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Print Literacy Engagement of Parents From Low-Income Backgrounds: Implications for Adult and Family Literacy Programs

It is important to support adults in their development of literacy skills, whether to boost job skills, to further their academic knowledge, or to help their children with their educational needs.

Jacqueline Lynch

Adult literacy levels are a continual concern in poor and affluent nations alike (Rogers, 1999; Shprintsen, 2006). In the United States, adult literacy levels remain low despite a large number of adult literacy programs (Guy, 2005). Some research has shown that programs have not been effective in increasing adults' basic literacy skills or in supporting parents' interaction with children in literacy events and offer various reasons for this (Duffy, 1992; Janes & Kermani, 2001). To address the ineffectiveness of some adult literacy programs, it has been suggested that programs have strong links to adults' daily lives (Kagiticbasi, Goksen, & Gulgoz, 2005). However, in practice, many adult literacy programs rely on scripted programs with no or little connection with adults' out-of-school experiences and do not reflect the research support of using authentic materials in the classroom (Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 2001). Various reasons for this situation include a lack of adult teacher preparation (Perin, 1999) as well as a lack of knowledge of the different literacy practices that exist and of ways to incorporate those resources in the classroom (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001).

Adult literacy development has important implications for the learning of children and adolescents. Links have been established between parents' educational level and children's achievement in that research has shown that children whose parents have less than a high school education tend to have the poorest reading success (Kogut, 2004) and that mothers' literacy level predicts children's literacy development (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Thus, effective adult literacy programs are not only important for adult literacy learning but also are important for the literacy development of children and adolescents.

This study was designed to determine the literacy practices of low-income parents living in three geographical situations in the United States: urban, rural, and migrant. Most of the migrant participants identified themselves as being Mexican and spoke Spanish as their first/home language. In this study literacy was theorized as social practice, which views reading and writing as part of larger historical, social, cultural, and economic practices that



are patterned in society (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000). Therefore, it was the contention that what adults learn about literacy is shaped by the context of their social and cultural community (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2000). Learners use discourse within the community to engage in authentic activities, and the community influences the type of literacy experiences one engages in as well as the value placed on specific literacy events. This study also focused on print literacy development, which was defined as the reading and writing of some form of print for communicative purposes in people's lives (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004).

Background

Parents' Print Literacy Engagement: Type and Purpose

It has been argued that the most effective way for adults to learn literacy skills is from their own daily literacy experiences (Rogers, 2004). To provide authentic learning experiences for adults, it is important for educators to consider the print literacy engagement of various groups. Stites (2001) found that television news was one of the more common forms of print material among a group of adults considered low literate in rural China. Books, magazines, or newspaper reading—beyond television news—was reportedly engaged in by less than half of the adults in the study. Zubair (2001) found that in rural Pakistan some of the print literacy practices of women entail reading prayers, newspapers, magazines, novels, medicine labels, cards, and calendars. Writing activities included letters, diaries, record keeping, messages, poetry, and short stories for the 15–29 age group. Men were more in charge of paying bills and reading instructions and political news. Participants in another study, who were all low-income mothers, liked word games, romance novels, and autobiographical writing that may support the need to express feelings, the need for recreation, and to escape from daily life stresses and activities (Finlay, 1999). Mace (1998) claimed that literacy might serve as a temporal excursion from the mundane. In further research on the print engagement of low-socioeconomic status (SES) families, Purcell-Gates (1996) found that engagement included fliers,

coupons, advertisements, television notices, grocery lists, name writing, and more. Indeed, for many of the reported studies, children would observe parents engaging in many of these literacy events.

