

## Literacy within Family Life

TREVOR H. CAIRNEY

Many educators have viewed the home as an important foundation for later learning, and as the site for the emergence of practices such as literacy. But most have failed to appreciate its significance for learning in other institutional settings, particularly school. The 1990s was a period in which the work of sociolinguists, social psychologists, anthropologists, critical and cultural theorists and literacy researchers led to the questioning of previous assumptions concerning the nature of family and community literacy and its relationship to the literacy of schooling.

Increasingly, researchers have come to realize that the influence of family members and caregivers does not cease at age five. Indeed, while the role of the teacher has been shown to be vital in children's school learning, differences in family backgrounds also appear to account for a large share of variance in student school achievement. This is reflected in findings of high positive correlations between parent knowledge, beliefs and interactive styles, and children's school achievement (see Schaefer, 1991, for a detailed review). Some even suggest that the cumulative effect of a range of home-related factors may account for the greatest proportion of variability in student literacy performance (Rutter et al., 1970; Thompson, 1985).<sup>1</sup> As a result, family involvement in children's education has become widely recognized as an important element in effective schooling (Epstein, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). This involvement is diverse and consists of contributions from varied household members, including parents, caregivers and extended family members such as grandparents and siblings (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Gregory, 1997).

Just as we have learned a great deal about the importance of families and the home in recent times, we have also learned much about the nature of literacy. Our work in a variety of settings suggests that literacy is not a single unitary skill; rather, it is a social practice, which takes many forms, each with specific purposes and specific contexts in which they are used (Cairney, 1995a; Luke, 1993; Welch and Freebody, 1993; Gee, 1990). Children negotiate a world in which there are multiliteracies and within this complex world there are different life chances (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000).

In this chapter, 'family literacy' is defined as social and cultural practices associated with written text. The research reviewed is that which relates to how literacy is constructed, developed, valued and defined in families.<sup>2</sup> It has attempted to focus primarily on studies that have examined these practices in the families of preschool children. However, several studies have been included that focus on family literacy practices for young school-aged children because of the relevance of much of this work to the preschool years.

What has not been included in this chapter are studies that focus on initiatives to support family literacy practices, educate parents about school literacy, build partnerships between home and school and so on. Peter Hannon's chapter on family literacy programmes (in this volume) provides a review of this research. Other reviews of this topic have been provided by Purcell-Gates (2000) and Cairney (2002).

Before exploring what we now know about literacy learning in the family, it is essential first to provide a brief overview of foundational research in the language and literacy field.

### HOW EMERGING THEORIES ON EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT SHAPED VIEWS ON THE ROLE THAT FAMILIES PLAY IN EARLY LITERACY LEARNING

It is fair to say that research on literacy in families was rather limited prior to the 1980s. While there was a great deal of research about children's early language development within the home, little specific attention was given to family literacy. Until the 1980s the prevailing view of literacy researchers and teachers was that children arrived at school in varying stages of readiness for literacy learning.<sup>3</sup> New school entrants were seen largely as 'blank slates' in relation to literacy. The exception to this was that some attention was given to the impact of environmental print in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Clark, 1976; Clay, 1979; Mason, 1965) but even this research was viewed as of interest because it helped us to understand children's early literacy learning at school.

As well as being driven by the school agenda, interest in early language learning (and hence literacy) prior to the 1960s was shaped by behavioural theories. Such theoretical foundations led to views of literacy that assumed that children were not ready to read and write until age five or six, and that this required instruction in schools if it was to be achieved (Hall, 1987). Studies of language acquisition were shaped by attention to the number, variety and frequency with which words were used, and the grammatical structures within which they were embedded.

There were two dominant perspectives during this period: maturational readiness and developmental readiness (Crawford, 1995). Maturational readiness, with its roots in the work of researchers such as Gesell (1925), argued that children pass through a number of stages that reflect biological maturation. Developmental readiness was an extension of this work and reflected strongly the work of developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Thorndike. Advocates of developmental readiness (e.g. Chall, 1967; Durkin, 1966) argued that children needed to be 'ready to read' if they were to have success. Hence, they placed greater importance on the alphabetic code. Families were seen, at best, as having a minor role in literacy development, and even then, only as they contributed to support of school literacy learning.

However, the 1960s and 1970s also saw the emergence of important changes in our understanding of oral language development that were eventually to alter the way we viewed the role of the family in development. Harste et al. have argued that developmental psycholinguistics 'altered the

profession's view of language learning. Instead of passively awaiting external reinforcement, children came to be seen as actively attempting to understand the nature of the language spoken around them, making predictions and testing hypotheses about how language worked' (1984: 56).

