raising her grandchild in Sharpeville, South Africa. The study describes how the grandmother read an English children's story to the child and then told her a tale in Sotho, a familiar folkloric tale. In her reading and telling of the stories the grandmother recruited a wider range of strategies than the father in the earlier example. She switched frequently between verbatim reading and explanatory and interpretive comments, using intra-textual and extra-textual comments, involving explanations, definitions, re-capping of narrative sequence, anticipation of events, and questions which drew the child into an engagement with the narrative and images. She modeled many of the strategies of a particular kind of experienced reader.

The contrast between the two reading practices that are modeled here is of interest. Where the father focused on getting the reading right as a performative act, the grandmother had a greater concern with interactive examination of the *meaning* of the text. She drew on her knowledge of oral narratives, drawing on her own cultural

resources of folklore, as sources for moral lesson to construct reading as a source of lessons for life. In different ways both these strategies were apprenticing children into particular habits and expectations towards texts. Both of them might support school literacy practices or deviate from them, as teachers, schools and education systems also vary in how they induce particular groups of children into the situated practices of reading and writing in schools.

Volk and de Acosta's (2001) study of Puerto Rican children living in a poor neighbourhood of a large US city examined what counted as literacy in the classroom, homes and churches of three Spanish dominant children living in the USA. They were concerned to go beyond research that focuses *solely* on parent-child interactions, thereby missing the complexity and richness of literacy practices occurring in the everyday lives of these children in their wider interactions. Older siblings in particular played an important mediating role for the three focus children. Parental help with their children's literacy tended to focus on letter names and sounds rather than on meaning-making.

They argued that the literacy practices of home blended literacy practices valued in schools with practices valued in their churches and in so doing created collaborative literacy practices rooted in their culture. Such findings broadly match those of the Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) research project, carried out in rural and urban settings in four sites across South Africa (Prinsloo and Stein, 2003; as well as the papers by Prinsloo, Stein and Slominsky already discussed here).

Snyder, Angus & Wendy Sutherland-Smith (2003, 2004), on the basis of ethnographic research into uses of computers and the internet in working class homes and schools in Australia, found that at a local level, various dimensions of disadvantage came into play in the different contexts they studied. They were concerned to find that even when people from poor backgrounds managed to gain access to technology, they remained relatively disadvantaged. They found that the 'socialisation' of the technologies, their appropriation into existing family norms, values and lifestyles, varied from family to family. In some cases, substantial knowledge of particular aspects of computer use and software did not match teachers' understandings of how these resources should be used, and did not

translate into success for those children at school. Snyder and her colleagues identified a disjunction between the sorts of learning opportunities afforded by new technologies when used at school in comparison to how they were used in some homes. A particular case that the researchers examined in their study was that of a one-parent family living on welfare who had internet access and a computer at home, acquired at low cost through a scheme organized by the trades union with ICT providers. While the children were active users of the home computer, engaging in extensive 'on-line chat', visiting music and hobby sites, and displaying "a sophisticated range of the new literacy practices associated with the use of information and communication technologies" (Snyder, Lawrence and Sutherland-Smith 2004, 225) they were not transferring those skills to computer literacy activities at school. The son was seen by his teacher as a difficult 'loser' with poor literacy skills, despite being the 'family expert' on ICTs (2004, 240). He, in turn, thought that the computer-linked activities at school were uninteresting and low in technical and skill demand levels. The child's mother, in turn, engaged extensively in on-line chat activities, but did not overcome her social isolation in that way, nor did she progress in the direction of finding employment for herself. In contrast, another single mother in the study from a similar working-class background had made a rapid ascent into upper end corporate administrative work, after starting out in public sector work. She had a good relationship with the school her daughter attended and the teachers in turn saw her as dynamic and confident, and her daughter in Grade 1 as 'the perfect student' at school. At home the daughter actively followed her interests on web-site activities as well as being an avid reader of books.

The study concluded on the basis of an in-depth comparison of a number of homes, that children and adults in more economically advantaged environments, with appropriate cultural resources, well connected to local social networks and school-linked networks, were better placed to exploit the benefits of having a computer at home. For others, Internet access provided opportunities for escapism and entertainment, but did not provide them with access to high status resources in a way that helped them to escape the social isolation that they experienced.

