

Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Home Language and Literacy Experiences

Erin C. Hamel

University of South Carolina

Abstract

What is the nature of classroom teachers' perceptions of their students' home language and literacy experiences? Evolving from a well-documented concern that current understandings about the validity of home and community language and literacies are not widely recognized or utilized in public school classrooms, this article describes a study that examines teachers' perceptions of the kinds of language and literacy opportunities teachers' perceive as occurring within children's homes and the ways in which these perceptions are recognized and utilized in their classrooms. Five elementary school teachers participated in interviews, observations, and debriefings as I sought to understand their perceptions of children's home language and literacy experiences. Analysis of interview and debriefing transcripts as well as expanded field notes of observations reveal that these teachers recognize a mismatch between home and school language and literacy experiences. They believe that teachers can use knowledge about a "mismatch" between home and school language and literacies to inform their teaching by (a) providing what they perceive as "missing" from the child's home, or (b) making connections by building bridges between home and school experiences. This article describes the teachers' perceptions of the children's home language and literacy experiences, how they came to develop these perceptions, ways these perceptions impacted their classroom instruction and environment, and implications for preservice teacher education.

I try to send things home and try to help the parents. I do a weekly newsletter. Sometimes I give them hints about how to do something. In that little book, there's a sheet in there that tells them how to read the book and that memorization is okay, and it looks like they're doing that and that's fine because that's the beginning of reading. So I tell them to 'finger the words' and that kind of thing. I try to tell them things. (Mrs. Robinson, kindergarten teacher, in response to what she knows about children's home language and literacy experiences)

For years, the academic community has embraced the notion that home and community language and literacies, while often taking forms and styles that are different from school language and literacy, must be recognized as valid if teachers are going to construct educational settings that have the potential to affect the lives of all children (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noll, 2000;

Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). However, we do not yet see these ideas widely embraced, utilized, or even understood by teachers in classrooms. Previous research (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noll, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) suggests that teachers need to utilize the kinds of home language and literacy experiences each child brings into the classroom, to recognize them as valid, to extend and build upon them to support new literacy learning in the classroom, and to celebrate each child as a literate individual. According to Hull and Schultz (2002), "despite dazzling theoretical advances in how we conceive of literacy, despite provocative research on out-of-school literacies in an array of interesting settings, a depressing fact remains: We still have not succeeded in improving the educational experiences and life chances of the vast majority of children..." (p. 52). Although the academic community has explored issues related to home and community literacies,

that work remains largely in the realm of academia. If this body of research has such potential to support the children who struggle the most, why do we not see evidence of this work affecting classroom practice?

This article describes a study that evolved from concerns such as those expressed by Hull and Schultz (2002) and others (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) by taking a closer look at the ways teachers perceive the kinds of home language and literacy experiences that students bring to the classroom and the role those perceptions play in teachers' literacy instruction. If we are to understand why work that academicians see as well established is not acted upon in classrooms, we must look first to the teachers themselves. What do they understand about home and community language and literacies? How have they come to create those perceptions? Do they utilize knowledge about differences between home and school language and literacies as they plan instruction? How? And, what implications might the answers to these questions have for preservice teacher education?

Although the principles upon which this study is based are already well established, evidence of this work is not being seen in classrooms. For these reasons, the goal of the article is to examine the kinds of perceptions teachers have about children's home language and literacy experiences, how they come to create those perceptions, how they use those perceptions in their literacy instruction and finally, to explore implications for preservice teacher education.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework grounding this study draws from bodies of literature that explore sociocultural learning theory and critical literacy. These constructs are pertinent to framing this study because they support the examination of the ways in which language and literacy is defined, used, and valued across cultures.

Sociocultural Learning Theory

A sociocultural framework for learning and teaching offers three important contributions to this

study. The first contribution relates to the notion that meaning can only be shaped and constructed within interactions in social settings. Individuals are all learning resources for one another (Lindfors, 1999; Rogoff, 1990) as they intentionally and actively seek to co-construct meaning through both explicit and tacit interactions with one another and with their cultural tools (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). Furthermore, the roles learners assume as apprentice and teachers assume as expert are intermittently reversed so that they both learn from and teach one another (Rogoff, 1990).