Parents' Print Literacy Development and Children's Achievement

“The traditional picture between literacy and development is that there is a direct relationship between the two” (Rogers, 2001, p. 205). Development and economic indicators, children's effective participation in school, health, and participation in community and political life all seem to relate to adults' educational level and literacy development (Papen, 2001). Studies of families using literacy as part of their daily routines (e.g., Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) showed that children's early understanding of literacy was acquired within the social and cultural context of their family and community. Whether parents and siblings engaged in frequent reading and writing for personal purposes was connected to children's vocabulary development (van Steensel, 2006). Purcell-Gates's (1996) research also showed that children's early literacy achievement related to parents' engagement in specific types of print literacy activities, particularly those with more complex levels of discourse for leisure and entertainment. Research suggests that the home literacy practices often emphasized with young children in family literacy programs are equally important for adolescents (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999). Parents' discussion of schoolwork and their provision of reading materials continue to support older children's reading achievement (Richardson & Sacks, 2003). Given the relationship between parents' literacy levels and adolescent high school drop-out rates (Hammond, Smink, & Drew, 2007) as well as the link with children's emergent literacy practices (Purcell-Gates, 1996), it is important to examine the literacy activities engaged in by parents that may support students' literacy learning.



The Need to Examine Out-of-School Literacy

It is critical that educators and researchers continue to explore the out-of-school literacy activities of low-income parents to support effective adult literacy

teaching and learning as well as to gain a clearer understanding of the print literacy knowledge of children and adolescents. The current research supported this need by focusing on the following questions:

- What are the types of print literacy activities low-income parents engage in their daily lives?
- How frequently do low-income parents engage with these print materials?
- Are there differences in parents' print literacy experiences based on geographical circumstances?
- What are the implications of this engagement for literacy instruction in adult and family literacy programs?

Research Design

Participants

There were 38 randomly selected parents who agreed to participate in this study. Parents were located in seven counties in a midwestern state. The random selection came from a list of parents with children involved in Head Start, a preschool for children who come from low-income families. Head Start provides support for various aspects of children's early development, including their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development (Zigler & Styfco, 2004). Head Start does not involve a formal adult education component unlike some other early intervention programs such as Even Start; however, parent involvement is encouraged. Involving Head Start participants provided a context for examining adult literacy practices of low-SES families that were unassociated with formal adult education programs. This research was needed to explore the everyday practices that parents engage in as part of their social and cultural communities so that those practices can be built on in educational programs.

Parents were living in various geographical circumstances (i.e., urban, rural, and migrant) with a 4-year-old child enrolled in Head Start. The list of parents was provided by the Head Start coordinators. Urban parents were located in an area with a population of approximately 100,000 or more while rural parents were located approximately 10 miles or more

from this area, with populations of approximately one-tenth or less of the urban center. A list of migrant parents was provided by the Head Start coordinator from those enrolled in the migrant Head Start program. Most of these parents were from Mexican backgrounds and all spoke Spanish as a first/home language. The random selection of parents also came from those without high school completion for urban and rural families. For migrant parents, the random sample was conducted from those parents with an educational level of eighth grade or less as the population was large enough to conduct the sample. The intent was to work with parents most stereotyped as not engaging in print literacy practices—that is, those with low levels of formal education. In conjunction with the larger study on family literacy that examined the types of print literacy activities parents engaged in with their children and children's print knowledge (Lynch, 2008), the purpose of this research was to examine the print literacy activities that low-income parents engage in as part of their own everyday lives to support effective teaching practice.

The intent was to work with parents most stereotyped as not engaging in print literacy practices—that is, those with low levels of formal education.

An overview of this study was presented to Head Start coordinators and educators at a general meeting. The coordinators for Head Start provided a list of names of parents who fit the criteria specified. Names were masked as numbers, and I did not contact any parent until he or she consented to participate. Often, Head Start educators or other staff members, such as a child service worker on a home visit, made initial contact with the parent, introduced the study that I had specified, and obtained consent. Many of the parents in this study were difficult to contact because they lived rather transient lives. Furthermore, many of the parents did not have telephones in their home. The sample of 38 parents that participated was from a list of 120 randomly selected parents. There were 12 urban parents, 11 rural parents, and 15 migrant parents who agreed to participate. Most of the parents

identified themselves as being Mexican, American/Caucasian, or Hispanic and 34 were mothers between the ages of 20–29 with multiple children. The data was collected over an eighth-month period. The entire interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, which included questions for parents on their print engagement as well as their engagement activities with young children.