But it was not until the 1980s that the first significant changes in the positioning of families occurred as two new perspectives emerged. The first has become known as emergent literacy and had its roots in the work of Clay (1966), Holdaway (1979), Wells (1982; 1986), Harste et al. (1984), Mason and Allen (1986), Teale and Sulzby (1986) and others. Hall (1987) provided one of the earliest syntheses of the emergent literacy research and did much to translate this work into a form that could inform early childhood practice. The emergent literacy work was influenced strongly by disciplines other than developmental psychology, particularly psycholinguistics (e.g. K. Goodman, 1965; 1967; Y. Goodman, 1978) and linguistics (Halliday, 1973; 1975; Wells, 1986) as well as research on early writing development (e.g. Teale and Sulzby, 1986). These different influences each contributed to new perspectives on the social dimensions of literacy, the way in which meaning is constructed as part of the reading and writing processes, and the role that adults in and outside the school play in children's literacy development.

What these perspectives contributed to an emerging knowledge of families and family literacy was an increased understanding of the critical role that early literacy experiences play in children's school literacy learning. This included a new appreciation that:

- Family support of literacy experiences was foundational to later literacy learning.
- Guided interaction between parents/caregivers and children in relation to story reading or early print experiences was important.
- The development of the alphabetic code had its foundations in children's early experiences of environmental print.

Almost in parallel to the development of emergent literacy was the rise of constructivist and sociolinguistic perspectives that were based strongly on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Researchers such as Harste et al. (1984) and Cook-Gumperz (1986) rejected developmental psychologists' staged notions of children's early learning. Drawing instead on the work of social psychology, anthropology and sociolinguistics, these researchers saw spoken language and literacy as cultural tools that shape individuals as they grow and transform behaviour as it is internalized. Rich literacy experiences, scaffolded support (Bruner, 1983; 1986; Rogoff, 1990) and encouragement of meaning

making and risk taking were more fully appreciated as a vital part of child language learning.

Sociolinguistic theories of language derived from writers like Bahktin (1935/1981), Gumperz (1986), Halliday (1975) and Hymes (1974) also played a major role in this shift. These theories built upon the basic understanding that language is made as people act and react to one another. From this was derived a number of key related constructs. First, people learn to be literate primarily in groups as they relate to others to accomplish social and communicative functions. Secondly, literacy is purpose driven and context bound. Thirdly, people react to the actions of others as well as to set patterns of group interaction. Fourthly, people may act with and react to each other through sequences of actions, not just single acts.

One final influence on how family literacy has been viewed was the emergence of 'critical literacy' (Crawford, 1995). This perspective draws heavily on the work of critical theorists, sociolinguistics and cultural studies. Its major contribution to our understanding of family literacy is that:

- Differences between the discourses of home and school can make a difference to the success of some children (Gee, 1990).
- An acceptance of cultural differences between home and school can lead to more responsive curricula that offer all children greater chances of success in learning.
- Some families are disadvantaged by power relationships that fail to value the funds of knowledge that some children and their families bring to school, while others are advantaged (see Moll, 1992; Moll et al., 1992).

As Solsken points out, the major contribution of this work has been to help us to identify 'the social practices by which schools, families and individuals reproduce, resist and transform hierarchies of social relations and their positions within them' (1993: 7). Furthermore, it has enabled research and educational initiatives concerned with family literacy to be critiqued in new ways.

The combined and overlapping impact of these quite disparate scholarly traditions was to bring about a significant shift in the way literacy was defined and studied and an increased understanding of the relationship between the literacy of home and school.

#### RECENT FINDINGS FROM FAMILY LITERACY RESEARCH

Building on the foundations of the above literacy research and the work across a variety of other

related disciplines, much more is now known about literacy in families. I want to discuss what the literature tells us under four key headings, each of which reflects a broad insight into the nature and importance of family literacy:

- Children acquire literacy as part of complex processes of enculturation.
- There are differences between the literacy practices of home and school that impact on literacy learning at home and school.
- Shared reading plays a key role in family literacy practices.
- The literacy practices of home are complex and varied.

#### Children acquire literacy as part of complex processes of enculturation

There have been a number of studies that are based on the foundational premise that children learn and develop as they try to make sense of their world. They are seen as socialized from birth into the cultural practices of families and community members with whom they share their lives. As McNaughton (1995) points out, literacy, like other cultural practices, functions to socialize children into specific ways of acting and thinking which are seen as appropriate by the group or community within which the actions are embedded.

It appears from practical experience and extensive research that from the beginning of life, parents introduce children to the complexities of language. Parents communicate with their children and jointly make sense of a shared world. The parent's role is complex and includes adopting the role of listener, prompter, information giver, asker of questions, and fellow meaning maker interested in the communication process (Cairney, 1989; 1990; Lindfors, 1985; McNaughton, 1995; Snow, 1983; Wells, 1985; 1986).