The second contribution of sociocultural theory is that this perspective recognizes the "cultural situatedness" (Bruner, 1996, p.x.) of all mental activity and emphasizes the role of culture in mediating learning (Wells, 1999). With respect to language and literacy learning, this means that the demands of the culture are central to the kinds of language and literacy experiences that are found within any one community (Bruner, 1983). In this way, the kinds of language and literacy experiences to which any one child is exposed, depends upon the needs and ways of living within that child's cultural community (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Wells, 1999).

Work by Donaldson (1978), Rogoff (1990), and Wood (1998) illuminates the context-dependent nature of learning and the ways in which contexts are embedded within cultural communities. Heath's (1983) work documents the various ways in which language and literacy learning in three different Piedmont Carolinian communities were directly connected to the cultural ways of the people within those communities. She describes the ways that each community has its own distinct uses of language and literacy. Likewise studies by Moll and Greenberg (1990), Noll (1998; 2000), Purcell-Gates (1995), Skilton-Sylvester (2002) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) also document the various forms of language and literacy experiences that are utilized within different communities.

The third important contribution sociocultural theory provides for this study can be found in the work of those researchers who illuminate the dramatic differences between the kinds of language

and literacy experiences that occur in homes, and the kind of language and literacy experiences that are constructed by teachers in the classroom. Researchers such as Stein (2001), O'Brien (2001), and Goodman (1997) help us understand ways in which the language and literacy experiences found in some children's homes are very different from the language and literacy experiences in which they are expected to participate at school. While some children have a very smooth transition from home to school because the school experiences match their home experiences, others are not so fortunate.

From a sociocultural perspective, every individual possesses a wealth of knowledge that is critical to his or her existence within his or her cultural community. In order for individuals to construct new meanings, those pre-existing knowledge bases and experiences need to first be recognized, valued as legitimate, and then extended in new ways and in new directions. In this way, educators recognize the home and community language and literacy experiences as real learning and as useful knowledge by building bridges from those experiences, to the new experiences the children will encounter in the classroom. Theorists, researchers, and classroom teachers such as Cope and Kalantzis (2000), Hall (2000; 1998), Heath (1983), Ladson-Billings (1994), Moll and Greenberg (1990), O'Brien (2001) and Stein (2001) highlight what such "bridge-building" practices might look like.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy provides the second framework that serves as the foundation for the conceptualization of the study. Recently, work by researchers and theorists such as Edelsky (1999), Vasquez (2000), and Comber and Simpson (2001) describe an important goal in the teaching of reading as helping children to use and receive language critically and to analyze how various literacy experiences position them as readers and writers. Considerations for whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced, and the broader implications for ways school literacy experiences empower some and exclude others (Hull & Schultz, 2002), are all part of a critical literacy perspective.

In relation to this study, critical literacy helps us see that educators have an obligation to not only consider multiple language and literacy experiences as valid, but to support children in recognizing and validating them as well. A critical literacy perspective allows us to uncover those literacies that may have otherwise been concealed and to examine issues of power and dominance embedded in specific literacy practices. Teachers who adopt a critical literacy stance create socially just classrooms by recognizing and appreciating the local settings of literacy and all the diverse experiences that emerge from those local contexts (O'Brien, 2001).

Methodology

Participants and Settings

The methods used in this study are qualitative in nature (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Spradley, 1980). The participants in the study are five teachers who work at four different public elementary schools. Mrs. Robinson is a European American kindergarten teacher who is in her twenty-second year of teaching. She teaches at a mid-size, rural school that is racially, socioeconomically, and ethnically diverse. Mrs. Triplett is an African American teacher of first graders and has been teaching for six years. She teaches at a large rural school with a student population that is racially and socioeconomically diverse, with the majority of the student population being African American. Mrs. Henderson, an African American second grade teacher, also works at this school. She has been in the teaching profession for nineteen years. Third grade teacher, Mrs. Schuster, is a European American who is in her twenty seventh year of teaching. She teaches at a small rural school with a high population of children who represent a low socioeconomic class level and are predominately European American. Finally, Mr. Jacobson is a European American third grade teacher who is relatively new to the profession. He is in his third year of teaching. The population at the school where Mr. Jacobson teaches consists of a majority of low socioeconomic class level, African American children. There is almost no ethnic diversity at this rural, mid-size school (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Teacher/School Background Information

