Family Literacy or Community Learning? Some Critical Questions on Perspective

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For more than 30 years, I have followed the 300 families of Roadville, a working-class white community, and Trackton, a working-class black community, both in the southeastern United States. As a linguistic anthropologist, I began studying these families in 1969. I reported in *Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* and subsequent follow-up publications (Heath, 1983, 1990) the changing nature of language socialization in the lives of the original families I studied and their children and grandchildren. Through their economic setbacks and breaks of good luck, geographic relocations across the country, and numerous crises of health and natural disasters, I have followed these families and their descendants in the course of their changing patterns of socializing the young through and into oral and written language uses.

What follows in this chapter is a brief general overview of what I learned about the realities of changing family life across more than three decades. Some families have lived just on the cusp of disaster and economic wipe-out, while others have flourished. Others have little left in their lives that might be called "family." The patterns of oral and written language uses that emerge from their lives tell us much about changes in the values surrounding family literacy— reading and writing carried out jointly between adults and children in the home (Heath, in press).

Family Literacy—A Look Back

In the late 1970s, historian Christopher Lasch (1977) opened his controversial volume on "the family besieged" by stating an idea with which few public figures then or now would disagree:

> As the chief agency of socialization, the family reproduces cultural patterns in the individual. It not only imparts ethical norms, providing the child with his [*sic*] first instruction in the prevailing social rules, it profoundly shapes his character, in ways of which he is not even aware. The family instills modes of thought and action that become habitual. (p. 3)

Lasch (1977) goes on to say, "Because of its enormous emotional influence, it [the family] colors all of a child's subsequent experience" (p. 3). His volume traces the "invasion" of the family by social, medical, and educational services. His book is an extended warning of the consequences that will follow as families lose their traditional forms and purposes. He believes modern families have little resistance and, moreover, few resources with which to sustain the home as the haven it needs to be for children growing up in an increasingly cruel outside world.

Just about the time Lasch's (1977) widely publicized volume appeared, the concept and practice of "family literacy" came into the public realm of American education. Governmental and educational institutions wanted to turn around the negative effects they feared poverty and cultural "deprivation" brought to the academic success of America's children. During the 1970s, the United Nations renewed efforts worldwide to educate mothers, in the belief that they in turn could bring literacy goals and skills to their own children. In the United States, individuals still fired with the drive for civil rights and greater equity pushed for early childhood programs, some starting at birth. These programs were to supplement whatever parents living in poverty could provide and also to engage parents as partners to promote home reading, language development, and awareness of numeracy. Implicit in promotions of literacy in the home was the idea that reading together should be a core family activity, because books instilled values. Books and reading brought the literate ways of thinking that were highly prized in school into habitual practice and gave family members common ground for talking, joking, and cross-referencing observations of everyday life.

Following the Civil Rights era, policymakers in the United States promoted the power of equal educational opportunities to elevate rates of secondary-school graduation and college entry. Gradually, education, publicly defined as

legitimization by the formal institution of schooling, became primary to goals and dreams parents held for their children as a preface to college entry and "success" in a future career. Many parents in the 1970s saw their own education as deficient and believed strongly that success in school could open opportunities to their children they themselves had been denied.

However, belief and action often do not match.

In the 1970s, anthropologists and linguists began to study families in the United States as closely as they had, in prior decades, examined households in regions scattered around the world. In communities within the United States, social scientists spent extended periods of time living closely with families of different social classes and cultural memberships. They documented paths of immigration for settlers in different regions of the country. They examined economic opportunities, patterns of religious beliefs, work in factories, and self-started small businesses. Their longitudinal studies of schools described ways that family norms of immigrants from all parts of the world both differed from and coordinated with the norms of formal schooling in the United States.

In some of their studies, these social scientists also detailed vast differences in language socialization contexts shaped not only by ideologies of family, home, religion, and respect, but also by the limited financial, time, and material resources that families had for matching school norms (Young, 1970). Social scientists, particularly anthropologists such as George and Louise Spindler and their many graduate students, documented home and school contexts of learning for multiple communities—Native American, African American, immigrant, and regional—in the extensive publications of the series Anthropology and Education. The Spindlers also collected several volumes of reports of studies that were later published as books (e.g., Spindler 1982). This work strongly influenced the studies of many students of education in graduate schools across the United States into the early 1990s. These social scientists did not find the "invasion" of social, medical, and educational services in impoverished and working-poor families that Lasch (1977) had foretold. Instead they found families struggling very much alone in communities—under-resourced and ill-prepared for the shifting demands of both school and work. Growing economic and educational aspirations of families were no match for the realities of their limited discretionary time and money. Families who previously lived by the rhythms of agricultural life, which offered some downtime and seasonal shifts, were now migrating steadily to manufacturing jobs that kept parents working day and night in unfamiliar rhythms that disrupted family life. Farming

families had been accustomed to working with their children in gardens, on hunting expeditions, and in projects of home repair and maintenance. Now as millworkers, they saw their hours spent in joint adult–child activities severely curtailed. Social scientists cautioned that less time for talk and joint planning, telling of stories, working, and playing together would have repercussions for the "paths to success" so many families now dared to dream of for their children (Harrington & Boardman, 1997).