As Clay points out: 'Remarkable learning has already occurred before children pass through the school doors. Even those who are most reluctant to speak have learned a great deal about the language of community' (1998: 1-2). From birth, parents and their children construct meaning together and the child is socialized into the cultural practices of community through language. Families do this by selecting, arranging and using specific experiences, which serve to show what is valued and seen as useful by family members (Cairney, 2002).

What the above work demonstrates is how literacy is developed within families as part of the social practices of life. Literacy is not developed in a culturally neutral way; rather it is interwoven with

the enculturation of each child, as written text is implicated in human relationships. As such, differences exist in the way literacy is viewed, defined, supported and used as part of family cultural practices.

**There are differences between the literacy practices of home and school that impact on literacy learning at home and school**

There has been a long interest in the social differences<sup>4</sup> that exist between families and individuals, and in particular the linguistic differences that might impact on later learning and achievement. As Wells (1986) suggests, because language is a social activity it is not unreasonable to expect differences between children that may be related to their membership of social groups such as families. As a result, there has been strong interest in understanding variations in early language and literacy development across various social and cultural groups.

This body of work has also helped us to understand the cultural variation that occurs across communities and families in the way that literacy is defined and supported. One of the most significant early studies to document cultural variations in literacy acquisition was the work of Scribner and Cole (1981). They found that the Vai people of Liberia used three different writing systems for different purposes. Arabic literacy was learned by rote as part of religious practices, English was learned as part of formal schooling, and finally, the Vai language was learned informally at home and in the community and for personal communication such as letters. What Scribner and Cole concluded was that each of these 'literatecies' was acquired and used for different social and cultural purposes.

Heath (1983) found in her well-known ethnography in the Piedmont Carolinas that there was significant variation in the use of literacy practices across three communities. There was variation in the acquisition of oral language, and the manner in which parents introduced children to literacy and its purposes. By focusing on story reading she was able to document significant differences in community styles of literacy socialization.

In a white middle class community (Maintown), children were socialized into a life in which books and information gained from them was seen as having a significant role in learning. Parents and other adults interacted with children from six months using book reading events. They asked information questions about these books, and related the content to everyday situations, encouraging them to share their own stories. Children in a second white working class community (Roadville), took part in book

reading where the texts were more likely to be alphabet or number books, real life stories, nursery rhymes or Bible stories, rather than written narratives. The parents asked factual questions about the books, but did not encourage the children to relate the books to events in their lives. Within a third working class African-American community (Trackton), parents rarely provided book reading events. Instead, they used oral stories that focused primarily on fictional stories or the positioning of familiar events into new contexts. These literacy forms were equally sophisticated, but they were not privileged in schools, nor did they prepare children for school literacy practices.

Duranti and Ochs (1986) found that the children of families in a Samoan village needed to cope with different forms of interaction across home and school settings. In the family, for example, complimenting and praising was a much more reciprocal process than in schools and the achievement of task at home was seen as a social product dependent on the participation of different group members.

Snow (1977) also found that there were variations across class groups, with working class mothers using more directives than middle class and upper class mothers. She also identified a key difference across social class groups and observed that middle class families prepared their preschool children to understand decontextualized language. This involved active scaffolding of children's interaction with text as they expanded, extended or clarified their children's utterances.

The demonstration of diversity across different social contexts has also led to an interest in how such diversity compares to the seeming uniformity of schooling (see, for example, Cairney et al., 1995a; Freebody et al., 1995) and has an impact on school learning. Much of the research in the last decade on matches and mismatches between the literacies of home and school can be traced to early work on social differences in spoken language in the preschool years. One of the earliest studies to impact on this field of inquiry was the influential (but often misused and misunderstood) work of Bernstein. Bernstein (1964; 1971; 1972) argued that educational disadvantage (that had long been identified as in some way related to social class) was related not to linguistic abilities but rather to the ways in which these abilities had been used as part of daily life. He argued that working class as opposed to middle class families were more likely to emphasize specific relationships in their families and through these relationships to use language resources in different ways. Hence, rather than lacking linguistic resources, working class families simply use different resources in different ways. Bernstein suggested that as a result, these families

used what he referred to as a 'restricted' linguistic code in which a great deal of the speaker's meaning was implicit because it was already assumed to be known. Middle class families on the other hand showed in their interactions with children more personal relationships and were more explicit in their use of language, making their views much clearer. This he termed an 'elaborated' linguistic code.

Bernstein's research spawned a number of other studies (see, for example, Hawkins, 1969; Tough, 1977) of early language development that collectively gave credence to what has been an enduring (if somewhat simplistic) belief that children of middle class families generally have linguistically more complex language than those from the working class. The interpretation of Bernstein's earliest work also gave rise to a number of less than helpful deficit theories<sup>5</sup> of children's early language and literacy development. However, Bernstein's later work has gone some way towards redressing this misinterpretation (see, for example, Bernstein, 1996).

