

## Chapter 3

# Home and School Together: Helping Beginning Readers Succeed

Jeanne R. Paratore

## Early Beliefs About Parents and Children's Literacy

I am ashamed to say that in spite of encouragement from Mother, and delightful hours spent with Aunt Fanny listening to poetry, I was a very backward child and could not read at 6 years old. Mother failed to make me study, and one day she said, "I am going to bring someone to talk to you. He is a great poet, and perhaps he could persuade you to learn to read."

This was Matthew Arnold, a friend of Aunt Fanny, whose poems she used to read to me. I was thrilled to see him, and after all these years I can still see his tall, angular figure, as he stood with his back to the fire looking down upon me from what seemed to me an immense height. He never smiled that day. His whiskers were thicker and longer than any I had seen; and I was glad that Father wore a neatly trimmed beard. This stern-looking man then sat down and took me on his knee while he talked to me about books, seeking to fire my interest; and in this he succeeded, for I could have listened to him all day. Then he stopped talking of poetry, and said very seriously,

"Your mother tells me that you do not know how to read, and are refusing to learn. It surprises me very much that a little girl of six should not know how to read, and expects to be read to. It is disgraceful, and you must promise me to learn at once; if you don't, I shall have to put your father and mother in prison."

I was startled and frightened by his threat, and at the same time very puzzled that a poet could put people in prison. I asked Father whether he could put him in prison. Father hesitated, "No, I don't think he could, although he is a Government Inspector of Schools."

I still felt mystified, but his threat made me start in earnest to work with my nursery governess, and to my surprise and pleasure, I found I could read Grimm's *Fairy Tales* within a few weeks. (Sutherland, 1975, p. 259)

Happily, we do not threaten imprisonment of parents whose children fail to learn to read successfully. Yet many of us do, in fact, hold parents largely responsible for children's reading failure. In a study conducted by the organization Public Agenda (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Aulicino, & McHugh, 1999), nearly 7 in 10 teachers believed that the most serious problem they face is with students who "try to get by doing as little work as possible" (p. 25), and they blamed parents for this behavior. Majorities of both suburban (67%) and urban (82%) teachers reported that too few parents are knowledgeable about their children's education; 83% of teachers stated that they believed that parents are failing to provide adequate and necessary support for their children's academic success. Survey data such as these are supported by case study investigations in which researchers report the most common obstacle to children's success in school identified by teachers is parents' lack of time for their children, lack of interest in their children's education, or lack of knowledge about how to support their children's academic success (Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Valdés, 1996).

The evolution of the belief that parental action or inaction is largely responsible for children's school success or failure is fairly easy to trace. For years, studies have correlated children's reading success with parental traits and actions. Beginning as early as 1908, Edmund Huey called attention to the role parents play in children's beginning reading, explaining,

Almost as naturally as the sun shines, in those sittings on the parent's knee, [the child] comes to feel and to say the right parts of the story or rhyme as his eye and finger travel over the printed lines.... The secret of it all lies in parents' reading aloud to and with the child. (p. 332)

In the years that followed, several studies reported that parent-child storybook reading correlated with children's success in school. In two investigations, Durkin (1966) compared the home experiences of early and nonearly readers. She found that early readers had parents who spent time with their children, who read to them, who answered their questions and their requests for help, and who demonstrated in their own lives that reading is a rich source of relaxation, information, and commitment. She concluded that

early readers are not a special brand of children who can be readily identified and sorted by tests. Rather, it would seem, it is their mothers who

play the key role in effecting the early achievement. The homes they provide, the example they show, the time they give to the children, their concepts of their role as educator of the preschool child—all of these dimensions of home life and of parent-child relationships appeared to be of singular importance to the early reading achievement described in this report. (p. 138)

The belief that parent-child reading plays an important role in children's eventual school success received additional support in many subsequent investigations (for example, Briggs & Elkind, 1977; Clark, 1976; Dunn, 1981; Mason, 1980; Morrow, 1983). The accumulated body of evidence led Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) to conclude that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p. 23).