During the 1980s, economic recession and an increase in migration to urban centers brought rapid changes to almost every detail of family life that had been valued and practiced as recently as the past two decades. Families no longer knew their neighbors. Extended families were broken up by public housing rules that restricted the number of family members living in apartments. Outdoor spaces for gardening, safe play, spontaneous ballgames, and family cookouts were fast-fading memories for many families. Leaving behind wage-based employment and familiar religious and small-town or rural neighborhood social networks, families who migrated to mid-size cities and urban areas entered low-salary jobs or set up small businesses. They struggled with previously unknown forces—inner-city crime, the vagaries and costs of public transport, crowded living conditions, the appeal of the crack-cocaine trade for the young, and the dangers to children of play in open spaces away from the direct surveillance of family members.

These same issues met families who entered the country through economic migration or refugee status following the Vietnam War and upheavals and loss of human rights in their home countries. These families had to struggle not only to survive financially but also to learn a new language and to understand American schooling. They had little time for understanding the necessity of adopting literacy habits and family interactional patterns essential to success in that schooling. In many cases, their countries and cultures told stories orally and did not rely on written literature dedicated to children. Their patterns of respect for the authority of elders often had little tolerance for talking with their children over books and allowing children conversational time in the presence of adults.

Teachers often interpreted silence from immigrant children as ignorance or resistance. Homework, especially assignments involving extended multimodal projects, embarrassed immigrant parents whose inability to help their children meant that they lost respect in their children's eyes. These parents saw their dreams for what American education could provide their children begin to slip

away as they stood by, watching helplessly as their children gravitated more and more to peer interactions away from home.

Believing in Equality

Numerous volumes in the 1970s and 1980s written by teachers who entered urban classrooms generally unprepared for immigrant children and children bused to new schools by desegregation rulings told stories of idealistic teachers and resistant students as well as stubborn teachers and creative young learners. Textbooks and teachers reflected little knowledge or understanding of the realities in the lives of students' families. White teachers, many of them male, often entered urban classrooms fresh from their participation in Civil Rights protests of the 1960s. Some of these teachers documented the painful and tedious lessons from their students who wanted to show their teachers that believing in equality did not make it so. Protests and legislation could not cure the social inequities that meant poor children in the United States lived in families whose time, space, aspirations, and inspirations could not move them toward equality.

Teachers who initially documented their learning experiences in urban classrooms moved beyond schools to look to social infrastructural supports for the academic success held out as the epitome of the American way. Herb Kohl and Jonathan Kozol led the way in these examinations (Kohl, 1967, 2009; Kozol, 1991). Entire communities got behind "block schools," claiming the right to have "a school of our own" (Roderick, 2001). Unique storefront schools, set up literally in storefronts of Harlem and inner-city Chicago and Detroit, offered alternatives to customary curricula and expectations of schooling (Rist, 1972).

Key individuals started family literacy programs (see the chapters by Gay, Edwards, and Rodríguez-Brown in this book). The National Family Literacy Center, funded by the Toyota Foundation, and numerous bilingual/bilerate programs for parents and children funded by the Ford Foundation, spread across the country. Social scientists paired up with state school officers and heads of state departments of education to prepare materials and workshops to help teachers learn more about the language and home backgrounds of the children they taught (Heath, 1972). Philosophers and social scientists despaired over the lack of preparation young teachers from white, middle-class backgrounds would have for life in urban classrooms or with immigrant students (Greene, 1973). They urged these teachers to try to see anew and to think through their own cultural backgrounds and to learn openly from those with different social

class, immigration, and racial histories. John Dewey's ideas were renewed in experiential learning programs and grassroots, community-based organizations and documented in engaging and widely popular published accounts.