Teacher's Name	Race	Teaching Experience	Current Grade	School Size	Socioeconomically Diverse Student Population?	Racially Diverse Student Population?
Mrs. Henderson	African American	19 years	Second	Very large (over 2,000 students)	Yes	Yes (majority African American)
Mr. Jacobson	European American	3 years	Third	Medium	No	No (98% African American)
Mrs. Robinson	European American	22 years	Kindergarten	Medium	Yes	Yes
Mrs. Schuster	European American	27 years	Third	Small	Yes	Yes (majority European American)
Mrs. Triplett	African American	6 years	First	Very large (+2,000 students)	Yes	Yes (majority African American)

**Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants*

It is important to note that all five of these teachers participate in a statewide literacy staff development initiative named the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI). Approximately 1800 teachers and administrators across the State volunteered to be a part of this three-year-long initiative aimed at improving literacy instruction by helping elementary teachers become more knowledgeable about teaching the individual readers and writers in their classrooms. Led by a Literacy Coach, the teachers and administrators in SCRI participate in small site-based study groups to systematically inquire about literacy and literacy instruction. Over the course of three years, the participants in the study group read professional materials, have discussions, raise questions, experiment in their classrooms, and share what they have learned with one another.

As part of their training, the Literacy Coaches participate in one of six cohorts with roughly fifteen other Literacy Coaches. Each cohort is led by a

university-based Teaching Team member who is responsible for supporting the coaches in building their knowledge base through leading an intensive study of literacy theory and practice. These cohorts become close knit learning communities whose members learn from and with one another over the three years of the initiative. Although the six Teaching Team members provide the Literacy Coaches with invitations and engagements that are philosophically congruent, those invitations and engagements also reflect their uniquely focused areas of expertise and passions. The possibility therefore exists that some Literacy Coaches (and consequently their teacher participants) have the opportunity to explore the notion of home and community literacies in their cohort (and/or study group) while others do not. Although the SCRI does profess the goal of helping teachers “foster students’ self-esteem and respect for diversity by immersing the classroom in books, music, art, and personal artifacts that represent the individual, cultural, religious, and

racial differences of the students" (SCRI materials, June, 2000), bridging home language and literacy experiences to school language and literacy experiences is not explicitly communicated as a goal of the SCRI. For these reasons, this particular teacher sample is unique.

As a member of the SCRI Research Team, I am currently involved in a qualitative study that is aimed at understanding what the SCRI experience has been like for forty-one representative teachers across the State. I am currently observing and interviewing seven of these forty-one identified teachers. For the purposes of the inquiry described in this paper, I decided to work with five of those seven teachers. To reflect the diversity of teachers and schools across the state, these five teachers were chosen based on their gender, current grade level taught, geographic location, and the socioeconomic and racial balance of their school.

Data Collection

Data collection for all five teachers includes both formal and informal interviews, as well as a one-hour observation of each participant as he/she teaches a language arts lesson. All data collection for this study took place between January and March of 2002. Although these interviews and observations are part of the data collection procedures for the larger SCRI research study, additional questions related to home-school language and literacy connections were intentionally added to the existing interview, observation, and debriefing protocols.

The initial interviews were formal in nature (Spradley, 1980, p.124) and included elements of *structure*, in that some of the questions were prepared ahead of time, *openness*, in that I was responsive to the lead of the participant, and *depth-probing*, in that I consistently sought for clarification and further explanations (Glesne, 1999). They normally lasted about 60 to 90 minutes. Each of the five interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Although I had some preconceived direction for the interviews, I was open and responsive to the participant, as I constantly sought to understand the teacher's perspective as much as possible (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Because observations can help uncover "complex interactions in natural social settings" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 107), in addition to the formal interviews, I also conducted a one-hour classroom observation of each teacher during a language arts lesson. I assumed the role of observer-participant in which I, at times, interacted with the children but was mostly as unobtrusive as possible as I took extensive field notes.

After each observation, we engaged in a debriefing session (or informal interview) which gave the teacher the opportunity to describe the language arts lesson and all of the interactions that took place during the observation. This "informal ethnographic interview" (Spradley, 1980, p. 123) lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes and was audiotaped and transcribed. Once again, I naturally wove questions relating to home/school literacy connections into these debriefings. These observation/debriefing episodes allowed me to dig for deeper understanding of the kinds of teaching practices that were observed and their relation to the teachers' perceptions of the home-school literacy connection.