Data Sources and Procedure

A modified print literacy questionnaire developed by Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler (2002) was used as the basis for interviews with parents. The items included were those found to be most reliably documented in their study. Parents were asked 26 questions about their print literacy engagement over the last year and the frequency of the engagement and were asked to show or present examples of the types of print literacy materials. There were 17 questions that focused on reading and 9 that focused on writing. A selection of sample questions is listed in Figure 1.

Most of the parents agreed to have the interview audiotaped and chose their home as the site for the interview for economic or convenience reasons. Parents

were assured that there were no correct responses to the questions. Although most of the parents chose to have the interview conducted in English, 15 migrant parents requested that the interview be conducted in Spanish as they seemed to have limited English language proficiency. Therefore, the questionnaire was translated into Spanish, and a bilingual assistant was employed to conduct those interviews with myself in attendance. Parents were asked to include all print engagement regardless of the language used, and all print engagement over the last year was recorded. In most cases, migrant families claimed to engage in literacy events reported in Spanish.

Research Findings of Parents' Print Literacy Engagement

Context

Migrant families in this study traveled to the Midwest from southern states to work on the crops from spring to early fall (generally from May to September). They often lived in trailer parks at the end of the farmers' land or a short distance away from the farmland in grouped temporary accommodation. Urban and rural families typically lived in small houses or apartments. Some of the homes had displays of print in the common areas (kitchen, living room) where the interviews were conducted, while others had none. Although formal questions about parents' job status were not asked in the interview, many parents stated that they worked in the fields (migrant parents), were unemployed, were working part time, or looking for employment. Many parents stated that the reason they participated in this study was to support their children's literacy development.

Types and Frequency of Print Engagement

The most frequent types of reading activities parents claimed to engage in were reading preschool communication information (96%) and store advertisements, coupons, or fliers (93%). The most common writing activity reported was writing names or labels (90%). Because parents had children involved in Head Start, information was sent home from the preschool on a semiweekly basis, and parents claimed to read various materials, such as children's schoolwork or newsletters.

Figure 1 Sample Questions From the Questionnaire for Parents

Reading Activities

- Within the last year, did you read any store advertisements, coupons, or fliers?
Y ___ N ___

Can you show me or tell me about an example? _____

- About how often did you do this sort of reading?

Daily Weekly Monthly A few times a year Once a year

Quote/comment _____

Writing Activities

- Within the last year, did you write lists (e.g., grocery, to-do lists)?
Y ___ N ___

Can you show me or tell me an example? _____

- About how often did you do this sort of writing?

Daily Weekly Monthly A few times a year Once a year

Quote/comment _____

Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Myers department store advertisements and coupons were listed as the most commonly read by parents; many parents claimed to read these in the local Sunday paper. Parents also commonly reported writing names and labels, most frequently on envelopes to be sent to family members or to pay bills. Many of the parents reported engaging in this type of activity monthly, with some parents engaging in it daily or weekly.

Parents stated that they frequently engage in reading print on calendars or tickets (87%), mostly daily or weekly, and reading directions, recipes, or shopping lists (87%) from daily to once a year. Many parents read their own writing on calendars, which included doctors' appointments, birthdays, and other written recordings. Parents tended to state that they engage in this activity daily or weekly. Parents reported reading recipes and directions for using household appliances as well as reading doctors' prescriptions. Furthermore, parents frequently reported reading messages or notes (85%), such as on greeting cards, and writing messages or notes (85%), mostly to the classroom teacher because their child was late or absent. Reading notes on greeting cards usually occurred a few times a year. Overall, parents seemed to write notes more frequently than read them. Reading labels, container print, or signs such as on baby formula and cough medicines (84%), as well as reading addresses, the phone book, or dictionaries (84%) were also stated by many parents as activities they engaged in during the last year. Many parents said they to read the phone book to find information, such as on heating systems or to look for mechanics. Overall, writing on a calendar (82%) and writing lists, such as grocery or to-do lists (81%), were popular. Reading utility bills, receipts, or bank statements (81%) were also frequently reported, with water, electric, and phone bills the most common examples given among parents. Many parents claimed to engage in this practice monthly.