As the experiential and project-based bandwagon rolled forward, however, some few cautioned that much about experiential and creative learning that gave children opportunities for discovery in learning had little to do with the values many families held. For example, African Americans who had migrated from southern states often embraced expectations grounded in religious and social norms that accepted authority, hard work, and discipline (Delpit, 1996). These families expected teachers to hold high expectations, demand much of their children, and to be in authoritative control. The same was true of many immigrant families who had in their home countries grown accustomed to the norm that the teacher is the disciplinarian, the ultimate authority.

Though born of good intentions and a desperate sense of need, most of the progressive initiatives of the 1980s lasted only a few years. Infrastructural means were lacking to continue the institutional learning needed to integrate principles (and not just practices) into preservice and inservice teacher education and school schedules and norms. Students needed instruction in basics: phonics, multiplication tables, and problem sets in mathematics and science. Yet to feel, see, and deeply learn how to build from the basics for creative and critical thinking, they also needed immersion in experiential learning. Some students, especially those working in their second, third, or fourth language, also needed additional instructional time outside of school. They needed extensive practice with the basics to benefit from the joys of applying what they had learned to experiential projects, free reading, and library visits. Yet the combination of basics, sufficient practice in language, and motivation to imagine beyond the immediate could not be provided by urban schools or districts in rural areas of dwindling populations and resources.

State-based and federally supported initiatives became battlegrounds for competition among different school-reform ideas. Entrepreneurial individual educators and start-up for-profit companies offered wide-ranging solutions; most had little or no long-term research to back their claims of effectiveness. School-reform ideas competed fiercely with one another for adoption by those school districts whose public financing could support the spread of specific ideas for reform as well as new roles in education administration and practice. Some districts added literacy coaches, along with highly innovative programs of reading and writing instruction, and fostered family literacy opportunities. In

some districts, however, governmental and public enthusiasm for comparative assessment of academic achievement led to decisions that narrowed or eliminated exploratory opportunities for learning in schools and defined *literacy* narrowly as comprehension of printed textual material.

Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, strong leadership by notable educators pointed to the persistent and increasing diversity of students in classrooms across the United States and the importance of multicultural education (see the chapters by Hoover-Dempsey and Whitaker and by Ladson-Billings, in this book). Yet the majority of state-adopted materials for reading instruction stuck to neutral topics, ascribed grade-level vocabulary usage, and heightened emphasis on phonics-based instruction. Foundations pulled back their support for family literacy programs and community efforts in bilingual or biliterate education, choosing instead to support school reforms.

Some museums and grassroots community organizations persisted in their efforts to draw in families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. But cultural expectations of after-school activities, along with lack of access to transport, meant that only a small portion of students could spend sufficient time in guided learning in informal settings to move their skills into intermediate and advanced learning.

Meanwhile, the push continued, largely instigated by schools, for parents to take more responsibility for their children's school behavior, preparation for literacy, and response to homework assignments. When student failures became part of schools' public identities, the schools often shifted blame to the shortcomings and failures of parents. Negative views of teenagers and the dangers they presented to society accelerated. Sweeping state-level changes in judicial policies regarding juvenile offenders resulted in longer prison terms that in turn led to higher recidivism rates for young males, particularly those of color (Males, 1996). Not only gang membership but also numbers and types of gangs increased, as young men (and women) turned to these hood-families for security, a sense of identity, and often protection. Schools became encircled by high fences and other security measures. Regulations regarding clothing and accessories attempted to neutralize evidence of youth memberships beyond school doors. Assistant principals, long the pals of adolescents who needed an adult friend, were forced to shift in responsibility from friendship and casual conversations to discipline and control. Equality could not hold up in the face of middle America's increasing calls for security and accountability.

Community in Action

Some observers during these decades perceived within communities the same kinds of loss of spirit and engagement that Lasch (1977) had noted in the 1970s for families. Social scientists and public commentators on education responded to the invasion of institutions such as schools on home values and community norms by pointing out the vital need for organizations, entities that, unlike institutions, resulted from people acting through consent with flexible structures and recognition of fallibility and the need for ongoing learning. Many national spokespersons rebelled against an increasingly "care-less society" (McKnight, 1995). Organizations could and must accommodate diversity, stimulate creativity, respond quickly, and build leadership across multiple roles. They could prepare individuals, especially the young, for real work roles in adulthood. Unlike institutions, organizations could, for example, operate through principles that insisted all staff members view young people as civic resources and advocates for the arts, environmental change, and community improvement. Within this framework of responsibility, young people would see literacy as essential for not only career development but also for full participation in the civic sector.

As schools focused more on preventing and controlling trouble and promoting assessment in schools, some (albeit too few) community organizations and spokespersons took note of the critical need for individuals to come together into forums for citizenship (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). Libraries, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and soccer leagues, for example, found ways to accelerate and expand their activities during out-of-school hours in order to help two-working-parent families and single-parent families. Literacy, numeracy, decision making, critical thinking, and argumentation figured as central to daily life in many youth activities in these organizations.