The teachers all had the opportunity to review the interview and debriefing transcriptions as well as the expanded field notes. They were instructed to change or add any additional notes that they felt would add clarity or further insight. By allowing teachers to provide feedback, I was better able to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability within my study.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred as a cyclical and dynamic process throughout the study (Merriam, 1998). Several readings and rereadings of the transcripts and fieldnotes allowed me to begin to discover emerging patterns and categories in the data (Ely, 1991). Based upon the relationships between the patterns and categories, broader themes were identified (Ely, 1991). Clustering, partitioning, counting, and contrasting and comparing (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were some of the analysis strategies used to further refine and synthesize my findings.

Findings

In using the transcripts and field notes to uncover the teachers' perceptions of the children's home language and literacy experiences, how they came to develop these perceptions and ways these perceptions impacted their classroom instruction and environment, several important findings emerged. In the remainder of this article, I will describe those findings and then discuss their implications for preservice teacher education.

The Power of Dialogue: How Do Teachers Know About Children's Homes?

Time and time again, the transcripts and field notes reveal that all five of these teachers often learn about children's homes through informal conversations with the children. Many of these conversations seem to take place around book reading events in the classroom. For example, as Mrs. Schuster conducted a guided reading lesson with a small group of eight children, various stories were shared about such topics as the children's family pets, ways their families recycle, what would be their wish if they could sit in a magic tree house, and what kinds of secrets they have been told in the past. All of this information was shared in one twenty-five minute guided reading lesson. Likewise, within an hour, Mrs. Triplett listened as children told stories about the verbal exchanges one child had with his grandmother the day she moved to Baltimore, the family photo of a deceased aunt and uncle that hangs in another child's hallway, and the recent birth of yet another child's sibling—which she witnessed. All of these interactions resulted from a read aloud by the teacher. During a literature discussion group activity, Mr. Jacobson learned of one child's account of a time when his parents reprimanded him for bullying and of another child's family experience with racism. Clearly, these informal conversations, usually inspired by literature, seem to be a common vehicle across classrooms for getting to know the children's home experiences.

Dialogue was not just an important vehicle with children. Teachers also consistently named ways in which they conversed with parents to learn about the children's homes. Conducting a parent conference was a common pattern. Although three of the

teachers discussed the traditional, "parent-comes-to-the-classroom-for-a-scheduled-meeting" type of conference, Mr. Jacobson described another type of parental conference. Mr. Jacobson makes an effort to attend school sporting events, dance recitals, and similar events. He explained, "A parent admitted this to me at a football game. He said, 'I'm glad to see you out here. I just don't feel comfortable in school. I've had teachers that kind of talk down to me.'" Mr. Jacobson said, "We held our teacher conference right there, watchin' the kids play football."

Using parent and child surveys is another popular vehicle to help these teachers come to know the children's home experiences. In fact, three of the five teachers shared that they sent surveys home for parents to complete at the beginning of each year. These surveys seem to elicit information about everything from favorite free time activities to bedtime rituals and routines. Less consistent, but also mentioned, were tools such as allowing children to bring items from home to share with the class, observing parent-child interactions, writing letters back and forth between teacher and child, and interviewing the child. Although their methods were diverse, these teachers all made an effort to become familiar with children's lives outside of the classroom.

On the Surface: What Do Teachers Know About Language and Literacy in Children's Homes?

The transcripts and field notes reveal that there was a wide spectrum of awareness of children's home language and literacy experiences among these five teachers. Some teachers knew many details about the children's home experiences such as the children's first spoken words, kinds of daily routines and schedules of the families, vacations, and how parents discipline their children. "I try to find out as much information as I can about the kids," remarked Mrs. Schuster, a third grade teacher at a small rural school. Other teachers had more general perceptions. For example, Mrs. Triplett, a first grade teacher at a very large rural school described the wide spectrum of experiences children bring to the classroom from "very minimal" to "a lot." What appeared to be a common thread

across all five teachers was some awareness of the residents of the children's homes, daily routines, kinds of parent and children behaviors surrounding print at home, and the kinds of toys and communication devices (i.e. televisions, telephones, computers) that are or are not found in the homes.

