Exploring Literacy in the Home of an Economically Disadvantaged Student: 
A Case Study

Thesis

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Abstract

Data from mandated standardized testing reveals an Achievement Gap amongst students of various racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups. Within my own school district of employment, administrators requested that teachers focus on all students from the subgroup of *economically disadvantaged* in order to close our gap in achievement, per *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Requests such as these create a deficit perception that can harm these students and their ability to succeed. This case study seeks to explore and define the meaning(s) and use(s) of literacy within the home of an *economically disadvantaged* student in my classroom. With a focus on learning and understanding how this student navigates through his literate world at home, as a teacher this case study will aide me in adapting the traditional literacy curriculum of public schools to address his home-based skills and interests. By creating a literacy curriculum that addresses each student as unique individuals with authentic skills and interests, higher levels of motivation and engagement can create an environment in which all students can succeed.
Dedication

Dedicated to my students – past, present, and future
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Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Education: Teaching & Learning
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Chapter 1: Objective & Perspective(s)

Objective/Purpose of the Study

Data collected from state-mandated standardized testing have consistently shown that in the United States there exists an Achievement Gap in content areas, such as reading and math, among students (“National Center for Education Statistics,” n.d.). In 2001, the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) into the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) and has consequently heightened the emphasis on closing this Achievement Gap. This legislation is an educational reform that requires all public schools receiving federal funding to annually administer a state-wide standardized test to students. Additionally, the NCLB legislation has identified individual subgroups of student populations (based on race, language, special needs and special rights, and social class) for educators to target for potential intervention based on the results from students’ standardized tests. Since 2001, public school districts receiving Title I funding are evaluated—through measurement tools such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Value Added Measurements (VAM)—by the percentage of students overall and in these individual subgroups who pass the tests and are considered proficient.

As an elementary school teacher within my district of employment, administrators have previously required that each student who classified as economically disadvantaged—judged by whether they qualify for free- or reduced-lunch—have an
action plan for academic intervention. This requirement negatively created the perception that students from *economically disadvantaged* homes and communities are in need of intervention regardless of their actual levels of achievement. As a teacher, I did not see this requirement as a necessary precaution because I believe that gaps in student achievement derive from larger, more pervasive cultural implications. Therefore, this qualitative case study examines literacy practices in an *economically disadvantaged* home to explore how one student makes meaning from his environment and relies on his funds of knowledge in ways that contribute to how I, as his teacher, can help bridge home and school literacy inside the classroom.

For the purposes of this study, I focused on one particular subgroup—*economically disadvantaged*—as identified by *No Child Left Behind*. I am currently employed as a Kindergarten teacher in a rural school district in central Ohio with little racial or linguistic diversity, but high economic diversity. According to the Ohio Department of Education’s Report Card for the most recent academic year (2013-2014), 51% of the district’s student enrollment is considered *economically disadvantaged*. At the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, each teacher was asked to develop an action plan for *economically disadvantaged* students in their classrooms—those students who received free- or reduced-lunch.

“Why,” I asked, “is it necessary for each student on free- or reduced-lunch to have an action plan when not all require academic intervention?” The answer was directly related to AYP results from the 2007-2008 school years that were not met by the subgroup of *economically disadvantaged* students. It should be noted that students with
disabilities also did not meet AYP goals for that year, but the presence of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was enough to appease school leadership. In fact, the school leadership, or administration, contended that it was essential to identify these students early in the year in order to avoid playing catch-up before the testing season. However, the mere presence of the action plans indicated a perceived deficit of all 

_educationally disadvantaged_ students that required intervention. “What,” I asked, “is the deficit?”

One deficit falls within the categories of reading and writing. Throughout this research study, I combined these two categories into the broader category of literacy. A brief glance at my school district’s 2008-2009 report card would tell any reader that the 

_educationally disadvantaged_ subgroup in testing grades 3-8 and 10 actually met AYP goals for reading. These goals are dependent upon the percentage of _educationally disadvantaged_ students scoring _proficient_ or better. Upon a more thorough review of the district’s report card, any reader could see that AYP goals being met does not equate to a closing of the achievement gap in these subject areas. A greater percentage of 

_educationally disadvantaged_ students scored _limited_ or _basic_ on literacy-based tests in comparison to their _non-educationally disadvantaged_ peers. Furthering the notion of an achievement gap were the lower percentages of _educationally disadvantaged_ students scoring _accelerated_ or _advanced_ on literacy-based tests when viewed in comparison to their _non-educationally disadvantaged_ peers. Although this study was conducted during the 2010-2011 school year, report card data from subsequent years reveal a similar trend.

While the data collected annually by the State of Ohio clearly show the presence
of a Literacy Achievement Gap, my intent with this research study is twofold. First, I ask: Why does such a gap exist? Second, I consider: What can teachers and teacher educators do to address the gap beyond relying on standardized test scores as mandated by *No Child Left Behind*?

**Perspective(s) or theoretical framework**

While much attention is placed upon supposed failing methods within schools, it seems little attention is paid to where students spend a majority of their time: home. Methods for teaching literacy standards within American schools are not always compatible with cultural literacy practices that deviate from the norm. As a Kindergarten teacher, I have annual expectations and hopes for my incoming students that include being capable of handling and using a writing utensil effectively, recognizing, spelling, and writing their first name, identifying a majority of upper and lowercase letters as well as producing their sounds, and telling a simple story orally and/or by drawing a simple picture. However, year after year I find that students, despite efforts at national, state, and local levels, are not academically homogeneous. With the presence of state curricular standards, as well as standardized assessment tools, my response is: Should we expect kids to be academically homogeneous?

**Social Constructivism**

Early and Gunderson (1993) advocate a shift in literacy instruction within schools from cultural dominance to cultural responsiveness. Traditional literacy instruction (basal reading series, teaching manuals, student workbooks, leveled readers) places a strong emphasis on mastery of decontextualized skills, such as letters, sounds, and words of the
day, skill-based worksheets, and leveled texts that leave little room for actual story comprehension. These skills do not necessarily reflect the literate practices of many non-mainstream cultural communities. The literate skills possessed by children of these communities are not often utilized within the school because they do not coalesce with the standards of traditional literacy instruction.

