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Paula S. Vergunst

Susan V. Piazza

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Couched Literacy: Family Interactions with Texts at Home

BY PAULA S. VERGUNST &
SUSAN V. PIAZZA

“Hi Mom! I’m home!” Johnny bounds up the driveway, kicks off his boots, tosses his backpack to the floor, and reaches his arms around Mama’s neck for a tight squeeze. Affectionate hugs and kisses are shared before Johnny remembers the second most important thing about coming home from school: snack time. All else is forgotten while Johnny settles down on the couch to unwind with his matchbox cars and Oreos. The rigors of fourth grade are clearly no trifling undertaking for this 11-year-old scholar, (first author’s brother with Down Syndrome). But as demanding as schoolwork may be, academics are not left behind on the school bus. Mom picks up the discarded backpack and rifles through the folders stuffed inside, pulling out Johnny’s homework to be set aside until after supper for “couch time.”

These are nightly couch-time interactions shared between mother and Johnny. When I began studying early literacy in a graduate class with second author, I took an interest in closely observing the details of these activities. Over the space of a few weeks, whenever I had the opportunity, I observed the context, activities, and specific dialogues shared during couch time between Johnny and his mother. Together we collaborated to identify the connections between home literacy practices and literacy learning theories.

Mom and Johnny snuggle together on the living room couch, Johnny leaning on Mom’s shoulder. His cup of milk is secured in his hand, his legs tucked up under his body. Mother and son are sharing a brand new book, *Harry and the Lady Next Door*. One of the last activities of the night, the clock already shows 8:00 p.m., and both Johnny and Mommy are feeling the effects of a long day.

Mom opens the front cover and the fresh spine crackles as Johnny sips from his

milk. “Harry was a white dog with black spots...He did not like the lady next door.’ Oh, Johnny, look at Harry! Is he happy?” Mom points to the dog on the first page.

“No! He is mad, Mom.”

“I wonder why he’s so mad.”

“He wants some...um...I think he wants some food,” Johnny surmises, peering at the picture and imitating the bunched eyebrows and frowning mouth.

“Oh, that could be. Do you sometimes get mad when you want food?”

“Yeah, I do. I so hungry.” He looks away and takes another sip of milk.

“Johnny, I wonder if you can find Harry’s name on this page? Do you see it?”

Johnny shakes his head and sighs. “No Mom, I can’t. Turn the page, Mom. Okay?”

“Johnny, don’t be stubborn. I know you can find it! Let’s see...I think it starts with ‘H’...See?” Mom flips to the front cover, pointing to Harry’s name in the title.

Paula S. Vergunst is a student in the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology at Western Michigan University.

Susan V. Piazza is an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education and Literacy Studies and director of the Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic at Western Michigan University.

Opening back to the first page, she waits patiently for a few moments, stifling a yawn.

Johnny gleefully points to Harry's name on the page, stretching out his legs in front of him and beaming up at Mom. They share grins and Johnny reaches up for one of his spontaneous "kissies."

Home Literacy Practices

Homework in the evenings is an ideal context for observing family literacy practices. There is a great deal of research that examines issues related to homework with respect to typically developing children and those with developmental disabilities (Cameron & Bartel, 2009, Kralovec & Buell, 2000, Sawyer, 1996.). Regarding research that supports best practices for teachers, parents, and students themselves, for example, the inclusion of both explicitly taught literacy skills (Sénéchal, 2006) and those embedded in day-to-day experiences (McTavish, 2007) have led to improvements in students' academic achievement. Additionally, positive maternal affect has been shown to increase student motivation during homework (Pomerantz, Wang, & Fei-Yin Ng, 2005).

The U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement devoted an entire section of its 1987 report to this subject (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). The reported research findings regarding best home literacy practices include: a) shared book reading, b) the encouragement of independent reading, c) participation in thoughtful and engaging discussions, and d) the emphasis of the general importance of education and hard work ethic.

Disagreements preside, however, over how to foster the most advantageous teacher-parent relationships to boost student achievement. Some researchers determined techniques for homework involvement were best explicitly taught to parents via school-based training programs (Dohrn, Bryan, & Bryan, 1993), while others suggested that parents should be viewed as partners in education, contributing their unique expertise to their children's schooling (Klassen-Endrizzi & Smith, 2004, McTavish, 2007, Mui & Anderson, 2008). As well, studies have documented the diversity of literacy practices found in homes across America (Ashton, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2004; Heath, 1983). Communities and cultures outside of school communicate and interact with others in

shared ways, but are not always recognized and valued in schools. Regardless of the cultural background or socioeconomic status, there is clear evidence that all parents share literacy practices embedded within their communities and these practices have important implications for how well students are prepared for academic expectations found in schools (Heath, 1983; Compton-Lilly, 2004).

Parents communicate home literacies intuitively and naturally through everyday interactions. They do not typically access specialized research that disseminates recommendations. As part of a graduate course that focused on this phenomenon, this study examines one particular family and the text literacies that they share. Observing and analyzing parent-child homework interactions can serve as a guiding link between research, theory, and practice.

Observing Family Literacy in Action

This micro-ethnographic case study took place over a period of 3 weeks. There were five 1-hour sessions in which detailed observations were made during couch literacy time between Johnny and his mother. After gathering field notes through participant observation techniques, the next step was to search for any recurrent themes or patterns that emerged from the notes (Spradley, 1980). The guiding questions that helped to identify themes within the data were: 1) What types of underlying literacy events were transpiring between mother and son? and 2) What are the implications for practice that might be drawn from the routines during couch time?