A revealing pattern across all five teachers was their tendency to describe the kinds of language and literacy experiences that were *not* occurring in the children's homes, as opposed to the kinds of experiences that *were* occurring. For example, in terms of parental behaviors surrounding print, four of the five teachers mentioned that the parents rarely read to their children. Two added that there are no books in most of their children's homes. Both Mr. Jacobson and Mrs. Schuster remarked that during school breaks over the Christmas holiday and summer, the children would have few opportunities to interact with books. A trip to the library was another literacy behavior that was frequently mentioned as absent from the children's home experiences. Two teachers shared their perceptions that conversation and writing were often not a part of the children's home experiences. They noted the children "rarely get to read to anybody" or to "practice reading."

Two teachers placed more emphasis on the kinds of behaviors surrounding print that *are* present in the children's homes. Mrs. Triplett explained that the majority of her children have "so many experiences [at home] that they are able to connect themselves to something [at school]." Mrs. Henderson shared her perspective that parents "do read with children" and "present reading as important." Generally, the teachers chose to explain the language and literacy opportunities that were *not* available in the children's homes, but these two teachers did offer snapshots of the language and literacy opportunities that *were* available in the children's homes.

While Mrs. Schuster's perceptions of children's home language and literacy experiences were vast and detailed, others like Mrs. Henderson had fewer and more general notions about the kinds of language and literacy opportunities provided in children's homes. It is important to note, again, that three of the teachers (except for Mrs. Triplett and Mrs. Henderson) described the children's home

language and literacy experiences in terms of what they perceived *was not* happening in the homes, as opposed to what *was* happening.

To Tote or to Carry: Teacher's Perceptions of the Mismatch Between Home and School Experiences

This group of teachers seemed to be well aware of a "disconnectedness" between the children's home language and literacy experiences and the kinds of experiences they encountered at school (as described by researchers like Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 1990; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Stein, 2001). Children's dialect used in their homes compared to the Standard English dialect used in schools was one such "mismatch" described by the teachers. Teacher comments ranged from those of Mrs. Schuster, who told me that she asks children to restate their home culture dialect in Standard English dialect, and said, "The way they say it is cute," and "It's their own form of English" to those of Mr. Jacobson, who described the children's failed attempts to edit their dialect in their writing when he stated, "They know it doesn't sound right, but a lot of them won't know how to (edit) it."

Another perspective on dialect was shared by Mrs. Triplett who stated, "I stand firm on the fact that there is a Standard English language that we are all responsible for. We were all not taught that. We were all not exposed to that. When he (a student) writes, 'I be goin,' that's okay. That's what he is being taught, but I have made it a point with children who have issues with dialect to say, 'Now here's another way you could say that.'" Of the three teachers who named dialect as a mismatch between home and school literacy, they all seem to agree that every dialect has a valid place in the home, but they express differing opinions about the place for dialects (other than Standard English) in the classroom.

In addition to dialect, both Mrs. Schuster and Mrs. Triplett commented on the mismatch between the vocabulary spoken by the children and the vocabulary spoken by teachers and found in the classroom literature. Mrs. Triplett stated, "Children's language is so different from the language

used in the books (teachers) select for them." Mrs. Schuster told the story of a child who was struggling with the math concept of renaming in addition. After three weeks of attempting unsuccessfully to teach the concept to the child, the teacher suddenly noticed the child was completing the addition problems correctly. When Mrs. Schuster asked him how he had learned to do it, he motioned toward the student sitting beside him and said that she taught him. Mrs. Schuster asked the student how she had taught him to solve the problems and the little girl replied, "I just told 'em to *tote* it over!" At that moment, Mrs. Schuster said she realized that the child's difficulties were not with the concept of "renaming," but with the term *carry*. The word "carry" is not used in the child's home, but instead the word "tote" is used. Once the child understood that "carry" means the same as "tote", he was able to solve the addition problems easily. In this case, the teacher became aware that her vocabulary choices were not always familiar to the child's vocabulary. In this particular case, the teacher seems to be making the point that her spoken language is the same as typical textbook language, but both can be very different from children's home language.