A push for “authentic literacy” that encourages “real, meaningful, personal reading and writing activities” (Early & Gunderson, 1993, p. 99) within schools would allow children from non-mainstream communities to utilize their literate skills within school and offer them opportunities at success that traditional literacy practices do not often allow. Such activities could include shared reading activities centered around stories brought from home, writing activities based on personal experiences, or dramatic storytelling based on characters students are familiar with and enjoy. Early and Gunderson propose:

There are no right answers or textbooks, no tangible end products, few models or evaluative norms to follow. As teachers/ethnographers we can bridge the distance between ourselves and our students and between students’ home and school values for literacy. In the process we can validate the students’ perspectives and come to understand them better. (p. 109)

K. Au (1998) advocates for a similar cultural responsiveness within literacy instruction by utilizing social constructivism. She suggests that the success of literacy learning should be more collaborative; an effort that involves more than the teacher and the student, but one that also includes the school, the family, and the community. There
should not merely be an effort to include individuals from these groups, but emphasis should be placed on encompassing their values, beliefs, and cultural realities within learning opportunities. As K. Au asserts:

Social constructivism includes the idea that there is no objective basis for knowledge claims, because knowledge is always a human construction. The emphasis is on the process of knowledge construction by the social group and the intersubjectivity established through the interactions of the group. (p. 299)

K. Au also mentions the idea of “authentic literacy,” allowing students to “build on the foundation of personal experience” (1998, p. 300). She does not diminish the typical traditional practices often utilized within school literacy programs—scientific concepts—such as isolated lessons that teach the alphabetic principle, phonics, and phonemic awareness. The construction of literate knowledge requires the knowledge of how literacy works. However, allowing students to construct literate knowledge through their own personal experiences and everyday concepts helps to bridge the gap between non-mainstream communities and the culture of power within schools.

For the purposes of my case study, I focused on K. Au’s (1998) exploration of cultural differences as a cause of the Literacy Achievement Gap. Schools often operate under “mainstream” standards and expect “mainstream” behavior such as encouraging independence and competitiveness. Often, these “mainstream” expectations are required for success in school. Education publishers whose materials are utilized in classrooms across the country make a number of assumptions about the standards each student should possess. For instance, Reading Street, a literacy-based program published by
Pearson Publishers, assumes that before children enter Kindergarten, they have all had enough exposure to the alphabet to quickly move on to how letters work together to make words, to read leveled texts that contain many words, and to possess the fine motor skills necessary to write words on traditional writing paper. However, many of these skills are too advanced for some of the beginning Kindergartners I serve. In fact, I agree with K. Au who writes:

> These preferences are not inborn but the result of socialization practices in the home and community, which in turn reflect cultural values. Because the school is a mainstream institution, instruction is carried out in ways following mainstream standards for behavior and reflecting mainstream cultural values. Students have difficulty learning in school because instruction does not follow their community’s cultural values and standards for behavior. (p. 302)

A shift from traditional literacy instruction to authentic literacy instruction through social constructivism requires schools to address the devaluing of cultural capital of children from diverse backgrounds and subsequently revalue it (K. Au, 1998). Educators must be willing to alter expectations of literacy events, particularly because students bring their own experiences to these events, experiences that may stray from the norm educators accept within the traditional literacy framework. In order to revalue the cultural capital of students from diverse backgrounds, educators must be willing to accept their students—experiences and all—as cultural beings. Their construction of literate knowledge in a personal, meaningful way encompasses their interests and experiences and helps to eradicate “barriers of exclusion” that, according to K. Au, are
“posed by conventional literacy instructional practices” (p. 308). K. Au continues:

...Educators must work with an expanded vision of literacy strategies and concepts in school, so that school definitions of literacy are transformed. In this way, educators create the possibility not only of helping students to become proficient in literacy but of enabling them to be empowered through literacy, to use literacy as a tool in bettering societal conditions. (p. 308)

*Family Literacy*

The two rural school districts in which I have taught have used basal reading series as a foundation for literacy instruction. In order to shift toward more culturally responsive literacy instruction and away from a dependency upon out-of-context literacy lessons, teaching manuals, and workbooks, literacy within the homes of students must be examined. Taylor (1983), in her work with white, middle-class families, observed literacy learning and acquisition within a relational context and concluded literacy acquisition was not achieved through a series of skill-related tasks. Rather, it was achieved courtesy of the typical daily life of the family. She notes:

In analyzing the data it has become increasingly evident that the most significant “mode” of transmitting literacy styles and values occurs indirectly, at the very margins of awareness through the continuously diffuse use of written language in the ongoing life of the family. (p. 7)

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) continued Taylor’s work on family literacy, focusing on the literacy acquisition of children in black, low-socioeconomic status (SES) families. They found that, despite socioeconomic status, the families they observed were
just as literate as the families from Taylor’s (1983) earlier work, but the context in which print was used differed with the low-SES families. Many of the families engaged in literate activities when reading instructions and filling out social service applications. However, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines placed an emphasis on the variety of their participants’ literate practices: “They are active members in a print community in which literacy is used for a wide variety of social, technical, and aesthetic purposes” (1988, p. 200).

Purcell-Gates engaged in similar work with home literacy. She observed the home literacies of low-SES families, but cautioned against particular findings from Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) research with the same social class of families. In a study with L’Allier and Smith, Purcell-Gates (1995) described variation amongst the types and frequencies of literate events in low-SES families, referring to them as either “high- or low-literacy families.” Low-literacy families had few, if any, literacy materials available to children within the home and spent most of their time engaging with the television or video games. Literacy was utilized in many of the same ways as with the families in Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines’ (1988) work, most often literacy for entertainment or to accomplish daily living routines. Children would hear a book being read by a character on television or members of the family would read through the cable listings to determine what to watch. Family members would write lists necessary to complete tasks such as store lists or recipes and read information from labels, letters, and instructions.

In contrast, high-literacy families possessed an abundance of literacy materials. Their daily lives were permeated by literate activities, often involving literacy-learning or
storybook reading. Literacy for entertainment (i.e. television viewing and video games) took place, but was routinely planned. Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, and Smith (1995) highlighted the difference between high- and low-literacy families by measuring the frequency in which literacy events occurred. The low-literacy families engaged in one literacy event for every three hours observed. The high-literacy families engaged in 2.5 events every hour observed. In essence, the “high-literacy families engaged in eight times more literacy events per hour” than the low-literacy families (1995, p. 576). The literacy events of the high-literacy families also tended to be more complex in nature.