The Bristol Study (see Wells, 1986; C.G. Wells, 1982) provided evidence that undermined simplistic attempts to make causal links between social class and early language development. In this project information was compiled on home background (primarily education and occupation) for each of 128 children to create four social class sub-groups. When these groups were compared on a variety of language measures there were no statistically significant differences. On the basis of these findings Wells (1986) concludes that there is little evidence to suggest class stereotypes have validity in relation to spoken language development of children at the point when they enter schooling.

But just as many have asked questions about the relationship between family background and early language development, so too researchers have considered the impact of differences in families on early literacy achievement. As argued elsewhere (e.g. Cairney, 1994; 1995b; Cairney and Munsie, 1995a; 1995b) the match and mismatch in language and literacy between home/community and school, are of vital importance in addressing the specific needs of all students, particularly those who experience difficulties with literacy and schooling. Differences in school literacy achievement are not due to differences in the volume of preschool or home literacy experiences. Indeed, many researchers have shown that virtually all children in highly literate countries such as the USA have extensive experiences with written language (Heath, 1983; Harste et al., 1984; Teale, 1986). Rather than reflecting deficits in skills and experiences, these differences in school literacy achievement seem to have more to do with some students'

lack of familiarity with the literacy practices of schooling, and schools' failure to recognize and build on the literacy practices children bring with them from home.

The work of Luis Moll and his colleagues (Moll, 1992; Moll et al., 1992; Gonzales and Moll, 1994) has provided an important alternative perspective that suggests that variations across families are in fact a resource rather than a set of determinants of literacy success. Moll and his colleagues argue that all children live in families that have resources and that part of these resources is the knowledge that family members possess, which they argue represents 'funds' that can be used by the children as part of later learning in school and the world. The role of teachers and schools is seen by Moll as to acknowledge and work with community funds of knowledge to design more effective literacy curricula.

Similarly, Weinstein-Shr and Quintero (1995) and Taylor (1983) argue that diversity in family means of support is a rich resource rather than a deficit for children. They argue that schools need to spend less time trying to conform families to school practices and more time understanding how schools can extend literacy opportunities outside the narrow definitions of classroom practices. Furthermore, we need to understand learners' different identities and the ways in which they learn best.

What this area of research highlights is that differences do exist in the literacy practices of home and school, and that understanding these variations is important.

### **Shared reading plays a key role in family literacy practices**

A number of detailed accounts of children's early storybook reading (Butler, 1979; Crago and Crago, 1983; White, 1954) have increased understanding of how shared reading experiences in the home are intertwined with the daily fabric of life and how they are an extension of human relationships in the children's world. Each of these accounts demonstrates how the process of learning to read is socially complex, and involves parents and children sharing in an imaginative process that integrates factors of language, thought and feeling (Meek, 1991).

However, while research suggests that reading to children is important, it is less certain how prevalent this is as a family literacy practice and what form it takes.<sup>6</sup> Meek (1991) suggests that traditionally we have assumed that it is the amount of reading that is critical, that picturebooks are the beginning text type for all children, and that the parent reads and the child listens. The limited evidence that we

do have suggests that the picture is more complex than this. These views are borne out by some of the early research on parent language interactions with children where texts were evident (e.g. Wells, 1986).

A number of detailed accounts of reading interactions within researchers' families have been helpful in providing some insights into the complexity of this partnership. For example, the work of Crago and Crago (1983), showed how one child in a literature-rich home moved in the first four years of life from being a listener to stories to a reteller and finally a narrator of her own stories. Similarly Ninio and Bruner (1978), in their research on two different families from two different social classes, identified that a joint book reading cycle could be identified that involved joint construction based around pointing to pictures, page turning and constant conversation, positive parent feedback and naming behaviour. Miller et al. (1986) also studied the early reading behaviour of three families with a child at age two. Reading with a partner was common and consisted of an initial agreement on the nature of the activity (e.g. 'Let's look at books'), followed by the act of reading which consisted in turning pages, pointing to pictures and much verbal activity. Parents used naming to gain the child's attention and engagement (e.g. 'Let's look', 'See the rabbit' etc). Children also used language to gain the parent's engagement but this was typically what the researchers called a 'notice verb' (e.g. look, see). This was followed (as Ninio and Bruner found) by cycles of 'query' (e.g. 'What's this? Say "bird"') and 'label' (e.g. squirrel). Positive feedback was also given, and finally 'storytelling' occurred, with narratives being told that were associated with the text.

