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Listening to Parents' Voices: Cross Cultural Perceptions of Learning to Read and to Write

Jim Anderson

Traditionally, educators have been generous in dispensing advice to parents about how they can help their children learn to read and write when they enter school (e.g., Mergentime, 1963; Vukelich, 1984). However, researchers in emergent literacy (Clay, 1966) have found that many young children enter school already possessing considerable literacy knowledge. Consequently, there is a burgeoning interest in working with parents to understand the important roles they play in their school aged children's literacy development.

Several perspectives as to parents' roles in young children's literacy development are found in the professional literature. For example, some educators suggest that parents do not "explicitly or systematically" teach literacy (Rasinski, Bruneau and Ambrose, 1990) but instead involve their children in functional literacy activities and in this manner children are socialized into literacy and acquire knowledge and skills. Other educators, however, argue that parents do teach literacy skills in a systematic and direct manner (Burns and Collins, 1987) while still others maintain that parents directly teach literacy but within the context of meaningful and

functional activities such as shared storybook reading (Pellegrini, 1991).

Attempting to understand how parents contribute to their children's literacy development is further complicated by the growing recognition that literacy is a sociocultural phenomenon. That is, the meanings ascribed to literacy, the ways in which literacy is learned and taught and the literacy activities engaged in by different cultural groups are determined by the values and beliefs held by the members of these groups. And whereas in the past considerable attention has focused on how teachers' beliefs affect how they teach literacy (Deford, 1978; Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984), only recently have researchers begun to investigate parents' perceptions of literacy learning. This research suggests that parents, like teachers, mediate literacy according to the beliefs they hold about literacy learning (Anderson, 1992).

Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham (1991) investigated relationships between parents' perceptions of emergent literacy and their literacy level. They found that high literate parents held beliefs consistent with an emergent literacy perspective but that low literate parents held more traditional perceptions of literacy learning.

In their study which involved middle class and upper middle class parents whose children attended a kindergarten class which was in transition from a skills based program to one that reflected a whole language orientation, Bruneau, Rasinski, and Ambrose (1989) found that most of the parents were very supportive of the whole language program although some parents preferred the traditional skills based approach and had considerable difficulty with aspects of the whole language program such as invented spelling.

Rasinski, Bruneau and Ambrose (1990) documented the literacy activities which children from a whole language kindergarten class participated in at home. They concluded that parents engaged the children in activities which closely resembled the activities provided by the teacher in the kindergarten classroom.

Anderson (1994a) investigated the perceptions of emergent literacy held by high literate middle class and upper middle class parents of three and four-year-olds. In contrast to the findings of Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham, he found that while some parents strongly supported an emergent literacy perspective, other parents held more traditional views. And while most parents supported some aspects of emergent literacy (e.g., reading-like behavior), many of them had difficulty accepting aspects such as invented spelling.

So while we are beginning to understand parents' roles in their children's literacy development, the research in this area is still quite limited (Adams, 1991) in that much of the research still reflects what Pellegrini (1991) describes as a "mainstream culture" orientation. Given the increasing diversity of our society, it seems incumbent on educators to find out what parents from outside "the mainstream culture" believe about literacy learning and how these beliefs relate to children's literacy development.

The purpose of this study was to document the perceptions of literacy acquisition held by parents from three different cultural groups.

Method

The sample for this study comprised ten parents from each of three different cultural groups (Chinese-Canadian, Euro-Canadian and Indo-Canadian) from an urban area of

British Columbia. The Chinese-Canadians and Euro-Canadians worked in white collar occupations while the Indo-Canadians were blue collar workers. The sample was drawn from parents of children attending kindergarten, grade one and grade two in three elementary schools (Schools A, B and C).

School A. Approximately 270 students attend this school which is located in a commercial-residential area. English is the second language for more than one third of the students, most of whom come from the ethnically diverse neighborhood surrounding the school. Some of the children come from a nearby housing project where the family incomes are low. However, most of the parents earn good incomes working in the commercial district and in service industry and would be considered lower-middle-class and middle-class. Four of the Euro-Canadian parents and six of the Chinese parents came from this school.