About two thirds of the participants stated that they engaged in writing a money order or check during the last year (76%). Most of the parents claimed to write a money order for bills; some parents wrote a check to pay their monthly rent. There were 74% of parents who claimed to engage in reading postal letters or e-mails, and 71% of parents said they engage in

writing postal letters or e-mails, mostly to family or friends. Overall, there were 70% of the parents who said they read schedules or guides, which included television, bus, and children's school schedule. Most parents reported to engage in schedule reading on a daily or weekly basis.

Parents reported engaging in menu reading (69%) and reading periodicals (68%), most commonly horoscopes. Menus were read mostly on a monthly basis. Examples included McDonald's (read from screen) and Big Boy restaurant. The next most frequent activities overall were application writing (66%), such as for a job or housing, and reading essays, newspapers, or magazines (64%). Parents read mostly information on the war in Iraq in newspapers and magazines, perhaps because of the strong media focus on it in the United States during the time of this study. A few parents also claimed to read magazine stories to keep up on general news, entertainment, or parenting issues. The parents reported engaging in this activity often on a weekly basis. More than half of the participants claimed to engage in reading a lease or mortgage document in the last year (56%) or a book or story (51%). Crime fiction and the Bible were the most cited examples of book or story reading. The following activities were less frequently engaged in by parents. Forty-six percent engaged in reading song lyrics during the last year. Less than half of the parents engaged in reading comics or cartoons (33%); writing poetry, stories, or a reflection (29%); and writing instructions (28%) during the last year (see Tables 1 & 2).

Geographical Circumstances

After controlling for education to compare the print engagement of the three geographical groups, a significant difference was found between migrant parents' report of engagement in reading activities and parents living in rural and urban circumstances report of engagement in reading activities, $F(2, 34) = 8.02$, $p = 0.001$. Education level was controlled because previous studies have shown that it affects literacy practices (e.g., Kirsch & Guthrie, 1984; Smith, 1996). Tukey's post hoc test revealed that migrant parents ($M = 32.94$, $SD = 3.12$) reported to engage in fewer reading activities than did urban parents ($M = 49.52$, $SD = 3.56$), and migrant parents also reported to

Table 1 Mean Percentage of Parents' Engagement in Reading Activities

	Store advertisements/ coupons/fliers					Bills/receipts/bank statements					Books/stories					Calendars/tickets				
	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	33	67	0	0	0	42	17	50	0	0	8	42	0	17	0	42	42	8	8	0
Rural	45	55	0	0	0	18	27	27	0	0	0	9	36	0	18	55	27	9	0	0
Migrant	7	53	7	7	7	0	7	60	0	0	0	20	7	0	0	20	47	7	0	0
All parents	26	58	3	3	3	18	16	47	0	0	3	24	14	5	5	37	39	8	3	0

	Comics/cartoons					Essays/magazine stories					Lease/mortgage documents					Directions/recipes/ shopping lists				
	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	0	33	0	8	0	25	42	8	17	0	0	0	17	17	33	0	17	42	17	17
Rural	0	36	9	0	0	18	45	18	9	0	0	0	27	9	45	9	27	9	18	27
Migrant	7	7	0	0	0	0	13	7	0	0	0	7	0	0	20	13	20	20	27	0
All parents	3	24	3	3	0	13	32	11	8	0	0	3	13	8	32	8	21	24	21	13