Snyder and her colleagues thus suggested that the 'old inequalities' of class and gender had not disappeared, but were playing out in new ways in the context of the networked society. They argued that we require more sophisticated and textured accounts of the ways the new literacies are being encountered and taken up than are currently available to address these concerns. 'Digital divide' logic suggests that the making available of computers in poor and deprived socio-economic contexts will have directly beneficial consequences. However the embedding of ICTs in local contexts follows a localized logic, which requires further elaboration and understanding.

Family literacy programmes

Family literacy programmes are generally interventions that aim to improve parents' literacy at the same time as improving children's literacy. They usually have an adult literacy instruction component. A general argument for such initiatives is that not only can parents with limited literacy proficiency help their children, they can also benefit their own reading and writing practices by doing so. Such programmes can be broadly classified as ones which target the adult directly and the child indirectly, the other way round, both directly, or both indirectly. Hannon (1995) described several examples, mostly from the UK and USA, directed at families where parents had low levels of school completion. An example of a direct adult/indirect child programme is one where parents attend workshops in which they are introduced to a range of children's books and shown how to use them with their children. Adult texts similar in theme to the children's books are also distributed, read and discussed. An example of a programme that targets both adults and children directly is one where parents and pre-school children attend a centre several days a week. Adult education and parent education is provided for parents while children have good quality early childhood education. Time is also set aside for parents and children to share educational experiences (Hannon, 1995, 105). Such programmes in the USA rely on large amounts of federal funding.

Hannon suggests that *family literacy* is apparently a neat solution to two problems – “promoting families as the preferred way of meeting social needs, and at the same time

promising to raise literacy levels to secure economic benefits” (106). He quotes the extravagant claims that can be made for family literacy programmes

Family literacy can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and dependency. Family literacy improves the educational opportunities for children and parents by providing both learning experiences and group support. In the process, family literacy provides parents with skills that will improve their incomes. It provides disadvantaged children with educational opportunities that can enable them to lift themselves out of poverty and dependency (Brizius and Foster, 1993, 11; quoted in Hannon, 1995, 106).

In reaction this brings to mind Freire’s observation that

Merely teaching men (sic) to read and write does not work miracles. If there are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write will not create them (Freire, 1972, 25).

Hannon suggests that there is something of a theoretical vacuum in the family literacy movement as it had developed at the time of writing in the USA and UK. One area of vagueness was around what sort of literacy interventions were productive, and a surprising lack of focus on either literacy or family was observed across a range of programmes. Hannon suggested there had not yet been a genuine meeting of the two main traditions from which family literacy had sprung – adult education and child education. Each concentrated on what it knew best. He suggested that early childhood education as a field had commonly neglected adults’ learning but was generally more concerned with *interaction* between parent and child than adult education had been. He suggested that while the basic idea of family literacy – that of teaching ‘low-literacy’ adults and ‘at risk children’ together is very appealing, in that it ‘promises two for the price of one’, it rests on some problematic assumptions that need to be closely inspected. Hannon examined research data produced by the state-appointed Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSA). The data indicated that children whose parents reported literacy difficulties had a 72% chance of being in the lowest reading level in school tests (compared to 25 % of children in the lowest reading level overall). However, “the vast

majority of children in the lowest reading level did *not* have parents who admitted to literacy difficulties” (108). Hannon concludes that ‘parental literacy difficulty’ cannot be used to identify all the children who are likely to have literacy difficulty in school, as such an assumption would miss too many children. It is also well-known that only a fraction of adults who might be thought to have reading difficulty present themselves for learning programmes aimed at their own literacy, while no doubt most parents would like their children to succeed. Hannon reported that only one fifth of those parents who had reported literacy difficulties had attended an adult literacy class, while almost all parents indicated they would participate in a programme that they believed would help their children (Hannon, 1995, 104-108).

Culturally responsive family literacy initiatives

Auerbach (1989) criticized family literacy programs for commonly working with a deficit model of the family, regarding the family as deficient in skills, attitude, knowledge, and the general wherewithal to promote learning. There have subsequently been several efforts at more culturally responsive initiatives.