Not only were dialect and vocabulary named as mismatches, but two of the five teachers also perceived a mismatch between the kinds of experiences and concepts which the children are familiar with at home and the kinds of experiences and concepts presented in the books the teachers use in their classrooms. Mrs. Robinson, a kindergarten teacher at a school which has an economically and ethnically diverse student population, told of her experience with a little boy who was unable to use the picture of a giraffe to help him read the word "giraffe," because he had never before seen or heard the name of the animal. She stated, "Some things you take for granted they know, and they don't. So you pretty much have to explain a lot because you don't know where they've been." Mrs. Triplett adds that she knows, for example, if her children read a book about a character that lives in an apartment complex, they may have difficulty understanding because in their town, there are no apartment complexes.

Although I never explicitly asked the teachers to name or describe any "mismatches," all five of them introduced this notion on their own as we talked about their children's home language and literacy experiences. Dialect, vocabulary, and background of experiences and concepts were all named as mismatches between home and school by various teachers and were identified in different combinations among the five teachers.

New Opportunities: "Life is More Than a Trailer Park"

After delving into the transcripts and taking a closer look at the field notes from the classroom observations, I was able to identify two ways in which the teachers' perceptions of children's home language and literacy opportunities impact their literacy instruction. One way they utilize those perceptions was to, in a sense, "add to" the children's experiences. It seems as if they fill in the "missing pieces" to make the children's lives complete. These new opportunities take many different forms and were introduced by the teachers into both the children's classrooms and their homes.

In the following statement, Mrs. Schuster offered her explanation for ways in which she uses what she perceives about the children's home language and literacy opportunities to shape her classroom instruction:

I give them a chance to get their thoughts on paper because sometimes at home, I don't think they are given that opportunity... Sometimes you find out things you don't want to know. But I give them every opportunity I can to read, to go to the library, use the library, read with them, partner reading, listen to them. Give them a chance to practice reading ... and give them an opportunity to learn that there is more to life than [their home town] or the trailer park.

Providing children opportunities to read, to have books read to them, to go to the library, and to write were all popular literacy opportunities that teachers provided in their classrooms, based on their perspective that these kinds of literacy events were not occurring at home. In the words of Mrs.

Triplett, some of the children "don't have any support other than the classroom. That's why it's important for me to foster a language rich environment, both oral and written. So that the children can at least have a language rich experience here."

Not only do teachers introduce the children to new literacy experiences in their classrooms, they also introduce certain literacy experiences into the homes themselves. Three of the five teachers discuss the importance of sending books home with children because there would otherwise be no books in the homes. School newsletters, interview charts, and child-written letters to their parents were other literacy artifacts that teachers introduce into the homes. All five of the teachers shared that they expect children to read at home. Some expect the children to read to themselves, while others want a family member to listen to the child read.

Teachers also have expectations for encouraging new parent behaviors in the home. Mrs. Robinson sends home a booklet explaining specific procedures parents should follow when reading with their child. Finger pointing to the words, using pictures, and allowing the child to memorize the text were just some of the pointers included in the booklet. Mr. Jacobson invites parents to attend "Parenting Classes" in which they learn how to "do guided reading" at home with their child. Mrs. Henderson explains to her parents how to help their children "get their mouth ready" when they read and the importance of making meaning when reading. "It's not all about calling words, but what you are actually talking about," she stated. In these ways, both in the classroom and in the homes, teachers used their perceptions of children's home language and literacy experiences to provide the children what they perceived was "missing" from their homes.

Making Connections: From School to Home and Home to School

The second use of the teachers' perceptions of the children's home language and literacy experiences was to use the language and literacy experiences as a foundation to build and expand upon in the classroom. My analysis of transcripts and field notes shows that this "connection-making" seemed

to occur from two starting points. There were instances when teachers used the classroom as the starting point and built bridges to connect school experiences to the children's home experiences. There were also instances when the teachers used the children's home experiences as the starting point and built bridges to connect home experiences to classroom experiences.

In terms of using the classroom as the starting point for building bridges to the home, all five teachers used discussions surrounding literature as a vehicle for facilitating those school-home connections. Sometimes the school-home connections were initiated by the child and validated by the teacher. For example, when Mrs. Robinson introduced the book *The Toy Box* to a small group in a guided reading lesson, she listened patiently as a little boy shared his experiences with his toy box at home. Other times, the teacher initiated the school-home connections. As Mrs. Henderson listened to a boy read aloud, she noticed he was having difficulty reading the word "stall" and she explained the meaning of the word by connecting it to the flea markets he had visited. Mrs. Triplett explicitly helped her children make school-home connections. During a conversation following a read aloud in which children shared personal connections between the book and their own lives, Mrs. Triplett explained to the children that their connections "are very personal and internal" and that they "take us to our own place."