School B. This school has a population of approximately 200 students, most of whom come from the immediate working class neighborhood. English is the second language for many of the students since many of the parents are recent immigrants from India and Punjabi is spoken in most homes. Many of the parents from this school occupy low paying service jobs. The ten Indo-Canadian parents came from School B.

School C. Most of the 400 students who attend School C come from the middle class and upper middle class neighborhood in which the school is located. Many of the parents are recent immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong and for more than half of the students, English is a second language. The school also has a French Immersion program which attracts students from the immediate neighborhood and from

adjacent, middle class areas. Many of the parents from this school are entrepreneurs and professionals. Four of the Chinese-Canadian parents and six of the Euro-Canadian parents had children attending this school.

While the schools differed in terms of demographics, they also shared many similarities. All three schools provided support for special needs students and for students for whom English is a second language. In each school, students sometimes received individual or small group instruction in the Learning Assistance Center and were supported in the regular classrooms by the Learning Assistance Teachers. The schools each had a school library, classroom libraries, a gymnasium, some computers with educational software and are considered relatively well equipped. The curriculum in each school was guided by the primary program which was developed by the Ministry of Education for the province of British Columbia and which emphasize an integrated approach to the learning/teaching of language arts.

As part of the protocol for conducting research developed by the participating school district, details of the research proposal were sent to all elementary schools within the board's jurisdiction. Three schools, each having fairly large concentrations of students from one or more of the cultural groups identified in the proposal were willing to participate in the study. Letters explaining the nature of the research and requesting parents' participation in the study were then sent to a sample (selected randomly as far as possible) of Chinese-Canadian, Euro-Canadian and Indo-Canadian parents of children in kindergarten through grade two. Some parents expressed reservations about participating in the study despite reassurances about confidentiality and the purposes of the study and consequently there was a slight imbalance in the makeup of the sample: 11 parents of kindergarten children,

10 parents of grade one children and 9 parents of grade two children. It was decided that this amount of imbalance would not adversely affect the study.

All parents were interviewed in their homes or in the child's school in their first language (English, Mandarin or Punjabi) by trained research assistants who were from the same cultural group as the parents. The parents were asked "What are the five most important things you are doing to help your child learn to read and to write?" An open-ended question was used since it was hypothesized that with this format, parents would identify what they were actually doing to help their children become literate and not be guided by what they thought the researcher wanted them to say. Subsequent to the data collection, each of the interviews was transcribed. The transcriptions were read in their entirety and the responses were then sorted into categories. For example, the responses, "She constantly sees us reading", "He sees us reading a lot" and "He sees siblings reading" were categorized as *Child sees parent or significant others reading*. For further analysis, the items were grouped into themes according to a classification scheme developed by Anderson (in press). The five themes are: 1) participating in activities/events; 2) teaching literacy skills; 3) valuing, demonstrating and encouraging literacy; 4) knowledge development, and 5) other responses (outside the domain of literacy). These were independently sorted by an expert in early childhood education. A reliability of 95% was achieved.

Results

In this section, the overall results of all three groups are reported. Then similarities and differences among the three groups are highlighted.

Overall results. Because ten parents in each cultural group were asked to identify five things they were doing to help their children learn to read and write, a total of fifty responses for each group was anticipated. However, in each group some parents could name fewer than five items and for example, two of the Indo-Canadian parents each provided only one response; thus there is a discrepancy between the actual number of responses and the number of responses anticipated. This is not surprising in light of the fact that Anderson (in press) reports similar results with the preschool parents in his study whose children attended a university sponsored child study center and who participated in a regular and well designed parent education program.

As is evident in Table 1, each group identified a wide array of items (Chinese-Canadian and Indo-Canadian parents 16 items, Euro-Canadian parents 19 items). Also, in each group, only one or two items were identified by more than one-half the parents and in many cases only one parent suggested a particular item. Anderson (in press) found similar diversity among the homogeneous group of parents in his study. This finding is also consistent with research in early literacy (Anderson, 1994b; Taylor, 1983) which suggests that children participate in a wide variety of literacy activities at home. Indeed, Dyson (in press) and Schmidt (1995) argue that we must not only recognize and accept the diversity in young children's home literacy experiences, we must also learn how to build on these experiences in school.