	Labels/titles, container print/signs					Menus					Messages/notes					Address/ phone book/ dictionary				
	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	50	25	17	0	0	0	42	25	0	8	17	25	17	25	8	42	25	17	17	0
Rural	55	18	9	9	0	0	9	64	9	0	18	9	9	36	27	0	36	27	27	0
Migrant	7	47	13	7	0	0	0	27	27	0	7	13	40	7	0	0	20	20	27	0
All parents	34	32	13	5	0	0	16	37	13	3	13	16	24	21	11	13	26	21	24	0

	Postal letters/ e-mails					School communication information					Song lyrics					Schedules/guides				
	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	17	25	25	8	0	17	50	8	8	8	0	17	0	25	8	17	50	8	8	0
Rural	36	9	18	18	9	0	73	9	0	9	9	9	27	9	18	18	36	9	0	0
Migrant	0	0	33	20	7	13	60	27	0	0	0	0	7	13	0	20	33	7	7	0
All parents	16	11	26	16	5	11	61	16	3	5	3	8	11	16	8	18	39	8	5	0

	Periodicals				
	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	25	33	8	0	0
Rural	27	36	9	0	9
Migrant	7	13	27	13	0
All parents	18	26	16	5	3

Note. D = daily; W = weekly; M = monthly; F = few times a year; O = once a year.

Table 2 Mean Percentage of Parents' Engagement in Writing Activities

	Names/labels					Checks/money orders					Calendars					Speeches/stories/ poems/reflection				
	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	25	33	42	0	0	0	25	58	0	8	42	33	17	0	0	17	0	17	0	8
Rural	27	18	55	0	0	0	45	45	0	0	36	27	36	0	0	0	0	9	9	0
Migrant	7	0	60	7	0	0	0	40	7	7	7	13	27	20	0	7	0	7	0	13
All parents	18	16	53	13	0	0	21	47	3	5	24	24	26	8	0	8	0	11	3	7

	Forms/ applications					Lists					Messages/notes					Letters/e-mails				
	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	0	8	17	42	17	25	50	17	0	0	33	50	8	8	0	25	8	33	8	0
Rural	0	0	9	36	27	27	45	18	0	0	0	45	9	18	0	18	27	36	0	0
Migrant	0	7	7	13	20	7	33	27	0	0	7	20	47	0	7	0	0	33	27	0
All parents	0	5	11	29	21	18	42	21	0	0	13	37	24	8	3	13	11	34	13	0

	Instructions				
	D	W	M	F	O
Urban	8	8	0	8	0
Rural	0	18	0	0	0
Migrant	7	13	13	7	0
All parents	5	13	5	5	0

Note. D=daily; W=weekly; M=monthly; F=few times a year; O=once a year.

engage in fewer reading activities than did rural parents ($M = 48.70$, $SD = 3.63$). Reading essays, newspapers, or magazine stories ($u = 92\%$, $r = 90\%$, $m = 20\%$); books or stories ($u = 67\%$, $r = 64\%$, $m = 27\%$); and song lyrics ($u = 50\%$, $r = 72\%$, $m = 20\%$) seemed to show the greatest differences. There were no significant differences in writing engagement among the groups, perhaps because of less engagement with writing overall.

There were trends in the frequency of reading and writing activities among the three groups, most notably between migrant and urban parents and migrant and rural parents. For example, advertisements and fliers were reported to be read more daily and weekly

with urban and rural parents and more monthly with migrant parents. Urban and rural parents reported to engage in reading periodicals, most frequently horoscopes, on a daily and weekly basis while migrant parents stated that they engage in this activity more on a monthly basis. Reading labels, container print, and signs was generally a daily activity for many urban and rural parents, but again, for migrant adults, this type of reading activity was reported to be engaged in more on a weekly basis. Writing letters or e-mails was a less common writing interaction reported by migrant parents. For migrant parents, limited English language skills of some parents may account for some differences that exist.