Several readings of the observational data helped to identify some subtle, but fascinating details related to the interactions between mother and child. Any themes emerged from the repeated readings of the data and were recorded and topically grouped into overarching categories. For example, a few of the categories identified were types of oracy/literacy activities, parent and child attention-getting techniques, outward expressions of emotions during interactions, forms of text connections to life, and forms of positive or negative reinforcement. As each new category was identified, the data was then examined to find every qualifying example that would fit the descriptor. Upon completing the thematic analysis, two peer reviewers checked for agreement on the categories and each example. Finally, the resulting categorical

lists were further analyzed to confirm the trustworthiness of the major themes.

Examples of Home Literacies

A particularly striking theme that surfaced upon close analysis was the nature of mother-to-child communications. Overall, the most significant finding here was the recognition that Johnny's mother was intuitively using many of the recommended research-based strategies (Klassen-Endrizzi & Smith, 2004, McTavish, 2007, Mui & Anderson, 2008). There were several different types of oral literacy activities identified. For example, during their interactions Johnny's mother would make connections between their life experiences and the text (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). She also regularly made references to the visual illustrations of the texts she was reading, encouraging Johnny's joint attention. Beyond simple attention, however, Johnny was invited to *share* the literacy experiences orally by reading to or along with his mother, by commenting on texts, or most often by simply participating in conversations. Besides these specific strategies, there was a repeated theme of humor that recurred between mother and child, almost revitalizing the routine tasks at hand. The notion of affect in general was a noteworthy part of their reading interactions, and there were a variety of emotions expressed, with the total number of positive interactions outweighing the negative. Each of the mentioned themes that were embedded in the observed parent-child interactions deserves closer examination and illustration.

The first theme of text to life connections was found a total of 14 times in the observational notes, and in a variety of forms. For example, while reading a story about farm animals, as she read about pigs, Mom stopped to ask Johnny, "Are you a piglet?" referring to a nickname Johnny has been called in the past. Sometimes the connections would be in reference to Johnny's behavior. While reading a Bible story, for example, one of the characters disobeyed God's command. As Johnny had been in trouble for being stubborn earlier that evening, Mom asked Johnny whether King Saul was being stubborn, prompting a brief discussion over that meaning. Later in the same evening when Johnny spontaneously apologized for his behavior, Mom referred to the Bible verse regarding the metaphor of God's forgiving sins

by casting them behind His back. "I take all your naughty and throw it behind my back," she said, as she kissed him in forgiveness. These connections to Johnny's life and family beliefs added meaning to some of the texts that might otherwise feel distant and abstract.

The second observation was Mom's frequent references to text illustrations. She apparently used this technique to draw Johnny's attention to what she was reading, especially if he exhibited signs of tiredness or disinterest. For example, one evening Johnny seemed to pay very little attention to the story. Playing with a toy drill in his hands, glancing around the room, and coughing seemed to be the clues in Johnny's behavior that his attention was lost. As she read, therefore, Mom began pointing to the pictures and saying, "Oh look! There he is. See what he's doing?" as she read about a particular character. This would prompt Johnny to peer at the illustration for himself and pay closer attention to the story events.

Thirdly, Johnny was seldom a passive participant during couch time. Mom actively attempted to engage him in every literacy encounter. Couch time reading, for example, was never simply Mom reading to Johnny, but Johnny was equally engaged by reading every other page independently or adding his own comments and sound effects to the story. Also, while coaching Johnny during their Bible studies, Mom seldom simply spoke the words to Johnny, but encouraged him to choral read along with her.

General positive affect and humor were the final themes found to most salient during the observed mother-child interactions. Tallying up the examples of positive and negative feedback during homework time confirmed that the majority of their interactions were positive. These positive interactions reflect what researchers have found to be conducive to motivational learning (Pomerantz, Wang, & Fei-Yin Ng, 2005). Humor was also embedded in many of these positive feedback interactions, bringing both smiles and laughter to the otherwise intense homework sessions.

Implications for Practice

Based on the number of examples and themes identified, it is clear that Johnny's mother was intuitively applying very specific strategies to enhance Johnny's learning. Homework interactions were not simply

bonding time on the couch. She was incorporating into her son's homework routines that researchers consider to be the most supportive literacy practices. Following the data analysis, (first author) interviewed Johnny's mother as to where she had accumulated this repertoire of instructional techniques. Without access to the academic literature, where was she learning these things? From Johnny's teachers? After sharing the observations with her, she was simply asked why she used the specific strategies she did. Her answers were not only enlightening, but unexpected! As we discussed her interactions with Johnny, she was surprised to learn that she had been using strategies that were research-based. In fact, she simply attributed most of her home literacy practices to her 20+ years of experience as a mother.

The implications of these findings for educators and researchers are helpful when planning and supporting homework. Underestimation of parental capabilities as children's first teachers is likely a common occurrence among general education teachers and has in fact been brought up in academic literature on more than one occasion (Klassen-Endrizzi & Smith, 2004, McTavish, 2007, Mui & Anderson, 2008). It is necessary to view parents as valuable resources that can inform instructional practices, rather than simply teach them how to "do school" (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Once families are viewed as valuable informants regarding their children's needs, our classroom pedagogies will become culturally and socially responsive in ways that will benefit all learners. This study adds to that evidence and the growing body of research that advocates the recognition of parents as more than trainable assistants, but rather, valuable and expert resources for literacy practices at home and at school. By familiarizing themselves with family literacy practices across cultures and by nurturing close relationships and understandings with families, educators will be better able to capitalize on and even learn from the skills parents possess as their children's first teachers.

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