Similarities and differences. As was described earlier, the second phase of the data analysis involved the sorting of the responses from each cultural group into five themes which were capable of describing the data. Each theme is now discussed in turn.

Table 1

What are the five most important things which you are doing to help your child learn to read and write?

Chinese-Canadian Parents

Teaching child to print and write properly	8
Checking understanding of what child has read	4
Teaching child how to spell correctly	3
Reading to child	2
Having child recite story she has read	2
Making sure child concentrates while reading and writing	2
Teaching child how to write	2
Copying books and writing words	2
Ensuring child pronounces words clearly when reading	1
Sit at desk properly	1
Helping child understand the use of learning to read and write	1
Teaching child to read fast and correctly	1
Making sure child completes homework	1
Correcting errors in grammar	1
Teaching child how to listen	1
Speaking the mother tongue (Mandarin) well	1
Total	33

Euro-Canadian Parents

Reading to my child	10
Child sees parents or significant others reading	6
Providing books on a regular basis	3
Encouraging child with reading and writing	3
Going to books to look up information	2
Making sure that reading is seen as pleasurable	2
Pointing to pictures during reading	1
Providing pencils, pens and paper	1
Encouraging my child to use the computer	1
Teaching my child how to spell	1
I started him in early literacy [phonics based] program	1
Child reading to parents	1
Child writes stories which I encourage	1
Teaching pronunciation and phonics	1
My child taught himself	1
Restricting the amount of television viewing	1
Teaching my child the alphabet	1
Showing that reading has practical application	1
The computer helped because it required my child to read	1
Total	39

Indo-Canadian Parents

Reading to my child	7
Listening to my child reading/telling stories	3
Teaching my child spelling	3
Teaching my child numbers	2
Answering my child's questions	2
Watching television helps my child [learn English]	2
Bringing books from store for my child	1
Taking my child on outings	1
Correcting pronunciation of difficult words	1
Telling my child the meaning of vocabulary words when child is reading	1
Looking at flyers from the supermarket with child	1
Playing cards with child	1
I bought my child a computer game	1
Helping my child write letters to friends and Grandma in India	1
Telling my child stories	1
Printing lines for child to write on	1
Total	29

Participating in literacy activities/events

Within this theme are literacy activities and events in which parent and child collaboratively participate. That is, the parent does not assume a didactic stance and directly teach specific skills but acts as a mediator providing the necessary amount of support for the child. A key tenet of an emergent literacy perspective is that through immersion in such literacy activities, children learn important literacy skills and attitudes (Sulzby and Teale, 1991).

*Table 2
Participating in Literacy Activities/Events*

<u>Chinese-Canadian Parents</u>		
Reading to my child		2
	Total	2 (6%)
<u>Euro-Canadian Parents</u>		
Reading to my child		10
Going to books to look up information		2
Child reading to parents		1
	Total	13 (33%)
<u>Indo-Canadian Parents</u>		
Reading to my child		7
Listening to my child reading/telling stories		3
Looking at flyers from the supermarket		1
Helping write letters to friends and Grandma in India		1
Telling child stories		1
	Total	13 (45%)

As can be seen in Table 2, one third of the responses of the Euro-Canadian parents and nearly one half of the responses of the Indo-Canadian parents fell into this category. That this group of Euro-Canadian parents identified a relatively large number of items in this category was to be expected since it is consistent with the findings of Anderson (in press) and with the "literate socialization" theme which is pervasive in the current literature in emergent literacy. On

the other hand, the amount of support for this conceptualization of literacy learning on the part of the Indo-Canadian parents was unexpected since previous research (Spiegel, Fitzgerald and Cunningham, 1993) with low-literate parents of blue collar occupations, as these Indo-Canadian parents were, indicates that they do not support holistic principles of literacy learning embodied in the items named here but instead, believe in traditional, skills-based approaches. Similarly, that so few items in this category were identified by the high literate Chinese-Canadian parents is inconsistent with the findings of Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham (1991) who concluded that high literate parents support an emergent literacy orientation.