PALS (Parents As Literacy Supporters), a program designed by Anderson and Morrison in collaboration with program participants, is such a program (Anderson, Hare and Morrison, in press). It aims to work with caregivers in supporting young children’s development amongst First Nations Communities in Canada. After some initial successes in their program, several First Nations Communities have now invited them to work collaboratively in modifying and implementing PALS to meet their needs. They identify key issues that confront them as they begin this process. First, PALS has a focus on various forms of *texts* while First Nations communities have a very strong *oral* tradition and they are trying to determine how to value and promote both simultaneously. Second, there has been considerable language loss among First Nations people. Given the complex relationships among culture and identity and language and literacy, they see the development of a culturally responsive family literacy program in this context to be a real challenge. They note that in the past, schools have contributed to the erosion of language and culture in First Nations Communities. They see the challenge as being that of

developing a model of schooling that promotes “school literacy” and at the same time promotes cultural maintenance of the communities. They identify complex issues as regards what the nature of the knowledge is that results from such collaborations, including the ownership of research knowledge.

Mashishi (2004) gives an account of her involvement with the Parents and Schools Learning Clubs (PASLC) program in Soweto in the late 1990s. The program aimed to encourage family members to share their experiences and cultural knowledge with their children and other members of the family and to use such experiences and cultural knowledge as a basis for the development of literacy in the family; secondly to enhance reading and writing as a familial practice in homes.

She describes how PASLC workshops at first followed a transmission model where parents were introduced to specific story reading techniques. Many parents could neither read nor write and participation in such efforts was minimal. Staff started translating the materials into African languages, and it turned out that many parents knew the lexis and syntax of these languages better than project staff. They were invited to share their knowledge, resulting in higher levels of participation. She describes how parents began sharing knowledge on family praise poems, family totems, and family trees, traditional recipes, forms of recreation, musical instruments and descriptions of other artifacts that formed part of their family histories.

The program developed an activity where this cultural knowledge was written down by literate family members, relatives or neighbors. These writings became part of the reading material that family members used in PASLC. The parents’ familiarity with the content facilitated their reading of the material, and increased the reading interest of inexperienced adult readers.

The recording of family praise poems were generative of a range of activities in workshops, including work on the geography of the region of the family’s origin, an examination of the characteristics of the animal which was a family emblem or token, studies of the indigenous history of the area of origin, and botany, agricultural and

nutritional activities that started out from indigenous knowledge that parents held in relation to edible and medicinal plants.

Masisihi reports that none of the families had attempted to draw up their family trees or write down their family histories before the program intervention, and this family knowledge was about to be lost; parents had previously also not seen any relevance in that activity to their children's education, nor that engagement with such knowledge could be used to expand their own and their children's reading and writing. Parents on the program reported increased personal confidence and more writing confidence for themselves, improvements in children's writing, and increases in motivation to read and learn. Mashishi concludes that the general lesson of her study is that of sensitivity of educators to the contexts and cultures of the communities where they work. She suggests that the family literacy approach to parental involvement can enable educators to form meaningful partnerships with families to promote learning. The question arises in response to Mashishi's account as to whether an independent study would have revealed such consistently positive responses on the part of parents to the program. Also, it is notable that the program appears not to have engaged with the everyday literacy practices of the parents and children concerned.

Finally, Stein and Mamabolo (2005) describe a school in a semi-rural area of Gauteng, South Africa where children were falling asleep and there was a high degree of absenteeism, despite the teachers' effort to make her classes interactive and responsive to the home culture and values of her children. The teacher arranged to visit the children's households and interviewed all the parents and caretaker adults. She found that in nearly all cases there was a major struggle to get food to eat for adults and children. Some children were being fed by neighbors, others were sent to stay with relatives elsewhere because there was no money to feed them at home. The teacher arranged food for some of the worse-off families, got subsidies for their unpaid school fees, and invited parents to the school, which they had been reluctant to visit before because of their personal problems. She organized for older children to take written messages of parent meetings to households where no-one could read, and to read them to parents providing

the parents accepted such arrangements. She started up a school garden, concerned with feeding the most needy families, and set up a community organization with the parents, that ran needlework and cooking classes, computer courses for adults, and an adult literacy scheme. Local government supported the initiative, resulting in food being grown and distribute to needy families and children receiving school meals of porridge and vegetables. Stein and Mamabola title their paper 'When pedagogy is not enough'. They argue that when children come to school, or adults go to adult literacy classes, teachers often don't relate to their home background, or identify their struggles. They suggest that home background, rather than being seen as a problem has to be engaged with in one way or another by educators, as that which references a matrix of social relations, social conditions, and potentials for social action.

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