Re-Envisioning School Literacy Practices That Engage Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Dian Mawene and Halil Ibrahim Cakir, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract: Mawene and Cakir re-envision school literacy programs that draw on non-dominant literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families as strengths, in particular oral-based literacy.

_____

Pak Raden, a neighborhood storyteller in Indonesia, stood in the middle of a crowd surrounded by young children spinning a tale about Maling Kundang, an ungrateful son who was cursed and turned to stone by his mother. Pak Raden moved around, raising and lowering his voice and using body gestures and facial expressions to intensify the drama of the tale. In most cases, the children were not just watching, they were engaging and interacting. In return, Pak Raden provoked them by asking questions, welcoming acclamations, and even singing at appropriate points of the tale. At this point, Pak Raden as the teller, and the children as the audience, were creating the tales together (Vansina, 1985). Pak Raden led the event but responded readily to the audience and led the children to experience the worry, fright, and delight of the tale. This type of storytelling is common in Indonesia not only in the community but also in households. In fact, families in rural areas occasionally use electricity blackout times to tell these stories.

Many students in Wisconsin come from families where storytelling is a common cultural literacy practices. Creating inclusive schools necessitates more attention to how literacy practices can reflect the cultural diversity and strengths of families that may not connect as easily to the traditional forms of literacy privileged in schools. Therefore, through this paper, we invite practitioners to re-envision school literacy programs by drawing on some of the non-dominant literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families as strengths, in particular oral-based literacy practices.

Storytelling is a common literacy practice found in many native and indigenous cultures. Our purpose in presenting this example is not to show the exotism of oral cultures, but rather to illustrate the multimodality (Heath & Street, 2008; Vaughn, 2016) of literacy practices potentially held by CLD families in the United States. Storytelling, as a literacy practice, is based on everyday life, cultural heritages, memories, knowledges, and personal experiences of the community members. A number of oral-dominant cultures might not have important written narratives documented in book form. Instead, the resources to literacy appear through narratives (e.g. legends, folk tales, stories), songs, poems, gestures, and visual representations that they encounter in daily practices. We refer to this type of literacy practice as oral-based literacy, as opposed to text-based literacy, which refers to literacy practices based on written or printed materials. Oral-based and text-based literacy commonly occur hand in hand. However, text-based literacy is more prominent in usage in school literacy programs with emphasis on reading texts. In this paper, we present oral-based literacy as a valuable form of literacy for engaging CLD families and embedding in classroom instructions.

Looking into a Family Literacy Program

Let's start briefly with family literacy programs, then move to the examples of family daily literacy practices and approaches toward linking them in classroom instructions. There is no single definition of *family* literacy programs that fit our complex and evolving society (Chance, 2010). A typical family literacy program, such as Reading Aloud or Library Night, takes place after school and provides structured interactive reading activities for both parents and children. In process, parents receive training to become their children's primary educators outside of school (Chance, 2010; Ohio Department of Education, 2016). One example of the Library Night comes from Collins Elementary School in Texas, where parents and children are situated in a relaxed atmosphere to color or collaborate on word search puzzles. Following that, a guest will read a picture book in Spanish and English. Most family literacy programs, like this one, are grounded in the belief that successful children read and have parents who participate in their education (Chance, 2010). Although this program serves mostly non-native English speaking and low-income

families, they focus specifically on text-based literacy. Despite the cultural mosaic of diversity in US schools, school-based literacy practices often do not reflect and build on the vast array of literacy practices that youth experience in their homes. The everyday use of literacy is generally constrained to imply the written representation of oral languages transmitted in a script system (Heath & Street, 2008). Oral-based literacy may be a missing critical component in family literacy programs to expand the opportunities to draw on the cultural strengths of CLD families.

Engaging CLD Parents and Communities

A plethora of efforts have been invested into increasing parental engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, including inside family homes. While these visits can be fruitful to better understand household literacy practices, without attention to multi-modal forms of literacy, educators risk narrowing their pursuit of evidence of household literacy practices to White, middle class, English-speaking artifacts such as possession of books, access to personal or private libraries, or even parents' professions (Langford, 2015). While this practice can be fruitful for understanding household literacy practices, it can also further perpetuate myths about CLD families as non-literate or literacy deprived without a multi-modal framing of what counts as literacy. Engaging families in order to *remedy* their literacy practices perpetuates deficit-based premises while undermining the importance of the everyday literacy practices that may not privilege text-based literacy (Gutierrez, 2008; Lee, 2007). Consequently, some households are not seen as literate, competent, or as sources of support for literacy development. Therefore, it is not uncommon for educators to find a lack of participation of CLD parents in school literacy programs.