All ten of the Euro-Canadian parents identified "Reading to my child" as a factor in helping their children become literate, a finding consistent with the results of previous research with parents from similar backgrounds (e.g., Anderson, in press). This was the only item which all members of a particular group identified. Furthermore, this was the initial item which many of the Euro-Canadian parents proffered, perhaps further suggesting the importance they place on reading to their children. The Indo-Canadian parents also placed considerable emphasis on shared reading with seven of the ten parents identifying it as a factor in their children's literacy development. On the other hand, only two of the Chinese-Canadian parents saw shared reading as a factor which facilitated literacy acquisition. So while other researchers (e.g., Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham, 1991; Bruneau, Rasinski and Ambrose, 1989) suggest that high literate middle class parents have perceptions of literacy learning consistent with an emergent literacy perspective, such was not the case with the high-literate Chinese-Canadian parents here. And whereas shared reading is apparently viewed by some educators as "... the literacy event *par excellence* ..." (Pellegrini, 1991, p. 380), these Chinese-Canadian parents afforded relatively little importance to it.

Teaching literacy skills

While it is generally acknowledged that parents do mediate important literacy skills within literacy events such as those discussed in the previous category (Sulzby and Teale, 1991), they do so not in a deliberate attempt to teach literacy skills but to support the child's participation in, and understanding of, the literacy events and/or activities. The items within this category, however, reflect a direct instruction or transmission-skills orientation and thus reflect the way that literacy has traditionally been taught in schools (Wells, 1986).

As shown in Table 4, some parents from all three groups identified items within this category. However, nearly 90% of the responses of the Chinese-Canadian parents fell into this category whereas relatively fewer items from other groups fit here. For the Chinese-Canadian parents, a concern with form and with monitoring and correcting performance seemed to predominate, for example, "Teaching child to print and write properly" was the item identified most frequently (eight parents). Similarly, "Checking child's understanding of reading (four parents), "Teaching child how to spell correctly" (three parents), and "Copying books and writing words", (two parents) reflect the concern with form and performance. One of the parents also suggested that by teaching her child to "Sit at desk properly," she was helping her child learn to read and write. And while some educators might question possible relationships between posture and literacy acquisition, proper posture has traditionally been seen as essential for the development of correct printing and handwriting. In fact, the recommended resource book for the Province of British Columbia suggests that teachers "... try to instill the following posture habits," which include "feet kept flat on the floor" and "back and shoulders kept straight." (*Handwriting Resource Book Grades 1-7*, 1981, p. 10).

Table 3
Teaching Literacy Skills

<u>Chinese-Canadian Parents</u>	
Teaching child to print and write properly	8
Checking child's understanding of reading	4
Teaching child how to spell correctly	3
Having child recite story read	2
Making sure child concentrates while reading and writing	2
Teaching child how to write	2
Copying books and writing words	2
Ensuring child pronounces words clearly when reading	1
Sit at desk properly	1
Teaching child to read fast and correctly	1
Making sure child completes homework	1
Correcting errors in grammar	1
Teaching child how to listen	1
Total	29 (88%)
<u>Euro-Canadian Parents</u>	
Teaching child how to spell	1
I started my child in early literacy [phonics based] program	1
Teaching pronunciation and phonics	1
Teaching my child the alphabet	1
The computer helped since it required my child to read	1
Total	5 (13%)
<u>Indo-Canadian Parents</u>	
Teaching my child spelling	3
Correcting pronunciation of difficult words	1
Telling my child the meanings of vocabulary words when child reads	1
Printing lines for child to write on	1
Total	6 (21%)

With the Euro-Canadian parents, no trends emerged in this category in that only individual parents identified teaching spelling, phonics and so forth. Whereas the items from the Chinese-Canadian parents suggest an overriding concern with form and performance, these items suggest a concern with teaching basic literacy skills (Adams, 1991). Anderson (in press) also found that teaching these specific skills were identified — albeit infrequently — as ways parents were

contributing to their children's literacy development. Given the limited range of items suggested by the Indo-Canadian parents, it is noteworthy that three of them referred to teaching spelling. Of course, it is impossible to deduce from the available data whether these parents had difficulty accepting the concept of invented spelling. However, Anderson (1994a) and Bruneau, Rasinski and Ambrose (1989) observed that parents who generally supported a holistic perspective of literacy learning had difficulty accepting invented spelling.