Reading bill statements and receipts was a common activity reported overall and was more of a daily activity for urban parents than for rural or migrant parents. Also, book or story reading was reported as

Some urban parents engaged in reading address books or dictionaries on a daily basis, whereas this activity was more of a weekly or monthly engagement for rural and migrant parents.

more of a weekly activity for urban parents and more of a monthly activity for rural parents. Menu reading was more of a weekly reading activity for urban parents and more of a monthly reading activity for rural parents. Some urban parents engaged in reading address books or dictionaries on a daily basis, whereas this activity was more of a weekly or monthly engagement

for rural and migrant parents. Urban parents reported to engage in writing more notes or messages overall than did rural and migrant parents (see Tables 1 & 2).

Discussion of Findings

There was a wide variety of print uses by parents. Being indicative of parents' education level, several parents had stated that were looking for employment such as cashier work in grocery or department stores or fast-food restaurants. Only a couple of parents in this study reported work-related literacy activities. Many of the parents had multiple children, which related in many ways to the types of print engagement. For example, communication with the school by writing notes and reading information on scheduled events, as well as reading medication bottles and food packaging, were common events. Some of the parents reported engaging in literacy events for leisure or entertainment, such as magazine reading for gossip or news, as well as reading horoscopes. This possible need for escape from present situations was also found in Finlay's (1999) adult literacy exploratory curriculum. Moreover, some parents claimed to engage in reading stories, mostly crime fiction. Because many parents moved frequently, sometimes for short-term employment (migrant workers as well as other

parents) or for personal reasons (e.g., "to hide whereabouts from the father of the children"), completing job/housing applications or reading and signing a lease were common activities.

The reading of store advertisements and coupons was a common event. Parents commonly reported to engage in label writing when paying bills and mailing letters. Reading/writing of print on calendars and grocery lists provided a semblance of organization for parents in their often busy lives as many of the participants had several children. Reading doctors' notes, how to operate new appliances, and container print provided important information for the safety and health of families. Greeting card and postal letter reading and writing often served a social function for these parents. Parents also frequently reported reading television guides or bus schedules for recreation and work-related purposes.

This research demonstrated the many types of print engagement in the lives of low-SES families. Unlike the parent in Purcell-Gates's (1995) study who often relied on family members to support her interactions with print because of her low literacy level, print was readily engaged in by participants in this study. However, variations in levels of literacy knowledge between these studies may account for such differences. This study offers adult educators as well as educators working in family literacy programs insightful information on the types of print experiences low-SES adults report to engage in as part of their everyday lives. This research provides a basis for literacy instruction within meaningful events for adult learners and supports educators' attempts to link in-school and out-of-school literacy. It may be ineffective to initiate literacy instruction using materials in adult literacy programs that are considered authentic by the mainstream population but which have no general use in the lives of those outside the mainstream. For example, reading newspaper stories was not a common event for participants in this study. However, parents claimed to read coupons and fliers within the newspaper, as well as their horoscopes. As parents' literacy levels increase through literacy instruction, parents will begin to read more widely (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002) and further print materials may become authentic for adult learners. It has been suggested that

beginning instruction should build on previous experiences and should be meaningful to learners (Taylor, 2006). This seems especially important for adults who struggle with literacy learning.

Preschools played a major role in parents' print literacy engagement. Many of the parents felt the need to read material from the preschool for organizational purpose (i.e., when their child was required to be at school, information about school lunches, and information about school events). Adult and family literacy educators, who have knowledge that parents are engaging in many reading and writing activities in relation to children's schooling, can incorporate these activities into their programs by using these activities as a basis for literacy instruction. All of these print literacy activities are important because they demonstrate the many functions of print to young children, even if children are not directly engaging in such activities (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