Based on the paucity of everyday literacy in school programs, we carefully present several methods of incorporating oral-based literacy into classroom instruction. These methods strengthen family literacy programs in ways that build on the literacy practices that may be common in CLD families, and they build on expanded notions of literacy that disrupt the constrained text-based literacies that may limit CLD families from participating and

engaging more readily. The three methods we will describe include storytelling, autoethnography, and using technology.

Storytelling

Storytelling is an historically rooted form of literacy for many non-dominant cultures, manifested in daily stories passed between generations such as parents, elders, or community members to young people in everyday natural settings (Inglebret, Jones, & Pavel, 2008). We draw from understandings that oral storytelling is rooted in ancestral ways of experiencing the world and growing up. For example, some Native American children in Southern Puget Salish in the northwestern United States learn about cedar canoe making through storytelling. Initially, they observe the canoe making process and learn about the method from the adults, then gradually take active responsibility by being responsible for small tasks and advancing to more complicated tasks as a part of group effort (Inglebret et al., 2008). Storytelling in this community thus plays a critical pedagogical role.

Storytelling invitations also open spaces for families to illuminate their cultural literacy in non-essentializing ways. If educators have traditionally invited parents to read stories about a cultural holiday or group of people as part of a classroom literacy program, the educators can modify family involvement by expanding the sources to include oral stories that emerge from the knowledge, heritages, and personal experiences of the parents and other community members. This can serve as a moment for educators to invite parents or community members into their classrooms to share firsthand accounts of experiences and histories. For instance, educators can invite parents to talk about life when they were children or about their or their ancestors' migration histories. Educators can also invite family members to tell tales in collaboration with youth in school literacy programs (note the use of *literacy* program, not *reading* programs), like the vignette illustrated at the beginning of this paper or through a shadow puppet performance. In order to do this, educators need to recognize that all families live literate lives with their own cultural funds of literacy knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Educators can also incorporate household literacy practices such as storytelling into subjects such as social science, science, literacy, or math. They can ask students to record (written or audio/video) as they engage in a social activity in their family or community, as in the example of the canoe construction process. Discovering the funds of literacy knowledge thus moves beyond visiting households to inspect the availability of books or access to libraries.

Expanding Classroom Instruction through Autoethnographic Literacy

In classical parental engagement practice, parents are often required to be physically present in school space. However, autoethnographies invert the classical family-engagement process by requiring the students take on the role of ethnographers. In their exploration of their lives, students explore their household literacy practices by collecting artifacts, stories, and visual arts that they bring into the classroom. Through this method, families may not be physically present, yet there is great potential for engagement as families become present through these artifacts. Family literacy programs can also create excursions that encourage collaboration between parents and students out of school setting. In school, with teachers' assistance, young children can transfer their artifacts into stories or picture collages with notes written in native language and/or in English (Louie & Davis-Welton, 2016), or they can reproduce the stories in multiple forms such as retelling them through pictures collages, video/photo collages, or storybooks. Family members can play roles in revising or looking over these texts and their descriptions in the native language.

Schools can also teach youth to revise history lessons with their own family experiences. For example, the *Wisconsin Media Lab* has an online reservoir of social studies lessons called *Wisconsin Biographies*. The current lessons include biographical stories of prominent figures in Wisconsin histories presented through animated videos, iBooks, and different forms of booklets for all grade levels. The biographies cover the figures from a wide range of years, primarily from 1700 to 1999, from three ethnic groups. Children whose families migrated after the U.S. was formed, such as the Latinx, Asians, and other

immigrants, are not yet represented in these biographies. This is a perfect opportunity to bring those histories to an existing curriculum. Educators can ask the students to interview or ask their elders to share their histories specific to Wisconsin.

Beyond Paper and Pencil: Using Technology to Engage CLD Parents

The dominant form of demonstrating literacy is based on paper and pencil. Technology, however, can help educators and students transform these conventional forms through multiple representations. A case we bring in this paper is the use of podcasts in literacy practice. Podcasts are digital audio files made available for the public to access through a computer or a mobile device. A good example of a podcast that shares daily experiences and stories of people is *StoryCorps*, through which people share their stories based on prompts. Although making and listening to podcasts require specific digital technology, educators can find the process of creating podcasts easy and fun. Besides, technology is omnipresent in multiple contexts, times, and used by multiple generations, ranging from a simple audio recorder, mobile phone, or smartphone to a computer or laptop with recording software such as Audacity.

Researchers in the area of technology usage in classrooms have made a positive endorsement that "the inclusion of oral language activities using digital recording devices supported students' ideas development and writing" (Cowell & Hutchinson, 2015. p. 61). Several other benefits of sharing stories through podcast are as follow:

1. The recording can be conducted anytime and anywhere. For parents whose work schedules prevent them from being physically present in school space, podcasts allow them to be present through their recorded stories.