Purcell-Gates (1996) also explored the relationship between engagement in literacy events and emergent literacy knowledge. She cautioned that prior research with home literacy also neglected children’s knowledge of written language and its uses. Children in low-SES homes may have experiences with literacy materials, but the purposes of constructing and using those materials may elude them. She concluded that children “knowing more about print and its functions in the world were generally more successful with the formal literacy instruction they encountered in school, performed higher on achievement tests, and were judged as more advanced readers and writers by their teachers” (1996, p. 409). Thus, Purcell-Gates (1996) summarizes the importance of home literacy:

Assuming that [children’s] conceptions of writing resulted from their experiences with literacy practices in their homes and communities before they began school, home literacy thus assumes a major role in the success of children in school literacy. (p. 409)
While children can readily learn knowledge of the uses of written language from school-based literacy activities, arriving at school without that knowledge places them behind their peers who do possess it. Family and home literacy researchers have explored the types of literacy used within the home as well as the frequency and duration of their use (Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, & Smith, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1996) as well as analyzed the complexity of those events (Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, & Smith, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Purcell-Gates (1996) addresses an unanswered question that is of value for educators working to close the achievement gap: “A question critical to educators is the relationship between [written] knowledge constructed at home before the onset of formal, school-based literacy instruction and the knowledge constructed in school through participation in literacy instruction” (p. 409).

Funds of Knowledge & Ways of Taking

In Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez’s work on funds of knowledge they highlighted the “prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually” (1992, p. 134). Funds of knowledge are defined as “the bodies of knowledge of strategic importance to households” (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 314). The perception perpetuated by my district’s request for action plans is that many of our economically disadvantaged students are truly arriving at the doorstep of our school in need of immediate intervention. Therein lies a problem. What are our expectations? Who determines which skills are necessary? Are the pedagogical practices of the school the best way for
students with perceived deficits to acquire basic skills? Neff (Moll et al., 1992) spoke of these assumptions in regards to a child she was observing:

It is so important to learn how culture is expressed in students’ lives, how students live their worlds. We can’t make assumptions about these things. Only a part of that child is present in the classroom. We had little idea of what Carlos’s life was really like outside of the classroom, and what he knew about the world. (p. 137)

As previously stated, for many students the culture of the school differs dramatically from the cultural realities of the home or the community (Heath, 1982; Ogbu, 1982; K. Au, 1998). Heath (1982) explored the cultural “ways of taking” from three separate communities in the Carolinas. Heath “reminds us that the culture children learn as they grow up is, in fact, ‘ways of taking’ meaning from the environment around them” (1982, p. 49). Heath’s work focused on literate “ways of taking” from storybooks and book-related activities that children acquire before entering school. Through her exploration of the three communities (one white middle-class, one white working-class, and one black working-class), Heath found that the literate culture of the middle-class families was congruent with the literate culture of the school and, therefore, the children from these families more readily adapted to the literacy expectations of the school. She referred to this as the mainstream culture. The working class, or non-mainstream, communities consisted of literate families, but their “ways of taking” from storybooks and book-related activities differed from those of the mainstream communities. Children from the non-mainstream communities did not perform as well as their mainstream counterparts in school-based literacy instruction.
Thus, the structured environment of the school can constrain children and their teachers by failing to capitalize on students’ talents, resources, and skills (see Moll & Diaz, 1987): “The typical teacher-student relationship seems ‘thin’ and ‘single-stranded,’ as the teacher ‘knows’ the students only from their performance within rather limited classroom contexts” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). In many of my professional conversations with the parents and guardians of students, the life of the school is quite different from their own life at home. Admittedly, I know little of my students’ lives outside school and understand even less. As an observer, I can see many students struggle from day to day with traditional school tasks. At other times, I can see untapped skills utilized in open-ended, flexible tasks.

The largely untapped skills children bring from home, or funds of knowledge, are what research suggests educators incorporate into their daily practices and routines (Moll & Diaz, 1987; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). The strategic and cultural resources of the home are often ignored in the school. Students spend hours in a classroom that can be worlds apart from the “social worlds and resources of the community” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). The knowledge necessary to “succeed” in many classrooms across the country is contextual—merely within the context of the school and not within the context of the child’s social world. By incorporating our struggling or economically disadvantaged students’ funds of knowledge into the learning environment, Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg argue that teachers can “approximate the total reality of the population” (1992, p. 330).
Connecting the Theoretical Framing to My Position

As previously mentioned, I typically have academic expectations for my students entering Kindergarten that are not always met. As a teacher, I am an expert in academic content and standards, curriculum, and pedagogy. I know what is expected of students and how to help them achieve those expectations. My natural instinct as a teacher is to rush to judgment concerning why certain students’ academic abilities fall so far below my expectations. Within the classroom context, I make assumptions that may or may not be true and offer little to no help to the students.

Within the theoretical, methodological, and praxis-oriented framing of this research project, I had to do more than adjust my expectations. I had to disregard them. As an ethnographer in an unfamiliar environment—the home of one of my students—my objective became less about observing what I know and finding perceived deficits and more about learning more about how the families of children within my classroom functioned within the confines of the broad category of literacy. Judgments could not be made by the teacher in me. Instead, listening and understanding had to become the objectives that guided the researcher in me. As a teacher-researcher, I had to use my knowledge of how literacy is achieved by a young child and observe the family to learn their means of utilizing literacy in both traditional and non-traditional ways.

To use an emerging trend in research referenced as humanizing, I had to constantly remain “mindful of how critically important it is to respect the humanity of the people who invite us into their worlds and help us answer questions about educational, social, and cultural justice” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xv). I had to approach the time in my
student’s home as an outsider not seeking to teach, but to respect his and his family’s pre-estab-
lished culture; to allow my time spent in their home to demonstrate my desire to understand
and to care about them as individual beings and a family unit. As a teacher-researcher, it also
becomes imperative that this trend carries over into the classroom, and that my students know I respect and care about them as individuals beyond the confines of school.
Chapter 2: Methods & Results

Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

In order to apply our students’ funds of knowledge in classroom contexts, teachers and researchers (or teachers as researchers) should spend time in the homes and communities of their students. The purpose of these visits must be ethnographic in nature, as teachers should seek to learn that which they did not already know about their students’ lives. Teachers should not view these visits as home visits with the objective of delivering a report card or confirming any preconceived notions. In fact, preconceived notions should be left at the front door. Instead, these visits require the teacher to step into a different, more symmetrical role with students and their families: teacher as researcher and learner. Amanti reflects on how her research visits into her students’ homes were different: “I had to observe, ask questions, take notes, and establish rapport” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 135).

Indeed, to qualitatively understand and learn from the homes of students, teachers as researchers could benefit from relying on participant observations, open-ended interviewing strategies, and case studies. One must know and must listen before one can fully understand. Through greater teacher understanding of students and their homes, the hope is that students’ funds of knowledge can be utilized within the context of classrooms in ways that foster positive instructional change and increased levels of student engagement and achievement.