Other ways that some of these teachers facilitated a school-home connection is by sending home weekly newsletters and having children write weekly letters to their parents about the happenings of school. By far, the discussions surrounding literature appear to be the most direct and popular method teachers use to support children in connecting the literacy events of school to the literacy events of home.

As stated earlier, some teachers also used children's home experiences as the starting point to make connections to school experiences. In this way, teachers make space and time in the classroom for the children to share their home experiences. There is a great deal of diversity in terms of how these teachers made this kind of space in their classrooms.

Allowing children to talk and write about personal topics and experiences was a popular method. Discovering the children's interests at home and creating curriculum to reflect those interests was another common strategy for making home-school connections. Mrs. Triplett told of a time when she "did not have the background on the child that allowed (her) to know what his interests were." She remarked, "I always selected the wrong books and we never got any place." Mrs. Robinson allows children to bring items from home to share with the class and she also invites parents into the classroom to lend a helping hand or participate. Mrs. Schuster also regularly invites family members into the classroom. She stated, "I just make them very comfortable in the classroom and find something for them to do."

Implications

What do the perspectives of these five teachers regarding their children's home language and literacy experiences tell us about the needs of preservice teacher education? Recognizing that definitive generalizations cannot be drawn because of the limitations of this study—it was limited to five teachers who all belong to a statewide reading initiative and the data collection methods were limited to an interview, observation, and debriefing—important understandings were gained that can inform the development of future research. For example, further studies might investigate the role of standardized tests in teacher's perceptions of what counts as literacy. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the kind of training (preservice or otherwise) the teachers had in understanding and valuing children's home and community literacies and the relationship between their training and their perceptions and practices. Finally, it would be important to study the process of teachers' introduction to and utilization of notions of home and community literacies in long-term studies that look closely at teacher learning in and out of their classrooms.

This study helped me better understand that the possible reasons why teachers may not be utilizing current work in the field of home and community literacies are that they have not been exposed to that

work in-depth, have not had opportunities to explore their own positionalities and sociocultural identities, have no forum for exploring other cultural values and traditions, are not equipped with tools to explore the personal lives and cultures of their students, and have not had opportunities to work with colleagues who understand the importance of valuing home and community language and literacies and who use that knowledge to help children in specific ways. Within the realm of the present study, based upon the perspectives of these five teachers, the following recommendations for teacher education are made:

1. *Preservice teacher education should support students to consider their own positionalities and sociocultural identities.* Preservice teachers need to understand that aspects of our personal identities such as race, gender, and class position us in society and in schools (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002). These positions, by their very nature, can privilege some of us and exclude others. In preservice teacher education, positionalities can begin to be identified when students are involved in coursework that "challenges (them) to look in the mirror, reflect on what constitutes their embedded value structures, and assess their perceived images of themselves and others" (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002). Villegas and Lucas (2002) note that it is not enough for preservice education to simply support students in identifying their positionalities; they must also support them to begin to see the ways in which their positionalities are connected to schools and society. In terms of language and literacy instruction, by becoming more cognizant of their positionalities, teachers can more easily identify ways in which their classroom practices invite or exclude the multiple uses of language and literacy that are brought into the classroom from children's homes.
2. *Preservice teacher education must help teachers begin to build a knowledge base of the cultural values, traditions, communication styles, and relational characteristics of diverse cultural groups.* Teachers' growing knowledge base of the differ-

ent kinds of learning and communication styles associated with diverse groups of people may positively impact the literacy growth of children (Gay, 2002). "Pigeon-holing" a list of characteristics for every ethnic group is not the recommendation being made here, but a more holistic notion of all the various possibilities in which diverse groups of people live and learn is intended. By becoming familiar with the ways of living and learning of diverse cultures, students might uncover hidden assumptions about their own biases and beliefs. For instance, equipped with the knowledge that in the African American culture, research has documented the ways in which small groups of people talk over one another, as opposed to the turn-taking fashion so predominant in classrooms (Heath, 1983), a teacher might better understand the kinds of communication styles with which his/her students are most familiar and experienced.