Valuing, demonstrating and encouraging literacy

While the cognitive dimensions of literacy have traditionally received much attention (e.g., Dagostino and Carifio, 1994), the sociocultural aspects of literacy have recently gained much prominence in the literature (e.g., Schmidt, 1995). For example, researchers posit that immersion in a sociocultural context in which literacy is valued and where literacy is a functional part of daily life contributes to children's literacy development (Sulzby and Teale, 1991). This perspective is exemplified by Smith's (1988) influential metaphor in which he likens literacy learning to joining a social club.

Again, there were marked differences among the groups in terms of this category of responses (Table 4). While nearly two thirds of all of the items produced by Euro-Canadian parents were in this category (Table 4), each of the other groups produced relatively few responses which fit here. Anderson (in press) also found that the Euro-Canadian parents of preschoolers in his study believed in the importance of valuing, modeling and demonstrating literacy, and approximately the same percentage of them suggested that seeing a parent or significant other reading contributed to their children's literacy development. An original premise was that the open ended question which guided this study would prompt

parents to identify that which they were currently doing to help their children to become literate. If this premise holds, it is obvious that the Euro-Canadian parents put much more stock in the importance of providing role models and encouraging children than do the parents from the other groups. Of course, parents in each of the other groups were probably providing role models and encouraging their children in terms of literacy learning as well. Furthermore, the fact that the Chinese-Canadian parents and Indo-Canadian parents appeared not to recognize the socio-cultural dimensions of literacy may have no effect on their children's literacy development. One wonders, however, how these parents view current pedagogical practices such as literacy circles and dialogue journals which are based on social-constructivist views of learning (Rogoff, 1990).

Table 4
Valuing, Demonstrating and Encouraging Literacy

Chinese-Canadian Parents

Helping child understand the uses of learning to read and write		$\frac{1}{1}$ (3%)
	Total	

Euro-Canadian Parents

Child sees parents or significant others reading		6
Encouraging child with reading and writing		3
Providing books on a regular basis		3
Making sure that reading is seen as pleasurable		2
Providing pencils, pen and paper		1
Encouraging my child to use the computer		1
Child writes stories which I encourage		1
Showing that reading has practical application		$\frac{1}{1}$
	Total	18 (62%)

Indo-Canadian Parents

Bringing books from store for child		1
I bought child a computer game		$\frac{1}{2}$ (7%)
	Total	

Knowledge development

Traditionally, literacy curricula have had a skills orientation and the more mechanical aspects of reading and writing (e.g., letter recognition, phonics, handwriting and printing) have received heavy emphasis. However, there is increasing recognition that reading and writing are complex processes which entail the use of various linguistic and knowledge resources (e.g., Snow, 1991). In other words, as Freire and Macedo (1987) cogently put it, literacy entails reading the world as well as reading the word.

Table 5
Knowledge Development

<u>Chinese-Canadian Parents</u>	
Speaking the mother tongue well	Total $\frac{1}{1}$ (3%)
<u>Euro-Canadian Parents</u>	
Pointing to pictures during reading	Total $\frac{1}{1}$ (2.6%)
<u>Indo-Canadian Parents</u>	
Answering my child's questions	2
Watching television helps child [learn English]	2
Taking my child on outings	$\frac{1}{5}$ (17%)
Total	5 (17%)

As shown in Table 5, neither the Chinese-Canadian parents nor the Euro-Canadian parents appeared to afford importance to the development of general knowledge in terms of their children's literacy development. On the other hand, the Indo-Canadian parents identified several factors in this category. Interestingly, two of the Indo-Canadian parents identified watching television — which some parents see as inhibiting literacy development — as a factor contributing to their children's literacy development. However, both parents elaborated that they saw television as a means for helping their children learn English which was the language of instruction at school. Anderson (in press) found that the parents of

preschoolers placed considerable emphasis on the role of general knowledge in their children's literacy development. Whether parents' concern with general knowledge development decreases after children commence school remains a matter for speculation.