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Moll and his co-authors’ (1992) research involved “teachers as co-researchers using qualitative methods to study household knowledge, and drawing upon this knowledge to develop a participatory pedagogy” (p. 139) to utilize funds of knowledge within their own classrooms in order to increase student engagement and achievement. Their research highlights the importance of “participatory pedagogy” guiding classroom teaching and engagements with students inside and outside schools. I believe a participatory form of pedagogy helps to frame teaching and research concerning funds of knowledge as highly contextual. Undoubtedly, every community is distinct in its own ways—from the geographical structure and demographic make-up of communities, to the beliefs and linguistic, cultural, and social practices that are or are not shared. Additionally, each family has formed and transmitted their personal funds of knowledge with one another, which is important to highlight because funds of knowledge provide teachers opportunities to listen with and learn about students in their classrooms. Teachers can determine how to incorporate particular funds of knowledge (such as students’ various interests) in their classrooms in order to enhance individual students’ academic learning. I believe that all teachers can benefit from examining their students’ funds of knowledge alongside being reflexive ethnographers of their own pedagogical practices. As a teacher-researcher, my aim is to qualitatively learn more about my students and the funds of knowledge they possess in order to strengthen my pedagogical approach, bridge the divides between students’ home and school literacies, and to encourage academic achievement in the classroom, regardless of subgroups, perceived disadvantages, or presumed deficits.
For the purpose of this case study, my student participant was a 7-year old Caucasian student in my 2010-2011 first grade class in a rural school district in central Ohio. In order to address the deficit perception left by the *No Child Left Behind* subgroup *economically disadvantaged*, this student qualified for free- or reduced-lunch. He was also a high functioning autistic student who struggled socially, but did relatively well academically. When working within traditional literacy instruction, I found that he was very difficult to engage. If the material was of little interest to him, he checked out mentally and had to constantly be redirected to the task at hand. Ultimately, I hoped to craft a learning environment brought from his home, especially in regards to literacy.

Ideally, I had hoped to visit the homes of three families in order to collect data from a variety of sources, including across settings from different participants. While the involvement of three families would not have made my research generalizable, the variety inherent in multiple sites would have given me a broader base from which to draw conclusions. I began by contacting the families – all Caucasian – whose students received free- or reduced- lunch from the school district. Most families seemed wary of allowing their child’s teacher into their homes, which I would consider a limitation of this study. Two families did seem interested and allowed me to come into their home to outline what I hoped to accomplish in my time there. From those meetings, only one family ultimately felt comfortable inviting me into their home. I had already established an exceptional working relationship with this family and their willingness to be involved did not surprise me.

The home in which I observed my student belonged to his grandmother and step-
grandfather, who was never observed during any of the interactions. It was located in a rural area of our school district. There were few neighboring homes with children of a similar age with my student so his interactions with peers outside of his grandmother’s home were limited. Upon entering the home, my student would drop off his backpack in the front living area and move into the kitchen where numerous observations were made. The kitchen had a dining room table which served as an area for structured literacy tasks. A hallway led off the kitchen which contained a staircase to the basement where a majority of the remaining literacy tasks were observed.

An important and instrumental piece of this study was participant observation. In my role as a classroom teacher, I always question what I hear (or do not hear) about students and their academic levels of achievement or underachievement from other people: Are others simply telling me what they think I want to hear about students? As a teacher, the actions I see from other adults—including teachers and teacher educators—often speak louder than words. Thus, I recognize that my role as a researcher obviously requires me to see through a different lens. The research lens that I use needs to be critical, but it also needs to adapt to the different cultures of students’ homes and communities that teachers are bound to encounter. Observation of student interactions inside their homes is critical because it can provide rich understandings and perspectives that may not be directly gained through interviewing alone (Maxwell, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, my observations were centered on knowledge and skills related to literacy in the student’s household and/or community. My personal definition of literacy contains the broad, everyday communicative experiences of an
individual—from greetings to letters, to a written, read, or oral story, to written, read, or oral directions—termed as *literacy events* by Heath (1982), Purcell-Gates (1996), and Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, and Smith (1995). All of my observations involved being conscious of the literacy experiences, their purposes, and their usage each and every participant, especially the student, engaged in within their given space. The following questions served as my guide:

1. What does literacy entail in the homes and communities of *economically disadvantaged* students? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Who are the participants? How often do the participants engage in literacy-based activities?

2. What does literacy in the home share in common with literacy in the school? How do they differ?

3. What can educators learn from the home literacies of economically disadvantaged students to help close the achievement gap in literacy-based content areas?

Borrowing from the methods of Purcell-Gates (1996), I observed this family within the context of their average week, on different days of the week as well as different times of the day in order to more accurately approximate what their average week would be like. Each observation occurred at the home of my student’s grandmother. Due to his mother’s work schedule, his grandmother was his primary caretaker on the weekdays. Six, one hour-long observations each were conducted over the span of three months. Each observation occurred during the afternoon or early evening following a school day. Following the observations, an interview was conducted with the student’s
primary caretaker (his grandmother).

**Data sources, evidence, objects or materials**

During my observations I kept extensive field notes on what I saw and/or heard in regard to literacy events as well as a preliminary interpretation of the events. While the work of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) reveals literacy events taking place within the homes of economically disadvantaged children, Purcell-Gates (1996) stresses the importance of coding these events in terms of participant structure and complexity. As literacy events are observed, revealing the participant structure provides further valuable description. Who are the participants in the literacy event? Who initiated the event or was it initiated independently of other participants? What was the duration of the event and with what frequency were the events engaged in?

The complexity of literacy events can vary from event to event. Rather than immersing myself in the homes and communities of my participants with preconceived ideas of what literacy looked or sounded like, I took an approach fixed in grounded theory. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002):

Two features of grounded theory are important: (1) Theory is grounded in the relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded; and (2) Codes and categories are mutable until late in the project, because the researcher is still in the field and data from new experiences continue to alter the scope and terms of his or her analytic framework. (p. 218)

My intention was to find literacy events taking place within the daily context of my participants’ lives and record them. Categories formed as I analyzed my own “lived
experiences” in the field. As a researcher, I “compare[d] each incident to other incidents in order to decide in which categories they belong” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). My research grew in shape as I spent more time in the field and experienced firsthand the literate culture of the participants.

While observations provide the action that a researcher may be looking for, they cannot be utilized alone. Interviewing can complement knowledge obtained through observations, and interviews can check for accuracy in observations, clarify something seen or heard, and provide access to things not available through observation (Maxwell, 2005). In order to utilize a planned interview, I used an audio-recording device to capture the conversation. Afterwards, I transcribed the interview to provide myself with a visual of the conversation for purposes of data analysis.

I envisioned these interviews as open-ended conversations. My goal was for the participants to feel comfortable and at ease. I hoped to establish the participant(s) and myself as equals by engaging in conversation as opposed to question-and-answer sessions. Many of the topics discussed evolved from observations I had made, with literacy as the subtext of the conversation. In the spirit of collaboration, I hoped the participant(s) and I collaboratively created meaning and understanding from these conversations. Ultimately, the goal of this study was for the teacher, students, and families to “learn” one another.