Phillips and McNaughton (1990) explored the nature of storybook interactions based on observations of 10 families who had identified themselves as interested in books and book reading. The families had incomes that placed them in the top two socio-economic groups. Analysis of the multiple readings within families showed that parents concentrated on the narrative in first readings but over time they reduced this emphasis and increased efforts to make links between the text and experiences. Nevertheless exchanges about the narrative accounted for 86% of all interactions. Children also initiated more questions over subsequent readings of the same text. While this work provides useful insights into the story reading practices of more wealthy white families, there are still many unanswered questions concerning families from different cultural backgrounds and those who are from lower socio-economic classes.

Snow (1993) attempted to compare low-income families that evidently supported their children's learning well to those who did not. She found that the parents' most significant contributions were non-print-related activities, particularly language interaction and talk. She found that effective home talk provided children with definitions that assisted learning. They also exchanged information with their children, showed affection and support, enforced discipline and kept them on task, and expressed feelings. Snow concluded that these interactions supported children's early literacy learning. These findings have been supported by a study in Australia by Hill et al. (1998).

Williams (1990) compared the shared reading practices of two groups of mothers. One group sent their children to a disadvantaged preschool in a poor neighbourhood; the other group sent their children to a privately run preschool. He noted four main differences in home reading practices from transcripts of reading sessions. First, mothers from the disadvantaged preschool (DPS) tended to read lengthy sections of the text with little linguistic interaction when compared to mothers from the private preschool (PPS). Secondly, there was more demand from the children at the PPS to display shared knowledge in the form of ritual displays than the DPS children. Thirdly, the conversation of the children at the DPS was closely tied to the fictional world of the book, whereas the children from the PPS linked their own world more regularly to the text. Finally, children from the PPS were given more opportunities to choose the texts than the children from the DPS.

The actual nature of the adult interactions with the child has also received attention by researchers. For example, Resnick et al. (1987) found that parental behaviour during reading had an impact on children's emergent literacy. Parental behaviours that fostered shared reading were evaluated and it was concluded that the amount of exposure to reading materials and the degree of facilitative verbalizations by parents (e.g. describing pictures, whispering, 'cooing' etc.) were important.

The above research confirms that shared reading is an important family literacy practice and that the interaction with family members can vary in form across social and cultural contexts. However, there is still limited research on the exact impact of this practice on a wide range of families across different social and cultural groups. Further work is needed to document the relative importance of shared reading. While it is a common literacy practice and has been widely researched, its prevalence should not lead us to overlook the importance of the many other varied forms of literacy present in the daily lives of families.

### The literacy practices of home are complex and varied

What the above discussion has shown is that while a great deal is known about early literacy development, there have been relatively few studies that have provided a detailed description of literacy practices within a wide range of families. This section summarizes several major research studies that have spent time in families attempting to understand the complexity of literacy practices.

Any discussion of literacy within families would be deficient without a treatment of the significant work of Denny Taylor. It was Taylor's (1983) work that spawned the term 'family literacy' and it has provided some of the most detailed insights into the nature of literacy practices within homes. Her series of ethnographic investigations began in 1977 with the study of a single family and by 1979 had grown to six white middle class families living in suburban areas within 100 km of New York City. Her study spanned a period of three years and involved her becoming part of the lives of her informants.

Taylor's work has contributed a number of critical insights. First, literacy is implicated in the lives of family members and discussions of literacy included reference to its place in the memories of the past, particularly in relation to schooling and the sharing of key literacy experiences. Secondly, the way parents mediated literacy experiences varied across and within families (e.g. in relation to the latter, even different siblings had different experiences). Thirdly, there were 'shifts' in parents' approaches to the 'transmission of literacy styles and values' which coincided with children beginning to learn to read and write in school (1983: 20). Fourthly, older siblings had an influence on shaping their younger siblings' experiences of literacy. Fifthly, literacy experiences within families are rich and varied and include reading and writing necessary for the running of the household (e.g. keeping financial records, reading junk mail), reading for information and pleasure, communicating with others (e.g. letters, notes) and establishing social connections with other people. Sixthly, literacy surrounds family members and is part of the fabric of life. Finally, children's growing awareness of literacy involves experiences that are woven into daily activities and could go 'almost unnoticed as the children's momentary engagement merges with the procession of other interests' (1983: 56).

The findings of Taylor's early work informed a number of later studies that similarly provided 'thick descriptions' and offered additional insights. In particular, her work with Dorsey-Gaines in conducting an ethnography of black families living in

urban poverty (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) added much to her earlier descriptions of white middle class families. What this work also did was offer a theoretical frame for the literacy practices observed that was lacking in Taylor's previous study. This framework built on the work of Heath (1983) and Taylor (1983) and described literacy practices in 22 categories. These examples included instrumental reading (i.e. to gain information, accomplish tasks or meet practical needs); social-interactional reading (to gain information linked to relationships, to build relationships etc.); news-related reading; recreational reading; writing as a substitute for oral messages (notes and messages); writing as an aid to memory (grocery lists, telephone numbers etc.); financial reading (reading stock reports, reading forms etc.); recreational writing (puzzles, crosswords etc.); work-related writing (job applications, forms etc.); and so on.