There was some variation in the functions of print in parents' lives that may be related to geographical circumstances. For example, urban parents seemed to engage more frequently in writing notes or messages and in particular types of reading, such as bills or receipts, menus, address and phone books, and books and stories, than other parents. This may be the result of print availability or lifestyle issues. Rural parents tended to engage in letter writing more frequently, but overall there were no significant differences in the frequency of reading and writing activities between urban and rural parents. Migrant parents claimed to engage in fewer reading activities overall, especially magazine or news stories and book or story reading, which may also be an implication of print accessibility, lifestyle, or language issues. It seems that migrant parents would be limited in the amount of materials that could accompany them when traveling for employment. In addition, most of these parents were working in farm fields, which may relate to differences in the amount of reading interactions. Importantly, lower competency in the English language may relate to engagement in literacy events for these parents, especially for parts of the year. Nevertheless, there were various print literacy activities migrant parents claimed to engage in (e.g., print signage, schedules, school communication information, Bible reading), which could

become a basis for adult literacy teaching. Most of the print engagement activities reported by migrant parents were in Spanish, and many print materials were available in both Spanish and English. Based on some of the trends in interactions among these groups, it is important for educators to consider how geographical circumstances, in addition to one's SES, may relate to the type and frequency of print interactions. Very few studies have compared adults' print literacy engagement on the basis of their geographical circumstances. Furthermore, given that the majority of the migrant parents were of Mexican background, it is important to consider the social and linguistic backgrounds of low-income adults in addition to income level and geographical circumstances.

Many parents reported to engage in print interactions that were more at the clausal or word level, which can be considered a lower level of "writtenness" (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1986; Purcell-Gates, 1996) than other forms of print interactions. That is, parents engaged with texts that had a linguistic structure more oral than written in form. Examples in this study included reading lists, container print, menus, and phone books, as well as writing lists or short reminders on calendars. Stories or periodicals would be considered a higher level of "writtenness." Educators can build on frequent reading and writing activities, such as writing notes or reading container print, to extend adult learning. This can be accomplished by teaching related vocabulary and comprehension skills within commonly engaged in texts. New texts, perhaps with a higher degree of "writtenness," such as a consumer report on food ingredients, could be used to increase parents' print knowledge on a similar topic. Furthermore, topics of interest to students in adult literacy programs can be linked to story or periodical reading (Padak & Bardine, 2004). This study has demonstrated that although there was some variation in print literacy engagement between migrant parents and parents from rural and urban circumstances, all low-income families claimed to be involved in various print literacy activities despite commonly held beliefs to the contrary.

Implications for Practice

In order to provide the most effective programs for adult literacy learners, recommendations are proposed

based on the findings of this study and in relation to previous research that has been conducted in this area. First, there is a need to involve learners in the curriculum content (Velazquez, 1996). Teachers should

It is critical to consider how social, linguistic, and geographical factors may intertwine to shape the print literacy interactions of adults from low-income backgrounds.

ask students about their interests and life experiences and use this information to develop meaningful tasks (Terry, 2006). By asking questions about the lives of students, for example, about the different purposes for reading (savings, job search, recreation), teachers can use this knowledge as a basis for their teaching. Adults can be taught skills such as vocabulary

and fluency in relation to these print materials. The goal is to provide adult learners with authentic tasks that promote a responsive rather than a prescribed curriculum.

Second, some parents in the current study were surprised by the number of literacy events they engaged in as part of their everyday lives. These parents did not reflect on many of these everyday events as reading or writing activities, perhaps because out-of-school print literacy was not valued or integrated into their earlier education. It is important for educators to validate all of these print experiences. "One of the best ways for students and others to increase their understanding of literacy is for them to reflect on their own practices and the everyday practices around them" (Barton, 2000, p. 167).

In addition, the importance of building on adults' first language to support second-language learning (Cummins, 1991) should not be underestimated. By gaining insight on adults' interests and authentic literacy events in their lives, educators can collaborate with bilingual educators for suggestions of appropriate first-language materials. In this study, most migrant parents engaged in print literacy practices in Spanish. Furthermore, Spanish print literacy materials can be used to support adults' competency in Spanish, which

may also support their English language and literacy development.