In addition, field notes were taken during the interviews. Both sets of field notes were reviewed and, following Lindlof and Taylor’s (2002) guidelines for a grounded theory approach, codes were developed through careful examination of the data and
discussions with a second coder. Initially, my instincts as an educator led me to code every literacy event independently of the others. This created a list of codes that was too vast to effectively analyze and find trends. Through discussion with a second coder, we resolved to develop four categorical codes and then determine how each event fit into the appropriate category while remaining open to adding additional categories if necessary. This kept the number of categories necessary to code at a manageable number.

As the study unfolded, I found that the methodology I chose to incorporate worked relatively well. As a teacher in the role of learner I held no preconceived notions as to what I would observe within this home. Through participant observation and open-ended interviews, I could simply observe and allow the applicable data to reveal itself naturally. Nothing was forced or preconceived. From my observations, I was then capable of developing open-ended topics to discuss with my student’s grandmother rather than using a predetermined set of interview questions. By letting my student’s natural environment speak for itself, the data I collected was more authentic.

Results and/or substantiated conclusions/warrants for arguments/point of view

Based on the codes developed, four main themes emerged: 1) collaborative, traditional literacy events; 2) collaborative, non-traditional literacy events; 3) independent, traditional literacy events; and 4) independent, non-traditional literacy events.

Collaborative, traditional literacy events consisted of any literate activity routinely utilized in traditional school-based literacy instruction (e.g. shared reading, comprehension) in which the student participated with other family members. Although
the student was observed at home, he often engaged in school-like activities with his grandmother. For example, the shared reading of a book brought home from school was an interactive experience. The student’s grandmother would consistently draw attention to the pictures in order to preview the events on a page and also monitor comprehension periodically. While reading *The Cat in the Hat* with the student, the grandmother brought attention to the type and purpose of the punctuation marks early in the story. She would then praise the student when his inflection matched that of the punctuation mark. When asked why she engaged in this type of collaboration, the grandmother replied that she wanted to model at home what was taught at school. She felt this type of collaboration improved his listening skills as well as his understanding and comprehension of the story.

During a shared reading of *The Berenstein Bears Forget Their Manners*, the student’s grandmother encouraged him to make connections between the events taking place in the story and events that may (or may not) have occurred in his life. In fact, as I observed an event unfold that I initially thought was simply humorous, a connection was made between the conversation and the topic of the story.

Student: Is it hot in here or is it just me?

Grandmother: Would you like to take your sweater off? You can’t do that at school.

My student went on to reveal a bite mark he had on his chest that came from his sister. His grandmother went on to explain how the bite mark had gotten there via his sister and how he had subsequently hit her back. She quickly turned to him, with a knowing look, and said: “Was *that* good manners?” Later, as he was losing focus on the story, he asked his grandmother to let the cat inside the house, saying his grandfather
would never find out. His grandmother quickly pounced on the opening, asking if that would be good manners or bad. As he stalled, his grandmother confidently said, “I think you know.”

On another occasion, I observed my student practicing his weekly spelling words. His grandmother gave him a blank sheet of lined paper and had him number the paper appropriately. She said each word for him, allowing ample time for spelling before moving on to the next word. After he spelled the entire list of words, he and his grandmother went over the correct spelling of each word. During this particular observation, my student misspelled three words. They practiced these words again, with his grandmother providing extra opportunities to explore each word’s spelling and usage. First, the word was repeated several times for my student. Then, as he was spelling the word, his grandmother helped him segment the sounds into chunks, or syllables, to piece the word together. Finally, his grandmother would use the word within a sentence to give it context and meaning. This activity and each of its components are used often within schools to practice spelling words.

Collaborative, non-traditional literacy events consisted of any literate activity often ignored in school-based literacy instruction (e.g. television programming, video and computer gaming) in which the student participated with other family members. Although not structured literacy events, the student often engaged in literacy activities in non-traditional ways with his grandmother. While scrolling through the television programming guide, his grandmother would routinely use the terms “appropriate” or “inappropriate” to describe shows. On one occasion, the student chose an inappropriate
show based on his grandmother’s standards. For example, the student’s grandmother deemed a show such as *Spongebob Squarepants* as thematically inappropriate. She did not appreciate the humor or language used by the characters in the show and did not want her grandson exposed to it. The student used the scheduling guide to show his grandmother that an appropriate show came on that channel after two other shows. Although this skill would not necessarily be viewed as useful knowledge in the classroom, this example illustrates a fund of knowledge students may bring into the classroom. He demonstrated that he was fully capable of collecting information from a source. This could be utilized within the classroom for research purposes as he has exhibited that he knows how to seek for information.

Perhaps my student's familiarity with schedules led to his effective use of the programming guide. In order to keep my student on task, his grandmother had a magnetic calendar located within a central area of the home—in this case, the dining room. This was an area where snacks were consumed, homework was completed, stories were read, and happenings of the day were discussed. The magnetic calendar served almost as a checklist for my student. When an activity was completed, he could manipulate a magnetic circle and place it within its appropriate space on the calendar to mark its completion. In order to complete this activity, he had to be capable of identifying pictorial representations of activities on small, circular magnets. He also had to be capable of reading which portion of the calendar he had just completed in order to correctly place his magnetic circle. His grandmother helped keep him accountable for these tasks by reminding him to refer to his calendar. Much like the families in Taylor's (1983) work on
family literacy, my student's grandmother was utilizing an everyday task—a checklist—to keep her grandson on task and to allow him to complete his required duties.

During another observation, my student had just placed some spare change into a jar when he asked his grandmother if he could buy a new LEGO set. His grandmother took advantage of the question as an opportunity to think critically about a problem. First, my student had to sort and count how much change he had available to him. Then, she asked him how much a typical LEGO set cost in the store. With the knowledge of how much money he had available to him and how much a typical LEGO set cost, she restated the initial question to him: *Do you have enough money to buy a new LEGO set?* He quickly realized he did not have enough money for a new LEGO set, and turned to questioning his grandmother on how he might be able to get the available money sooner rather than later. While a majority of this impromptu lesson outwardly appeared to address math skills, most grade level language arts standards highlight the importance of critical questioning and thinking with regard to problem solving.