2. By interviewing, listening, and reproducing stories, the literacy task has more of an authentic purpose and has more connections to the students and their families (Cowell & Hutchinson, 2015). When students decide to post their podcast for public consumption, such as through StoryCorps, they and their families have authentic and broad audiences accessing their works (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011).

3. By collaborating with parents or other elders, students have more opportunity to learn from multiple perspectives.

4. Both teachers and students can learn to present literacy using a range of methods (Cowell & Hutchinson, 2015).

5. The podcasts can be permanently available (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011). Students, parents, and teachers can use the podcasts for other learning purposes at any time and place.

Concluding Thought

The vignette that opened this paper opened a window to the range of possibilities to engage CLD families and community members in different cultural literacy practices relevant to the context of both students and families. To move forward with this concept of re-envisioning literacy programs, we introduced two pivotal ideas relevant to school practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. First, text-based literacy that privileges dominant cultures should not function as the only norm in school literacy programs. What we are proposing here is that the practices should co-exist or be re-enforced with other literacy practices. Second, we invite school practitioners to rethink the concept of literacy. For example, the concept of literacy resources should not be privileged to being able to recognize (English) words, keeping books at home, and having access to libraries, museums, and other resources. These traditional concepts of literacy practices easily reinforce perceptions of families from non-dominant backgrounds as "illiterate" or unable to function as literacy resources for their children. Consequently, this traditional concept can exclude them from school literacy programs.

Some possible challenges to this work are as follows: First, the work of re-envisioning literacy practices in schools can be arduous work. It needs extra time and effort beyond the regular teaching hours to modify or expand the lessons in such a way that can open space for the CLD parents to engage. Such arduous work might also require connecting and building rapport with families, visiting households to learn about their literacy

resources and practices (Gonzalez et al., 2005), and internalizing thoughts and understandings from the visits in order to draw pedagogical implications for the classroom. In addition, the work of re-envisioning literacy practices also requires commitment from educators to be agents of change. The second challenge is that re-envisioning literacy practices urges schools to modify their current literacy programs that bring together families from multiple cultural backgrounds. The last challenge is the possibility to start and maintain this work in the midst of high-stakes testing cultures. However, it is important to notice that, by re-envisioning literacy practices, educators widen access to those with literacy capital.

Despite its challenges, engaging CLD families through oral literacies contributes to and expands the notion of inclusive education. Incorporating oral-based literacy in school programs creates an inclusive space for families from the CLD background. Therefore, this practice expands inclusive education beyond the practice of providing curriculum and services for students with diverse needs in general education settings.

References

Chance, R. (2010). Family literacy programs--Opportunities and possibilities. *Teacher Librarian, 37*(5), 8-12. Retrieved from the MasterFILE Premier database. (Accession No. 52571245)

Heath, S. B., & Street, B. V. (2008). *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research. Language & Literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2006). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. New York: Routledge.

Gutierrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the Third Space. *Reading Research Quarterly, 43*(2), 148-164. https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.43.2.3

Inglebret, E., Jones, C. & Pavel, D. M. (2008). Integrating American Indian/Alaska Native culture into shared storybook intervention. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools, 39*(4), 521-527. Retrieved from the CINAHL Plus with Full Text database. (Accession No. 105700939)

Langford, M. (2015). Empowering partnerships in literacy through home visits. *Michigan Reading Journal, 48*(1), 19-34. Retrieved from the Education Research Complete database. (Accession No. 111189326)

Lee, C. D. (2007). *Culture, literacy, & learning: Taking bloom in the midst of the whirlwind*. New York: Teachers College Press

Louie, B., & Davis-Welton, K. (2016). Family literacy project: Bilingual picture books by English learners. *Reading Teacher, 69*(6), 597-606. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1444

Ohio Department of Education. (2016). *Partnering with families to improve literacy skills (K-5)*. Retrieved September 18, 2017, from https://education.ohio.gov/

StoryCorps. (2003-2017) Retrieved September 18, 2017, from https://storycorps.org/listen/

Vansina, J. M. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Vasinda, S., & McLeod, J. (2011). Extending readers theatre: A powerful and purposeful match with podcasting. *Reading Teacher, 64*(7), 486-497. https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.64.7.2

Vaughn, M. (2016) Re-envisioning literacy in a teacher inquiry group in a Native American context. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 55*(1), 24-47. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2015.1105888

Wisconsin biographies. (2016). Retrieved September 18, 2017, from http://wimedialab.org/biographies/