Finally, it is critical to consider how social, linguistic, and geographical factors may intertwine to shape the print literacy interactions of adults from low-income backgrounds. The diversity in print interactions among parents from low-SES backgrounds has implications for instruction and learning. As Janes and Kermani (2001) found in their research, for programs to be successful the beliefs and values of the participants need to be incorporated.

In addition to the implications for adult literacy programs, there are suggestions for family literacy programs and schools based on the study findings. Previous research has established associations between parents' and children's literacy knowledge (Kogut, 2004). From gaining insight into the literacy practices of adults from low-SES backgrounds, the following suggestions were made.

First, it is important that educators working in intervention programs recognize that parents with low levels of formal education engage in many meaningful print literacy activities in their everyday lives. Recommendations made to parents about involvement in literacy activities with their children can be connected to some of their own everyday literacy activities. Second, by building on some of the print activities young children are exposed to in the home (such as calendars, lists, notes, advertisements, and coupons) in preschool and in formal schooling, educators can support the creation of a bridge between in-school and out-of-school literacy.

It is also important that for parents with low formal educational levels, educators can provide specific suggestions to parents for aiding young children and adolescents with their homework and ways of connecting in-school literacy with daily routines (Paratore, 2001). Furthermore, parents should be encouraged to talk with their children about areas of interest to them and to their children to build their general knowledge (NCES, 1999) as a background for print literacy learning at home and at school. For parents with lower competency in the English language as well as in their first language, educators can encourage parents to engage in first-language discussions with their children and adolescents (Chandler, 1999) as well

as encourage sibling involvement (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004), when possible, in students' English-language learning.

Limitations and Looking Forward

It is important to support adults in their development of literacy skills, whether for employment reasons, to further their academic knowledge, or to help their children with their educational needs. Studies such as this one that explored the out-of-school literacy activities of low-income adults provide support for adult teaching. This study involved a group of difficult-to-reach parents, which may be attributed to their formal educational level and perhaps negative experiences toward schooling. Indeed, many adults are at risk for dropping out of adult literacy programs (Guy, 2005), which makes the need to bridge in-school and out-school literacy more critical. Even when parents do not attend adult literacy programs, knowing about their home literacy experiences can help educators connect parents' activities with ways of helping their children learn about print in a more formal context. This signifies the importance of examining print activities parents may engage in for their own purposes and not just ways parents interact with their children around print.

A limitation of this study is that it is a self-report of literacy practices and the ensuing implication that socially appropriate responses exist must be considered. However, I made strong attempts to connect with the parents before interviewing them by engaging in general conversation and playing with their young children. Many of the parents appeared comfortable answering questions about their literacy experiences. A further limitation is that all migrant parents chose to have the questionnaire administered in Spanish, which must be considered when examining differences in print engagement based on geographical situations. The availability of print in some parents' first language within their environment may relate to their print engagement. However, parents were asked to report on their print engagement over the last year, rather than their current print engagement practices, and had access to some print materials in their first language, such as newsletters, calendars,

and reports at the migrant Head Start centers when engaging in migrant work.

This is the one of the few studies to compare low-SES parents' print interactions on the basis of their geographical circumstances. Although slight differences were found between migrant parents and parents from urban and rural areas, all parents from low-SES backgrounds claimed to engage in print literacy activities of some nature. This study builds on the educational theory of literacy as a social practice by further examining the literacy engagement of low-SES parents. Recommendations were made for educational practice based on the findings of this study. Further research is needed on how geographical factors may relate to print engagement, including an examination of the role of language and culture among different geographical groups. In addition, further research should examine how out-of-school print interactions can be combined with formal instruction in adult literacy classrooms to establish more authentic adult literacy programs for all students. If educators are able to understand the literacy practices of adults, they may be able to provide instruction that more closely relates to learners' goals and is transferable to their everyday lives (Mellard, Patterson, & Prewett, 2007).

Notes

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