Independent, traditional literacy events consisted of any literate activity routinely utilized in school-based literacy instruction in which the student participated alone. Students in my classroom are encouraged to explore books independently. Books ranging from emergent readers that contain a predictable pattern (such as *I like _____.* ) to picture books that contain complex text that students may yet be unable to read are at the disposal of students on a daily basis. As emergent readers, this may include telling the story by examining the illustrations. This same skill was seen at home. For example, the student was searching in a coloring book for a page to color. He began talking to himself
as he was looking through the book, forming a story to match each page of the coloring book. He was only told to go color a picture, but the student turned the direction into a similar literacy event expected at school.

My student also enjoyed spending time on the computer. During each computer session, his grandmother had outlined which websites and games he was allowed to visit and play. A great majority of these websites and games were educational. Websites such as Starfall.com focused on literacy skills. Different sections of the website focused on different literacy skills such as the alphabetic principle, phonics, and word building. Students could learn more about each letter of the alphabet, including the sound(s) it made within words. Other sections had interactive stories, ranging from fiction to informational text. Also, these interactive stories could be read independently or students could click on any particular word and have it read to them. My student's grandmother had learned of this website from his Kindergarten teacher and continued utilizing it within the home to develop his literacy skills.

Last, independent, non-traditional literacy events consisted of any literate activity often ignored in school-based literacy instruction in which the student participated alone. Many times my student engaged in non-traditional literacy activities that he does not have the opportunity to engage in at school. LEGO blocks are popular amongst my students and are traditionally viewed as a toy, not a potential literacy source. I observed my student attempting to construct a rescue boat made of LEGOss. From the start, the student used the instruction manual to help him successfully complete the twelve steps necessary to finish the boat. As he neared completion of the rescue boat, he realized a
piece was missing. He was able to refer to the instruction manual to identify the missing piece, much like the families who engaged with instructions referenced in the work of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines on family literacy (1988).

He also illustrated knowledge of story sequence during a video game. The content of the video game involved superheroes, a popular subject among many school-aged children. As he was playing a video game that he was very familiar with, he got my attention at a particular moment in the game’s narrative. As a popular villain appeared on-screen, my student said, “Watch what happens next.” While superheroes are not prevalent in traditional literacy instruction within school buildings, this student illustrated an understanding of a storytelling standard all children are taught. Like the collaborative, non-traditional examples, these types of knowledge are not often valued in the traditional school setting as they are focused on characters that many educators deem inappropriate—for a number of factors such as violence, language, and age appropriateness—for their students. These types of literacy events were also classified as “low-literacy” in the work of Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, and Smith (1995).

Each afternoon, my student was also allotted a particular time in which he could watch some of his favorite television programming. He spent one afternoon watching a program televised on the Public Broadcasting System called Fetch! with Ruff Ruffman. The premise of the show centered on the presentation of a problem and the subsequent discovery of clues used to solve the problem. My student spent every moment of the show highly engaged. As new clues were presented, I could hear him talking to himself, processing the new information with what he already knew. Later, his grandmother
would tell me that he enjoyed this problem-solving show so much that his birthday party had been centered on the same premise. A birthday mystery was presented to the guests and they had to find clues in order to solve said mystery, which would have served as an additional example of a collaborative, non-traditional literacy event.

During interviews, his grandmother spoke of the literacy opportunities he engaged in on a consistent basis while he was with her. She had developed a structured schedule for him that began once he arrived home from school and continued until his mother picked him up later in the evening. Many of the traditional activities that he engaged in at home were through direct planning on the part of the grandmother. She spoke of the importance of developing listening and comprehension skills through the use of shared reading. She also mentioned her utilization of workbooks to help him with skills needed for success in literacy instruction in school, very similar to the decontextualized skills taught in school-based reading programs.

When we shifted our conversation to literacy activities that my student actively engaged in on his own, many non-traditional forms of literacy were mentioned. She mentioned his love for playing games on his Nintendo DS and the computer, referenced earlier with my observation findings. She also spoke of television programming that he enjoyed watching whenever his schedule allowed for free choices. Block building was also mentioned as an opportunity for both building creatively and following directions to create a predetermined outcome.

Throughout my observations, two literacy-related facts were made abundantly clear:
1. Far more non-traditional literacy events were observed than traditional literacy events.

2. My student's level of motivation and engagement was higher when choice was involved.

For the most part, the traditional literacy events observed were directly related in some way to school work. The books that were read aloud (The Cat in the Hat and The Berenstein Bears Forget Their Manners) were books sent home for students to read for homework. Spelling practice was done in preparation for that week's spelling test at school. On the contrary, a greater portion of time spent observing my student in his after-school environment centered on more non-traditional literacy events. From video games and television shows with a story at their core to instruction manuals and on-screen television guides used to complete or schedule a task, my student spent a majority of his time immersed in these non-traditional activities.
Chapter 3: Conclusions, Limitations, & Significance

Conclusions

Despite the obvious literacy gap among students that results from highly biased and traditional standardized testing (W. Au, 2009), literacy is present within the homes of economically disadvantaged students. My first research question asked the following:

*What does literacy entail in the homes and communities of economically disadvantaged students? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Who are the participants?*

How often do the participants engage in literacy-based activities? Occasionally, literacy within such homes looks and sounds much like those literacy practices and activities traditionally utilized within public schools. Within students’ homes, literacy can be represented by the ways a family member shares a storybook with a child or by how a child engages with a storybook independently. It may look and sound much like a teacher-directed language arts lesson, with students practicing spelling words, drawing, or engaging in other literacy activities. Additionally, it may materialize in how a family member assists a child with teacher-assigned homework.

My second research question sought to compare and contrast: *What does literacy in the home share in common with literacy in the school? How do they differ?* While the examples listed above address the similarities between home- and school-based literacy events in my second research question, what I found more often than not were differences between the two. Based on my research observations literacy activities often are not like
those traditionally found in school-based literacy instruction. Students engage in stories through television programming. They play out storybook realities through videogames. They generate their own fantastical stories through pretend play with their own toys. Basal reading series and other programs meant to teach students reading, writing, and language skills often disregard these students’ interests and realities. This isn’t to say that students from non-economically disadvantaged homes fail to share the same interests, given that the members of such homes also often operate under the same value system as a variety of middle class institutions. However, this is to say that the literacy practices, activities, and interactions in such homes—however different from those literacies within school contexts—are equally rich and significant, and should be valued as important aspects of students’ learning.

My final research question is loaded with implications for educators with regard to utilizing students’ home literacies within literacy instruction at school: What can educators learn from the home literacies of economically disadvantaged students to help close the achievement gap in literacy-based content areas? Educators can learn much from the findings presented in this study in relation to future literacy instruction. Quite often, schools rely on scripted materials to teach the skills students need in order to master literacy concepts. While scripted materials such as Reading Street and New Phonics claim to be research-based, they often do not often take into account students’ interests and strengths. Many positives can be taken from utilizing scripted materials to master skills such as the alphabetic principle, phonics, and phonemic awareness. These skills serve as a foundation for future literacy learning and serve as building blocks that
can be presented effectively in a decontextualized manner.