3. *Preservice teacher education should emphasize the importance of and offer multiple tools for learning about the personal lives and contexts of the children they teach.* If teachers are going to provide "continuity of experience" (Dewey, 1938) for the children they teach, that is, utilize the child's home language and literacy experiences as a foundation from which to build additional language and literacy experiences in the classroom, then they must first "get to know" those home experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994). They need to learn how to find out about the lives of the children outside of the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Although dialogue seemed to be a powerful tool for these five teachers to learn about the children in their classrooms, preservice education could offer an expansive repertoire of tools for teachers (i.e. Allen and Labbo (2001) describe ways to enable children to take photographs that capture their 'out-of-school' lives and share them in the classroom).
4. *Preservice teacher education should support teachers in developing an appreciation for the diverse cultural experiences each child brings to the classroom.* Once teachers are more aware of their own cultural identities and the way those identities position them in their classroom and in society, and once they are able to use a variety of tools to get to know their children's lives outside of school, it is also crucial that they respect, value, recognize and celebrate those diverse experiences that each child brings into their classroom. Instead of operating from a deficit perspective, preservice teacher education could help students see the strengths of every child's home context (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In the words of Ladson-Billings, preservice teacher education can emphasize the importance of "honor(ing) and respect(ing) the student's home culture" (1994, p. 138). With regards to language and literacy home-school connections, prospective teachers should be introduced to the notion that "literacy" can take many shapes and forms, and until teachers interrogate their own assumptions about their definition of literacy and the roles literacy fulfills, they will be unable to recognize the vastly different forms and styles of literacy that do exist among various cultural communities. Although there are many ways in which preservice teacher education courses can emphasize this concept, one suggested strategy is to have preservice teachers spend time with children and adults from cultures other than their own, so that they may become familiar with the home language, interaction styles, and communication patterns associated with that culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Martin & Van Gun-ten, 2002).
5. *Preservice teacher education should offer students multiple opportunities to observe and work with culturally responsive teachers.* Because identifying our own cultural identities and recognizing the ways in which those identities invite some and exclude others is quite complex, it is crucial that preservice teachers have opportunities to see what these precepts look like in the classroom. How do teachers teach literacy in ways that value the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all learners? What kinds of instructional strategies do culturally sensitive teachers use? What kinds of assessments do they use? How do they come to know the children's home language and literacy experiences? Preservice students need opportunities to construct their own answers to these questions based upon their observa-

tions and work with exemplary teachers who use culturally relevant practices.

Widening the Lens

When considering these implications for preservice teacher education, it is important to note that by no means should these preservice teachers be expected to become masters of culturally relevant teaching practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). With regards to language and literacy, the aim should be to expose students to the notion that the ways of using and learning language are culturally relevant and that the language and literacy experiences that each child brings to the classroom are all valid and important within their own cultural communities. According to Hull and Schultz (2002), "When we widen the lens of what we consider literacy and literate activities, homes, communities, and work places become sites for literacy use" (p. 11).

By "widening the lens," we begin to understand that the kind of language and literacy experiences provided in classrooms is only one type and that school literacy can be very different from the kinds of literacies that naturally occur in homes and communities. Hall (1998) warns "school literacy is presented to children not as one set of literacies, but as the pathway to knowing the 'right' literacy" (p. 8). Preservice teacher education is one vehicle through which the lens of what we recognize and value as literacies can be widened by presenting school literacy as one kind of literacy, belonging to a broad and complex group of many literacies.

Most importantly, preservice teacher education programs that model constructs such as the ones described in this article can have an impact on helping teachers to assume the role of change agent in their schools and communities. Street (1995) asks, "If, as we argue, there are multiple literacies, how is it that one particular variety has come to be taken as the only literacy?" (p. 106). This study helps illuminate the fact that explicit attention to the area of home and community literacies must be given to preservice teacher education students. Marilyn Cochran Smith states, "...there has been little broad-based fundamental change in teacher education. By and large, teachers continue to be prepared from a mono-cultural perspective that ensures the perva-

sive impact of race, class, linguistic background, culture, gender and ability and emphasizes instead a universal knowledge base for teaching, learning and schooling" (2002). Preservice teacher education can empower students to make an impact towards shifting the power of school literacy, to the validation, recognition, and celebration of the multiple literacies of diverse cultural homes and communities.

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