This conclusion, however, did not go unchallenged. In 1994, Scarborough and Dobrich reexamined studies in which measures were made of both parent-child joint reading and of language or literacy skills in children's preschool years or later. They reported "modest strength and considerable variability of results in the 31 research samples" (p. 285). In particular, they argued that when differences in indices of socioeconomic status, early interest in literacy, and preschool language and literacy abilities are taken in account, differences in frequency of parent-child joint reading make "only negligible unique contributions" (p. 262) to prediction of children's success in learning to read.

Subsequent to Scarborough and Dobrich's investigation, Bus, vanIJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) conducted a meta-analysis of 29 studies of parent-child joint reading and reported that the combined effect sizes for all studies involved amounted to  $d = 0.59$  (33 samples, including 3,410 subjects). They concluded that their results provided a "clear and affirmative answer to the question of whether or not parent-child joint storybook reading is one of the most important activities for developing the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 15). They suggested that the disagreement between their findings and those of Scarborough and Dobrich could be attributed to the differences in methodological approaches and the superiority of a quantitative meta-analysis that "takes the accumulation of trends into account" (p. 15).

Bus et al. further concluded that their findings provide "straightforward support for family literacy programs" (p. 15). In school systems in the United States and in other countries, reading educators, school

administrators, and community leaders have reached the same conclusion, and as a result, family literacy intervention programs are increasing, with most designed to teach parents and children to engage in family storybook reading as the literacy event most likely to lead children to eventual school success. In their evaluation of Even Start Programs, the largest federally funded family literacy initiative in the United States, Tao, Khan, Gamse, St. Pierre, and Tarr (1998) found that of 469 sites reporting, 94% offered reading, storytelling, and prereading activities to most of their families and 90% offered language development activities to most families. In addition, nearly 90% of the programs reported teaching all or some families to work with letters and numbers.

Should we assume that we are moving in the right direction? Is it right to expect all families to embed mainstream literacy practices within their daily routines? Are there any negative consequences to their doing so? What have we learned about culturally and linguistically diverse families and the ways they use literacy that should guide us in our plans and actions to collaborate with them? In the next section, I address studies that are helpful in answering these questions.

## **Emerging Understandings About Parents' Roles in Children's Literacy Learning**

Luis Moll and his colleagues (1992) have raised awareness of our need as educators to better understand what they have referred to as "household funds of knowledge," defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). They explain,

Our analysis of funds of knowledge represents a positive (and, we argue, realistic) view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, potential utility for classroom instruction.... This view of households, we should mention, contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually; perceptions that are well accepted and rarely challenged in the field of education and elsewhere. (p. 134)

What evidence exists that shows that when we widen the lens and look beyond mainstream literacies, we find a rich tradition of literacy behaviors and other funds of knowledge, albeit different from those that

easily map onto the literacy behaviors that characterize most preschool and primary grade classrooms?

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) was one of the first educational researchers to examine the ways class and culture influence literacy practices. In her well-known and widely cited 10-year ethnographic study of two communities in the Piedmont Carolinas, which she referred to as Roadville and Trackton, Heath examined the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of literacy and language structures needed in classroom and job settings. Although she observed rich literate traditions in both communities, she found these to be unlike the literate events common in the mainstream community she called Maintown. Unlike Maintown parents, she observed that Roadville parents

do not extend either the content or the habits of literacy events beyond book reading. They do not, upon seeing an item or event in the real world, remind children of a similar event in a book and launch a running commentary on similarities and differences. (Heath, 1986, p. 109)

Trackton, too, differed in substantial ways in its literate traditions:

There are no bedtime stories; in fact, there are few occasions for reading to or with children specifically. Instead, during the time these activities would take place in mainstream and Roadville homes, Trackton children are enveloped in different kinds of social interactions. They are held, fed, talked about, and rewarded for nonverbal, and later verbal, renderings of events they witness. Trackton adults respond favorably when children show they have come to know how to use language to show correspondence in function, style, configuration, and position between two different things or situations. (Heath, 1986, p. 120)

Heath concluded that Trackton and Roadville children struggled in school not because they were language- and literacy-deprived, but rather because they were language- and literacy-different. Unlike their mainstream peers, the children of Roadville and Trackton did not begin school with the knowledge of language patterns and literacy events that are valued and privileged in most classrooms.

Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines (1988) conducted a study of African American children living in urban poverty who were perceived by their parents to be successfully learning to read and write. They observed that the children and their parents used literacy in ways that were integrally related to the accomplishment of routine tasks in

their daily lives—they read, wrote, and drew for genuine and meaningful purposes. The connectedness and embeddedness of their home literacy events, however, stood in stark contrast to the learning activities the children encountered in school. Here, their literacy and language activities were decontextualized, fragmented, and, importantly, disconnected from the real events of the children's lives outside of school. Over time, the children experienced school failure. Their observations of the children at home and at school led Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines to comment, "We are overwhelmed by the fragmentation that takes place as they move from the hopes of their families and the promise of their early years through an educational system that gradually disconnects their lives" (p. 121).

William Teale (1986) also examined the reading and writing behaviors of children and other family members in low-income, urban homes. Like Heath and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, Teale's observations led him to conclude that "virtually all children in a literate society like ours have numerous experiences with written language before they ever get to school" (p. 192). Also like Heath and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, Teale found that the children used literacy to "mediate Daily Routines" (p. 195) and get things done in the course of their daily lives; he found that social institutions (for example, church, government, and school) largely influenced uses of literacy at home. However, although the families were similar in their almost universal practice of literacy, they differed widely in the frequency of literacy events. He concluded that "in sheer quantitative terms, some children had the opportunity to observe much more reading and writing going on around them than other children" (p. 192). Finally, like the children of Trackton, only three of the children in Teale's study engaged in storybook reading at home on a consistent basis. Yet again, the importance of storybook reading in judging children's preparedness for success in school was underscored by the finding that these three children achieved the highest scores on tests of emergent literacy.

In a more recent study, Purcell-Gates (1996) examined the home literacy experiences of children in low-income families. With findings similar to Teale's, she observed that although there was evidence of some print use in each of the 20 families, the purposes, and particularly the frequency, of literacy events varied widely. The families used print most often in the context of entertainment (e.g., playing board games, reading *TV Guide*) and to mediate daily routines, and rarely in the context of work. She also observed that most texts read were those at the word and

clausal level: coupons, advertisements, food labels, and so forth. Purcell-Gates challenged the notion that “literacy is literally interwoven into all people’s lives in a literate society such as ours. Some families in this study, in fact, lived busy and satisfying lives with very little mediation by print” (p. 425).

Whereas investigations such as these have been used to support arguments that we need to broaden the lens through which we observe the literate traditions in culturally and linguistically different families, other studies bring into question the widely held assumption that parents who are linguistically or culturally different from mainstream parents are less interested or less involved in their children’s education. In her ethnographic study of 10 Latino families, Guadalupe Valdés (1996) reported the many ways the educational practices in these families were in conflict with, or at least incongruent with, the actions expected of them by mainstream teachers. The parents Valdés observed and interviewed were seldom observed to “teach” their children about literacy, either formally or informally; they could not be counted on to suspend household chores so that children could do a special homework project, and teachers’ requests for special items or for parents’ attendance at special functions often went unheeded as the parents attended to essential family routines or activities. Yet, the parents were clearly interested in and dedicated to their children’s learning. Rather than the teaching of literacy, however, the mothers took as their responsibility what Valdés reported as “la educación de los hijos” (the moral education of their children), which included

teaching children how to behave, how to act around others, and also what was good and moral. It included teaching the expectations of the roles that they would play in life and the rules of conduct that had to be followed in order to be successful in them. (p. 125)

As with the earlier studies, what stands out in Valdés’s report is the depth of misconception there is in common understandings about the beliefs and values nonmainstream families hold about their children’s education. In her words,

It is true that the families were not producing successful schoolchildren. It is true that there were many things they did not know about American schools and American teachers. It is also true that they were poor and they were struggling to survive. What is not true is that the parents in