However, perhaps it is time to take an interest in our students as individual beings who respond to our teaching more effectively when we target their interests. While scripted materials excel at presenting decontextualized skills, they often fail to engage each and every student with the literature provided and the prompts used for writing instruction. For example, the Kindergarten program for *Reading Street* targets literature instruction around a single story of the week. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday the same story is read, reread, and reread again. Even if the story is engaging upon the first reading, students often tire of it shortly thereafter. If the story fails to engage the students upon the first reading, the second and third readings are a chore. Within the *Reading Street* program, writing prompts almost always revolve around the theme of the story of the week. There is little time spent allowing students to engage in writing activities that target their interests.

By targeting students’ interests and skills within literacy instruction, I have found that teachers can increase levels of engagement and motivation. Scripted materials limit a student’s exposure to literature, but giving students a choice in the type of literature that is read in the classroom 1) increases their exposure to a variety of texts, 2) increases their engagement in the literature being read, and 3) gives students a sense of empowerment in the decision-making process within the classroom. The same can be stated with regard to writing instruction. When students are given the opportunity to write about topics of interest, I have found students’ motivation and engagement with the writing process also increases. By engaging students in topics that are of interest to them, teachers can hone in
on the skills necessary to develop skilled readers and writers.

**Limitations**

Despite my conclusions regarding the presence of valuable, non-traditional literacy events within the home of my economically disadvantaged student and the benefit of utilizing such events within the daily curriculum of my classroom, my study was limited in a number of ways. My methods are based on assumptions that I have made as a researcher. A potential limitation surrounding this project involved concerns about participation. It was unknown whether families would be willing to allow a researcher access to their world to observe and ask questions. After attempting to recruit the families from my 2010-2011 classroom who qualified for free- or reduced-lunch for participation, only one family agreed to allow me into their home as an observer. Ideally, this project would have involved multiple families across multiple sites.

As a teacher, it is clear that no two students are the same. As a researcher, I believe it would have been more insightful to observe the literate environment established within multiple homes to help further establish this point. Many households within the same community are capable of operating in different ways. For example, would I have observed the same structured schedule employed by my student’s grandmother in another home? While traditional literacy activities were not as abundant in my student’s home environment, they were still present. Would a similar trend have appeared in another household or would the split between traditional and non-traditional literacy events have been different? Would I find that my other students have the same opportunities to engage cooperatively in literacy events with their caretakers or would the observed
literacy events have been more independent in nature? These are all questions that could have been addressed with more participant families.

In addition to the limitation of participation is the concern over what a researcher is able to observe. When a researcher is granted access to the worlds of his/her participants, how accurate is the world, the routines, and the conversations he/she observes? Are participants engaging in normal, day-to-day activities or are they performing for the researcher (or, in my own case, the teacher-researcher/teacher-as-researcher)? Important to highlight is that each of my observations occurred in the afternoon following a school day and across various days of the week. My participant’s after-school destination was always his grandmother’s home. While his grandmother seemed to have an established routine that was not embellished for me—the researcher—I did miss out on many important opportunities to view the literate culture within the participant’s home across different times of the week.

Also, my ability to observe and collect accurate and reliable data hinged on my ability to establish a comfort level within the home and community I was observing. As an experienced teacher, I feel comfortable around the family members of my students when the arena for interaction resides within school walls. As a novice researcher, I regularly wondered: How did I react to interacting within a different context? What was my stance toward what I observed, and what was my disposition within the home environment of one of my students? I believe that my role as teacher was of great benefit when entering into the homes and communities of my students. It was a role that allowed me to build upon an established relationship of trust that was previously developed within
the context of a school-based parent-teacher relationship.

One final limitation addresses the broader topic of my research. While reviewing the literature in preparation for this study, I struggled to find an abundance of applicable work. There were exemplars available, such as Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines’s (1988) work on family literacy, Heath’s (1982) work on ways of taking, and Moll et al’s (1992) work on funds of knowledge. Beyond those exemplars, I ran into trouble finding other applicable work. While the previously referenced work provided enough background to serve as a guide for my study, it would have been helpful to find research that addressed the population with whom I currently work. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) addressed literacy in the homes of low-SES black families. Moll et al. (1992) addressed similar conditions in Mexican-American households. Heath’s (1982) study was the only piece I could find that involved working class white families. In addition, each study was dated by as many as ten years. Within the subsequent timeframe, literate technology has advanced significantly and consumes the daily lives of many of our current students.

These are some of the limitations that a researcher should consider before conducting a study that has the potential to yield substantial results, especially related to teaching and learning. The stated limitations, among others, are worth confronting if the researcher truly cares about the research and the participants. While my case study was based on observations within one home concerning one student, I truly believe that the information I gained from observing the non-traditional at-home literacy skills is invaluable information for my future classroom-based literacy instruction. For instance, I have begun to rethink the use and implied meanings of phrases such as “economically
disadvantaged” and “traditional and non-traditional” in both my professional and personal commitments to all students. The language that is used to describe students, their families, their communities, and their literacy practices must be humanizing and not based on deficit constructions and orientations of people. Finally, I believe my findings and conclusions—while not generalizable—are certainly applicable to creating a more inclusive, interests-based literacy curriculum that accounts for the diverse literacy practices of students.

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

As a teacher, I believe that I assume too much about my students. The deficit perception comes from a variety of sources (such as an educator’s professional experiences, persistent requests for paperwork documenting assessment data collected from students identified as economically disadvantaged, or the constant requests to close an achievement gap) and as long as it continues to be perpetuated by teachers, administrators, students, parents, and the local and federal governments, then it will never go away. As a teacher, I am ready for a different view. Teachers are trained to help students learn and achieve. Exactly what (or how) are they achieving? By what standards are we measuring them? When we exhaust any and all of the pedagogical practices that undergraduate and/or graduate coursework, professional development, and/or professional collaboration prepared us for, then what is left?

Since the home culture of many students differs dramatically from the school culture (Heath, 1982; Ogbu, 1982; K. Au, 1998), it is important that teachers develop a means to connect the two cultures. As a teacher, this case study provides me with new
ways of incorporating non-school sanctioned, instead of non-traditional, literacy events into the daily curriculum. Observations revealed to me that activities such as watching television or playing video games can provide opportunities to practice literacy skills at home and to make culturally relevant connections at school. This observation is important because it supports my belief that all students should be provided opportunities to utilize their funds of knowledge inside classroom settings. At the same time, students who are considered—however unfairly—economically disadvantaged and are identified as needing intervention do engage in a variety of literacy practices, activities, and events at home that should be valued at school.