Other responses

Table 6
Other Responses

<u>Euro-Canadian Parents</u>	
My child taught himself	1
Restricting the amount of television viewing	$\frac{1}{2}$
Total	2 (5%)
<u>Indo-Canadian Parents</u>	
Teaching him numbers	2
Playing cards with him	$\frac{1}{3}$
Total	3 (10%)

Some of the responses appeared to be outside the domain of literacy and hence were assigned to this category (Table 6). For example, it is difficult to envision how "playing cards" facilitates literacy learning; instead this activity seems more applicable to the development of numeracy which was identified by two of the Indo-Canadian parents and also assigned to this category.

Conclusion

Given the relatively small sample size and the lack of true randomization in sample selection, the results of this study need to be interpreted cautiously. However, certain trends emerged from the data and these may be summarized as follows: 1) The Euro-Canadian (middle class — upper middle class) and Indo-Canadian (working class) parents appeared to afford considerable importance to the social aspects of literacy whereas the Chinese-Canadian (middle class —

upper middle class) parents did not; 2) Most of the responses of the Chinese-Canadian parents were categorized as direct teaching of literacy skills and attitudes suggesting that this group held quite traditional perceptions of literacy learning. While such direct teaching was identified by some parents in the other two groups, it received considerably less attention; 3) The Euro-Canadian parents appeared to place much value on valuing, demonstrating and encouraging literacy whereas the other groups did not; 4) While neither of the groups appeared to afford much value to the role of general knowledge development in literacy learning, the Indo-Canadian parents mentioned such factors more frequently than the other groups.

The results of this study are generally consistent with those of Anderson (1994a) who found that while some parents supported an emergent literacy perspective, other parents retained more traditional views of literacy learning. However, the results of this study do not support the conclusion of Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham (1991) that "low-literacy parents seem to have a bundle-of-skills view of literacy and ... high literacy parents tend to see literacy as cultural transmission" (p. 211). For clearly in the present study, the Chinese-Canadian parents did not present a cultural transmission view of literacy and neither did the Indo-Canadian parents appear to have bought into a "bundle of skills" point of view. Furthermore, the results of the current study are counter to the contention by Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham (1991) that "ethnicity is not highly related to home literacy practices" (p. 211).

In deconstructing some of the assumptions underlying current early literacy programs, Dyson (in press) points out that an orthodoxy has emerged in that proponents of particular pedagogical stances project the notion that there are "correct" ways of teaching and learning literacy and "incorrect" ways of literacy learning and teaching. That is, despite the evidence that literacy learning and teaching are culturally determined (e.g., Resnick, 1989), proponents of whole language

and emergent literacy " ... imply — or directly state that certain kinds of instructional programs will benefit all children ..." (Dyson, in press, p. 1). Anderson (1992) concluded that there is a relationship between parents' beliefs about literacy learning and the home literacy environment they create, or in other words, "they practice what they preach." If this holds for the parents in this study, one would have to wonder about the degree to which the home literacy experiences of some of the children are in harmony with their literacy experiences at school or the expectations of the school.

Dyson (in press) has clearly shown that children bring expectations of literacy experiences from the home and that these experiences do not always map on to current developmental models of literacy acquisition. The negative consequences which can result from a dissonance between literacy experiences at home and literacy learning at school are brought home poignantly in Schmidt's (1995) accounts of the lived literacy experiences of Peley and Raji, two children from outside the "mainstream" culture attempting to make sense of literacy, and learn to read and write within a kindergarten class where mainstream values and practices predominated. As Dyson (in press) suggests, the differences between cultures in the end may not really matter in terms of children's literacy experiences if educators understand and build on these differences. Dyson argues that we need to enter into dialogue about difference in terms of early childhood literacy. The results of this study suggest that we should.

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