



Lecture Transcript

Session 8: Connecting School and Home

Dr. Jeanne R. Paratore: If we step back and look at what we know about parents and children, and their literate lives at home, we can look to a good deal of professional literature, that in some ways challenges some long held beliefs. In the existing literature, and in conversations with teachers in general, one of the things we learned is that, as a matter of routine, when children fail in school, and particularly, when children of color, or children in economically poor communities fail in school, we turn to the parents and their family lives as, at least one source of their failure. Our explanation commonly, is that children are failing, not because of anything we do or we don't do in school. But children are failing because of what is happening or not happening at home. And while that particular belief is very widely held, there's some very important literature that I think should cause us to rethink and reexamine that belief.

In the early 1980s, Shirley Brice Heath conducted a ten-year study that ultimately came to be known as "Ways With Words." And in that study, Heath for all intents and purposes, lived with families in economically poor and culturally diverse communities. And for ten years, she watched the children in three different communities: one African-American, one low income White, the other middle income White -- she called that mainstream community. And as she studied children in these three communities, she found that in each of the communities, children used literacy before they came to school. But she found that they used literacy very differently. So, in the mainstream community, they used literacy in ways that are very commonly used in school. But in the other communities, literacy was used, but in very different ways. Children may not have had routine bedtime stories; children may not have been asked school-like questions. But children were not literacy impoverished. For example, in the community that she called Trackton (primarily an African-American community), she found that parents immersed their children in language, from birth on, parents talked to children, played with children, included children in adult-like conversations; that the children were immersed in a very, very, very rich language environment, but that environment was very different from the environment in school. Shirley Brice Heath concluded at the end of that study, that the children in the communities of Roadville and Trackton were not illiterate, but they were differently literate. And she suggested that their different literacies, simply did not map onto the literacies teachers expected in school; that there wasn't congruence between what children did at home, and what they were expected to do in school. And the lack of congruence, ultimately contributed to their failure.

You add to Heath's work, the work of people like Bill Teale, Vicky Purcell-Gates, Luis Moll, and Jim Baumann, whose work was on the list you read last night, indeed, some of my own work. And you find that it's very hard to dismiss the evidence that culture, race, economics do not predict parents' interest in, parents' motivation for, parents' ability to help children learn to read and write; that those factors simply are not reliable predictors of parents' ability to help their children. In fact, what we find is language, culture, and class influence the way parents use literacy at home. And those factors influence the ways they understand their roles in helping their children succeed in school. But virtually, all linguistic, cultural, and social-class groups perceive education to be of critical importance in their children's lives. In fact, Joyce Epstein, whose work has been among the best-known in building home school partnerships, concluded, at the end of one of her many studies, with this statement: "Parents' education did not explain their experiences with parent involvement unless -- and take a good look at that word unless -- unless teacher practices were taken into account, and the classrooms of teachers who were leaders in the use of parent involvement -- parents of all educational levels -- said they were frequently involved in learning activities at home." Often when I share this quote I think that teachers in the audience are probably saying, Oh sure. It's my fault again. Oh sure, now I have one more thing to do. Not only do I have to teach reading, writing, speaking, listening to the children in my classroom, but now, it's my responsibility to engage the children's parents in all of these things. And I'd like to say to you, No, it's not. But you can't get away from the evidence. The evidence is one more time that the teacher makes the difference; that what we do as classroom teachers, matters. It matters in how well our children achieve in our classroom. It matters in the extent to which parents understand and exercise their roles in working with us.