Since conducting this case study, I have been able to adapt and put into practice many of the findings of this research within my classroom—from supporting students to rely on literacy practices and skills that they utilize within their homes, to encouraging them to read aloud, independently, and with a peer. Despite my inability to spend time with my students in their homes and communities, I have altered my perception of what constitutes a literacy event based upon my observations. Rather than follow strict, structured scripts from teaching manuals that often align to the middle class cultural values of public schools, my literacy instruction is more focused on the cultural realities, cultural capital, and funds of knowledge of my students, creating a classroom environment where “authentic literacy” is valued (Early & Gunderson, 1993; K. Au, 1998).

Specifically, students inside my classes are always welcome to bring in books from home that are then utilized during shared reading time to teach reading standards.
These books, often starring characters aligned with popular television shows, movies, and toys and easily found in the book section of your local Target or Walmart, almost always align with the interests of my students and keep them actively engaged with the material. Text genre and complexity also vary within the selections. Students bring in non-fiction texts that cover topics in which they are interested (such as sharks, outer space, and my personal favorite, penguins), also opening up cross-curricular discussions involving science and/or social studies standards. I have also read more comic books to my students within the past four years than I ever did during my first seven years of teaching. The male students in my classroom respond well to these selections as the characters featured within often correlate with their interests. I have also found the illustrative style of comics to be more helpful in teaching reading skills such as plot. Within a traditional picture book, many words can be read on a page with only one picture to illustrate a fraction of the action that took place. In comic books, the action is broken down piece by piece, frame by frame, giving my students a clearer picture of what is transpiring in front of them.

Students are also encouraged to utilize their interests within writing instruction in my classroom. A variety of writing paper (examples: blank, lined, line-dot-line, comic boxes) is consistently available for students to visually express their interests through story. Stickers of popular fictional characters (examples: superheroes, princesses) and stamps are used to jump-start a student’s story, allowing them to focus on aspects of character, setting, and plot. Comic boxes are provided to encourage students to tell stories that follow a natural plot progression. Students are also encouraged to utilize their
creative imaginations to tell stories through writing.

Also encouraged, although not as often, are dramatic tellings (or retellings) of stories. Students are given scrap paper, writing utensils, scissors, and glue and encouraged to simply create. Their creations include attire worn by characters from their favorite stories and props utilized by those characters. Students with similar interests are encouraged to work together to lay out appropriate characters, setting, and plot for their stories. With practice, they then perform a play for their classmates. Sometimes the plays follow similar storylines from familiar stories. Other times, students combine elements from their favorite stories to create a hybrid story of their own.

As a parent, I have previously been judgmental of what popular cultural elements my students have been exposed to within their homes and communities. As five-year-olds, the parent in me is disappointed at times that they have been exposed to images and sounds that I would deem inappropriate for their age. As a teacher, I have learned, first, that I have no control over their exposure to these things. Second, I have learned that, given slightly more lenient parameters, allowing students to bring these stories into our classroom provides more engagement and stimulates important literacy-based conversations.

For example, two years ago I had a student who was difficult to engage in many tasks. During shared reading, his attention was often elsewhere, unless he had chosen the story he would read. During independent learning centers, he struggled to stay on task and often completed half (or less than half) of what his classmates completed. Once I gave him a piece of writing paper or even comic boxes without a prompt, then his
imagination came to life and his engagement skyrocketed. One of his favorite topics was zombies. Years ago, I would have refused to include in my instruction and in my students’ assignments stories containing the living dead. However, when I saw how engaged he was with his storytelling—how detailed his illustrations had become (non-graphic), how well he had developed plot progression, how much he enjoyed what he was doing—I could not help but to encourage him and support his interests. For him, zombie stories were a reality, whether I liked it or not. By welcoming his desire to bring this knowledge and interest into our classroom and utilize it within literacy instruction, he became an excellent storyteller.

Even more recently, I have developed a character unit that coincides with Halloween. With raised standards and abundant concern about test scores, some would say fun has left our school buildings. However, during the week leading up to Halloween, I incorporate each child’s favorite characters into my literacy instruction. We read stories that they have brought from home and compare and contrast the main characters, often superheroes and princesses. I print out clip-art from the Internet of their favorite characters and they create drawings that depict real or imagined scenes from those characters’ worlds, highlighting additional characters, setting, and plot. In fact, last year my administrator evaluated my teaching based on one of these writing lessons. She commented that she had never seen an entire class so engaged with their work, especially writing. I replied that I thought it was because we—the teachers—were putting children in the position of expert to complete a traditional literacy task. They knew these characters’ worlds inside and out, and it was evident in their engagement and their final
work. I have since attempted to share these revelations with my colleagues in the hope that they will allow their students to engage in these types of literacy tasks from a position of knowledge.

Still, I believe I face an uphill battle. Without my experiences, many teachers stick to the script because—for them—it has worked well enough. It is structured and familiar, while my classroom methodology changes from year to year as my students’ interests and skills change. It does not require one to stray too much from that which he/she already knows, while engaging students’ interests requires additional time to learn. Unfortunately, some of their students continue to fail at important school-sanctioned literacy tasks. We look down upon many of our students, much like I used to, and we question what valuable educational experiences they have had before reaching our classrooms. We scoff at their screen time—time spent watching television shows or movies, or playing with videogames or toys—and we make judgments without getting to know them and about their funds of knowledge. Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, and Smith (1988) even term these types of activities as “low-literacy.”

But what is a television show or a movie before it is broadcast to the masses? It is a script, written out from someone’s imagination. What is a videogame before it is placed upon shelves for public consumption? It, too, is a scripted story created by someone. If, as educators, we would take more time to sit down with our children and embrace each and every detailed interest they shared with us, perhaps we would learn just how much literate knowledge they truly possess. No, their interests are not often addressed by a standardized examination that will one day judge whether or not the literacy gap has been
closed. Often, the assessment instruments used to measure student success are very similar to the scripted programs that fail to target student interests. However, through early engagement with school-based literacy activities that focus on student interests, perhaps they can acquire the tested skills through more culturally responsive approaches.

This case study has prepared me for a new role: teacher as researcher. Ethnography allowed me to see aspects of the world of one of my students through an unknowing set of eyes. Admittedly, I do not know enough about my students, their families, and their communities outside the four walls of my classroom. At times, my teaching and student learning suffer from this lack of knowledge. I believe this research was valuable for those directly involved (my student, his family, and me) and it has the potential to be valuable for colleagues and families in the community by providing them with new ways of utilizing their own and their students’ funds of knowledge in literacy instruction.
References