Based on their observations, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines drew a number of conclusions that are important. In particular, their work showed that within these poor black families there was a richness of literacy experience that previous studies had not been able to recognize, and that institutional factors rather than a lack of parental support had a far greater impact on lack of school success for these families. This supports Auerbach's (1995) view that the extent to which families use literacy in socially significant ways as an integral part of family life is a key factor in shaping literacy acquisition. These findings are important because they suggest that race, economic status and social setting should not be used as significant correlates of literacy. They support the conclusion that there is a rich diversity of literacy practices within families that should be acknowledged and tapped.

The difficulty of making sense of the varied literacy practices that are observed in families is common to many studies. A major problem has been that few studies use comparable categories or even broad definitions of literacy practices. Some of these studies tend to define and list separate literacy events<sup>7</sup> (see, for example, Leichter, 1984; Teale, 1986) and others use a mix of reader and writer purpose and function (e.g. Heath, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988); some use a combination of audience and purpose (e.g. Cairney et al., 1995b; Barton and Padmore, 1991) and others use linguistic categories such as written genres.

Another study that attempted to consider literacy practices across different social and cultural groups was conducted by McNaughton (1995) in New Zealand. He concluded from detailed case studies of 17 families in New Zealand that what happens in the families is the most critical determinant of

children's early literacy development. His description of the literacy practices of Maori, Samoan and Pakeha families whose income earners were from non-professional occupations provided a picture of resourceful families able to support their children's early literacy learning. What is useful about McNaughton's analysis is that he was able to describe the variable way in which families use time, space and varied resources to help preschool children to learn literacy. He noted three different ways in which families supported literacy learning:

- joint activities – where another person (parent, relative, sibling) provided guidance in a specific literacy event such as story reading
- personal activities – involving the child practising a specific form of literacy on their own (e.g. scribbling)
- ambient activities – involving literacy practices in which the child is immersed as part of daily life, those practices that occur 'around' the child while they go about life.

Like Taylor's work, McNaughton's research demonstrates the 'everydayness' of literacy in the family and provides detailed analysis of common literacy practices in the home.

As part of an Australian government project that sought to examine the relationship between home, school and community literacy, Cairney and Ruge (1998) described the literacy practices evident within 27 families. From these 27 families, a total of 37 children were observed. While these children were of primary school age, the families also had approximately 20 preschool children. Each participating family was asked to collect a range of data including audiotape literacy events, an audit of home literacy resources, a log of all reading and writing activities, and photographs of significant literacy events in the home (using disposable cameras supplied by the researchers). One member of each family was also asked to act as co-researcher. The child and family member co-researchers involved in this phase of data collection recorded a range of home literacy events. A total of 130 home literacy events were recorded.

Cairney and Ruge (1998) identified four distinct purposes for literacy in the homes and classrooms in their study: literacy for establishing and maintaining relationships; literacy for accessing or displaying information; literacy for pleasure and/or self-expression; and literacy for skills development. Table 8.1 below lists the identified literacy practices, as well as sample home literacy events in each category.

One important finding from this study was that the data showed that specific literacy practices may contribute to, and constitute part of, different

literacy events in different contexts depending on the understandings and purposes of the participants. For example, the intended purpose of a newsletter from school may be to give parents access to information about school policies or activities. Alternatively, the intended purpose may be to maintain communication between home and school and thereby develop the relationship between families and the school. However, in reading the newsletter at home, families may have very different purposes and 'use' the newsletter in different ways (e.g. one family used it for oral reading practice).

Cairney and Ruge (1998) also found that the families in their study differed greatly in the extent to which literacy was *visible* in everyday life, ranging from the ever pervasive nature of literacy in one family home to the seemingly rare occurrence of literacy events in another household. There was considerable variation in the amount and types of literacy resources available in each home.

One of the striking features of literacy practices in the homes of many of the families in this study was the extent to which 'school literacy' dominated home contexts. That is, the particular types and uses of literacy usually associated with schooling were prominent in many families. This prominence was manifest primarily in the amount of time spent on homework activities and, to a lesser extent, siblings 'playing schools'. While this might seem irrelevant for a review of early childhood family literacy practices, it is important to remember that once the first child in any family is five years old then that family is effectively under the strong influence of school literacy practices (see Cairney and Ruge, 1998; Freebody et al., 1995). As well, there is evidence to suggest that the literacy practices privileged right from the birth of a first child are strongly shaped by the parents' experience of school literacy as well as the desire to prepare the preschool child for later schooling (Cairney and Ruge, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

As suggested at the commencement of this chapter, the last 20 years have seen a deepened interest in understanding literacy within the home. As a result, a great deal has been learned about the importance of families and the home as sites for early literacy development. Research suggests that children experience multiliteracies at home, and that literacy is defined, used and supported in accordance with social and cultural differences.