A survey of 120 youth organizations across the United States in the mid-1990s indicated expanded hours and opportunities, increased use of volunteers, and growth in innovative partnerships bringing several types of organizations together (Heath & Smyth, 1999; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Libraries and other centers available to children during their nonschool hours increased electronic resources for children and young people and widened programming to involve Readers Theatre, puppetry, and environmental programs. Inner-city and rural youth who had access to community libraries found them the safest and most accessible no-cost places to be during nonschool hours. Religious organizations, in an effort to recruit and hold onto a young membership, expanded means of worship and participation, adding opportunities in music, youth-led

services, films and books, and dramatic performances. Grassroots community organizations, as well as nationally based groups such as the Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, and Future Farmers of America, expanded locations of their activities, moving into housing development recreation centers and sponsoring diverse types of summer camps. By the opening of the 21st century, students in some communities and neighborhoods had already experienced strong differences between school instructional hours and their after-school opportunities for exploration, creativity, team-based competition, and development of community service through the arts (Halpern, 2003).

Through the 1990s, many of these community organizations took as part of their mission helping to save young people from destructive forces in society. These organizations were zones of safety, offering both refuge from tension-filled homes and streets and the chance for the young to do something meaningful. Moreover, some youth organizations provided job training and experience in small-business development through social enterprise. In committing to the "business of place," small business developments promoted crafts, arts, innovation, and community building as well as consensual decision making (cf. Abrams, 2005). Federal programs, such as Job Corps, and union-sponsored training programs linked with community organizations gained attention through their message of complementing school learning and preparing workers for the 21st century. Behind all these efforts lay a paradox: youth can be a danger and a drag for society, yet young people represent the society's promise and possibility. The message of "let's save them" saw the young as potential employees, community leaders, heads of families, and leaders in small businesses for their neighborhoods.

Television channels such as Bravo, along with evening news programs, youth newspapers, and feature stories in local and national newspapers, celebrated the achievements of programs that rescued young people who otherwise might not have made it. In many cases, the immediate forces from which the youth needed respite and even removal came from their own families, where control by physical and mental abuse had become destructive to their most vulnerable members. The premises of community organizations that put young people into meaningful real roles built high-risk opportunities for work and play and surrounded them with tough love—the idea that adults are there for you and with you, never against you. Running social enterprises, pitching accounts to civic and business leaders, rallying for altered zoning rules, and many such activities

carried high risks, for success or failure would have lasting effects (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Heath & Smyth, 1999).

These organizations carried additional features. Young people from newcomer families, second-generation immigrant families, African American families, and European American families came to take part. Languages, oral and written, flowed through everyday events: theater productions in Spanish, bilingual poetry volumes and song lyrics, and graffiti arts production projects all meant meaningful practice and authentic authorship. Parents in immigrant families had too often judged English as essential for their children and thus diminished verbal contact in their mother tongue with their children. As children grew older, they felt less able and willing to talk with their parents, and opportunities for reading, talking, and thinking together around books, ideas, and projects seemed strange and impossible. Instead, peers became the draw for young people who wanted to be where the action is and who could not imagine anything really happening in sustained interaction with extended written texts. Community organizations proved otherwise while also giving immigrant students ample opportunity to hear English used in business-oriented and project-driven contexts.

The most fortunate among first- and second-generation youth in immigrant families lived in households where the mother tongue was kept alive through wide-ranging functions. In these famlies, young people talked with parents and other family members in the mother tongue and saw them read mail and newspapers from the homeland and listen to television programs and read books—some or all in a language other than English. The children of these families acquired not only the habits and values of literacy but also learned early in their lives to articulate explanations, narrate directions, and ask questions. Once their English reached even a modicum of fluency, these children could manage most academic requirements, such as homework and assigned projects, discussion in class, and questions about the content and the process of assignments. In their mother tongue, they had already acquired ways of talking that met discourse demands of academic literacy. Learning to perform these ways in English came far more easily to them than to children from families who had not socialized their children in their mother tongue to the genres, styles, and functions that characterized not only school life but public institutional life in general. Community organizations that put adolescents at the center reinforced and added valuable meaningful practice in a wide range of genres and for audiences of many different types and interests.