As well, literacy in the home is diverse. Young children encounter print on food products, on television, in books, magazines and computer games,

Table 8.1 *Classification of Cairney and Ruge's (1998) literacy practices and examples of home literacy events in each category*

Literacy practices	Sample literacy events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy for establishing or maintaining relationships</li> </ul>	Reading/writing letters to/from relatives or friends Making/writing birthday cards Reading 'bedtime' stories Writing/reading notes to/from school Playing 'schools'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy for accessing or displaying information</li> </ul>	Completing homework activities Doing school projects Reading/discussing newspaper articles Reading store catalogues, 'junk' mail Reading/discussing non-fiction texts Study related (e.g. TAFE coursework) Use of computer/Internet/fax Reading TV guide Reading maps, timetables, calendars, menus Writing/reading notes to/from family members Reading/writing recipes Writing/reading shopping list Reading/writing labels or instructions Reading street signs Reading TV subtitles Writing/reading appointment diary Filling in forms Writing/reading list of jobs/chores Writing/reading for financial, accounting or banking purposes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy for pleasure and/or self-expression</li> </ul>	Practising writing own name Drawing/labelling pictures Reading books, magazines or comics Playing card or board games Doing crossword puzzles, find-a-word puzzles Writing/reading stories or poems Writing/drawing cartoons or comics Keeping a personal diary Writing own life history Writing songs Playing computer/ Sega/ Nintendo games
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy for skills development</li> </ul>	Completing homework activities 'Read aloud' practice Phonics drills Writing the alphabet

flashing at them on the freeway, and even on clothing. The typical preschool child experiences more diverse forms of literacy than at any time in human history. Print is everywhere. Children also 'read' a myriad of pictures, images, words and sounds as they observe others using automatic teller machines, writing letters, collecting faxes, reading messages on mobile phones, and playing video games. Increasingly, they watch members of their families purchasing products via computer, answering

e-mail, interacting with their televisions, and downloading images, recipes, and other documents from the Internet (Cairney, 1995a). In the increasingly digital age there also appears to be greater opportunity for the interactive experience of multiple media than ever before.

However, it is evident from the studies reviewed here that much work still needs to be done in understanding family literacy practices. We still know little about the diversity of reading experiences and

early writing. We know even less about the way in which the multiliteracies of life interact and shape each other and the people who use them. There are three main reasons for this. First, much of the early writing research still uses definitions of literacy that are limited and hence researchers restrict observation to a more limited range of literacy practices that appear far too often to simply mirror school literacy.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, a concern with how family literacy impacts on school learning has led almost inevitably to efforts to examine family literacy as subordinated to the primary concerns of researchers to improve school learning. Thirdly, the methods that have been used to examine family literacy have been very limited. Except for a small number of significant ethnographies, few get 'close enough' to, or spend enough time with, families to gain insights into the depth and diversity of literacy practices at home. The major challenge for researchers is to address these issues as we attempt to gain further insights into literacy within families.

As well as the above general issues, there are a number of specific areas of great need in relation to ongoing research. First, we need more studies that consider factors such as gender, social class and culture while examining literacy across diverse contexts. For example, Razey (2002) has recently examined gender differences in the literacy practices of home and school for children aged five years. In her study gender construction was examined by observing and analysing the literacy interactions of six kindergarten children at school and home. Her analysis showed that there were differences in the ways that teachers interacted with boys and girls. Boys were asked more questions and in turn asked more questions themselves than girls. Within homes, Razey found that each child's pattern of interactions with parents was unique. As well, what counted as literacy was seen differently in many homes. This was in contrast to school lessons where far less diversity was observed, consistent with the work of Cairney and Ruge (1998) and Freebody et al. (1995). In considering both home and school contexts, Razey was able to conclude that for the families studied, school was a 'linguistic leveller' that failed to acknowledge and build on the linguistic diversity of families.

There is also a need to examine in more detail the synergistic relationship between the literacies of home and school. While this chapter has examined some of the research on mismatches between the literacies of home and school, we need further research that examines the impact of school literacy on the shaping of family literacy practices as well as an increased understanding of how family literacy intersects with community literacy. Rather than studying home literacy in order to shed light on

learning at school, we need to give more attention to understanding how school literacy practices shape home literacy – and why. As well, there is a need to understand the cultural diversity of literacy in families to inform the development of more responsive curricula (Cairney, 1997).

Another area of urgent need is the examination of how multimedia and digital literacy demands are impacting on literacy practices within the family and how this intersects with the forgotten part of the literacy context triad, the community. While we know that literacy practices in our world are changing (see, for example, Cairney, 1995a; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear, 1997; Makin and Jones Diaz, 2002), far less is known about the impact this has had on the literacy practices of the average family. Accounts like those of Lankshear (1997) are helpful in enabling us to understand the increasing complexity and multimodal nature of literacy, but there is still more to learn about what it means for literacy acquisition. While there is much (almost polemical) writing about how literacy is changing and how the literacy practices of the digital age are different, little definitive work has been done within families to assess the impact of such changes on the way children experience literacy in the first years of life.

Finally, we need to remember that literacy is not culturally and ideologically neutral (Street, 1995). Hence we need to examine what this means for literacy acquisition and the relationship of family literacy to life and, in particular, public institutions such as schools. It is important to understand how family literacy practices and their relationship to school literacy are implicated in power relationships that affect life chances.

The research reviewed in this chapter is rich in its findings concerning the importance of the family as the first and perhaps most critical site for literacy acquisition. The evidence also shows that interactions between adults and children as they encounter literacy are significant in shaping literacy practices and the human relationships that surround and are embedded in literacy. There is also a richness in literacy experience that transcends social class and culture. However, there is also evidence to suggest that there are significant variations in the way that literacy is culturally defined and used and that understanding this complexity may well be important for understanding the role that later institutions play in literacy and learning. Children experience a richness of literacy practices at home that is not replicated in school. This richness appears to have been affected by the increase in multimodal literacy experiences as we enter an increasingly digital age. Understanding variations across the contexts of home, school and community, and how these relate

to other factors such as social disadvantage, gender and language diversity, is perhaps the greatest challenge for literacy researchers in the future.

## NOTES

1 There has been great debate over the last 10 years concerning the reason for such a relationship. However, this is outside the scope of this chapter. Broadly, there appear to be two extreme positions. At one end of the continuum we have what can be called deficit driven explanations. These are based on the faulty assumption that there are families who lack the specific skills to enable them to create an environment of support that will enable children to succeed at school. At the other end of the continuum is what could be called an educational inadequacy explanation, which suggests such problems simply represent a failure of educational institutions to develop student strengths and abilities. Neither of these explanations is very helpful because each assumes that social practices such as literacy are skills to be mastered that are dependent on the possession of the right mix of abilities and access to 'appropriate' teaching practices. Much of the variability of student achievement in school reflects discrepancies that exist between school resources and instructional methods, and the cultural practices of the home (Au and Kawakami, 1984; Auerbach, 1989; 1995; Cairney, 1995a; Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Moll, 1992), not deficiencies.

2 Family is defined here as any group of people that includes at least one parent/caregiver and one child. Such units may include combinations of biological parents, step-parents, *de facto* partners, other adult family members and children of other members of the same family unit.

3 It is important to note that while I use the term 'literacy' throughout this chapter to encompass the multiliteracies within the domains of reading and writing, this was not the case prior to the late 1970s. To this point in time the terms 'reading' and 'writing' were used separately. When using the term 'literacy' in relation to the 1970s and earlier, I am referring to the combined fields of reading and writing research.

4 This is a term that Gordon Wells (1986) uses to avoid problems caused by the use of the terms 'social class' or 'socio-economic status'.

5 There have been a number of useful descriptions of the various explanations of the relationship between social difference and variable school achievement (e.g. Au, 1995; Ogbu, 1993). Wells (1986) discusses three explanations: deficit views (i.e. children and families are deficient linguistically); mismatches between the school and the students' dialect and language capabilities (i.e. schools need to be responsive); and in between a societal limitations view (i.e. society at large had problems in terms of

distributions of power and control). These three positions are variously reworked in other work by Au (1995), Cairney (1994; 1995a), Cairney and Ruge (1998), Comber (1999), Comber et al. (2001) and Luke (1993).

6 It is worth mentioning that similarly little is known about how parents listen to their children read, something that largely replaces parents reading to their children in the school years. For an interesting discussion of this issue and details of his own research see Hannon (1995).

7 It is important to differentiate between literacy events and practices. The term 'literacy event' has its roots in the sociolinguistic idea of speech events dating back to the work of Dell Hymes in 1962, but the concept was developed further by Heath (1982; 1983) to describe a distinct communicative situation where literacy has a key role. For Heath, a literacy event is 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes' (1982: 23). According to Barton, 'literacy events are the particular activities in which literacy has a role: they may be regular repeated activities. Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy that people draw upon in a literacy event' (1991: 5).

8 There are many interesting discussions concerning how one's definition of literacy shapes one's research, writing or practice. Street (1995), for example, would suggest that such limited approaches reflect 'autonomous' models of literacy that see it as a culturally and politically neutral technical skill.

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