Following the recession of the early 1980s and the loss of low-skilled jobs in the 1990s, more and more students lived in poverty and in families of the working poor (Hart & Risley, 1995, 1999; Lareau, 2003). Many not only entered school but also went through their full 12 years of public school without having daily extended conversations with adults—their parents or teachers—about abstract ideas, reading materials, or future projects and plans. Sustaining a conversation on a single topic for 10 minutes seemed out of reach for children from an increasing portion of families of the working poor, single-parent households, and two-working-parent families (Heath, in press; Miller, 2006). Formulating a plan for something so seemingly simple to teachers as a project or a laboratory experiment often required language skills unfamiliar in most children's linguistic repertoire. Throughout this decade, juvenile justice officials increasingly reported misdemeanors and crimes that resulted from young people not thinking about the consequences of their actions (Venkatesh, 2006). Extensive practice in talking about actions into the future and developing plans that involved complexities of intentional and unintentional consequences often was not available to allow young people to internalize thinking about cause and effect.

Many grassroots organizations recognized this important need among their young members and provided roles that put them into positions where they had agency. These roles asked youth to think ahead, anticipate what others might do, and consider how their actions would affect the operations of the unit as a whole. As scholars reported long-term positive effects of community organizations, federal and state policymakers took note. However, as policymakers created legislation for after-school learning opportunities, they failed to consider the critical features of learning environments that gave young people responsibilities and roles as well as guidance and tough love. The strong desire for a quick fix or magic bullet to improve young people's chances in schools led politicians to take scholars' reports of community organizations' successes and make them into turn-around stories. They failed to heed the recommendations of what was needed from the American Youth Policy Forum and numerous philanthropic foundations who urged more systematic attention to the needs of American youth and young families (e.g., Larner, Zipporoli, & Behrman, 1999; Halperin, 1998).

Instead, quick-fix stories were simplified and twisted into rationales for federal and state policies and programs. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers had been initially formulated around the findings of reports from

research scholars and foundations (e.g., Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; for a brief history, see McCallion, 2003). The original idea had been to provide expanded nonschool learning opportunities to help prepare young people for the challenges of production, creativity, and civic responsibility. In many centers developed in the first five years (1995–2000), grandparents and nonworking family members became intensely involved, sharing with youth organizations their hobbies, narratives, and special talents in cooking, gardening, mixing paints, and crafting woodwork. Most of the initial Centers partnered schools and community resources by bringing artists, museum curators, parks and recreation groundskeepers, and community garden developers together with teachers interested in art, science, and civic engagement for students. Acknowledged in the initial years of the 21st Century Learning Centers was the fact that schools and community organizations worked to give children the best of both worlds (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994).

In the second round (2000–2005) of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, pressure was on for these centers to be located within schools and to work as extensions of the school day. The focus shifted from skills projected for future workers to skills needed to do homework and prepare for standardized tests. Teachers—not artists, health professionals, or park rangers—became central actors within these Centers. This arrangement gave teachers opportunities to supplement their salaries and to reinforce basic skills for academically weak students—thereby improving chances for schools to raise test scores. Community partners became only occasional participants offering one-off performances, visits, and presentations and only occasionally being able to work on long-term projects with children and youth. The Centers evolved quickly into being less about partnering—an initial premise behind establishment of the Centers—and more about school personnel and priorities. After-school and before-school opportunities had become by the middle of the first decade of the 21st century extended times for tutoring, homework catch-up, and child care for mothers who did not get off work until several hours after the end of the normal school day. Key premises of the experiential learning opportunities and grassroots community organizations that had inspired the after-school movement could not find their way into school-based, extended-day sessions that featured teachers charged with improving student performance.

Exceptions came in community schools that, though few in number, stepped forward to incorporate the best possible practices of academic and civic work in communities while also offering medical, social, and neighborhood resources to

needy children (Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005). Community schools, along with neighborhood community organizations for youth, recognized that expectations the schools could make of families of the working poor had to match realities. Neither discretionary time nor money was available in a majority of these families. Out of reach were activities, such as reading, playing adult-child games, planning joint projects or family vacations, and visiting parks and other informal learning environments, that were designed for families with the time and finances to think about leisure.

In the 1990s, young people fortunate enough to find their way to grassroots community organizations or affiliates of national organizations (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, and Girls, Inc.), had the chance to develop identities as artists, environmental stewards collecting trash and urging recycling, and civic agents, as well as team members playing soccer or swimming. Many of these organizations included literacy and numeracy as a matter of course in routine activities and built into their system opportunities for young people to advance in status (e.g., from Cub Scout to Eagle Scout) through successful achievement of project development.

However, by the end of the 1990s, the public climate—driven by ideas put forward in the No Child Left Behind Act—pressured anyone involved with children and youth—especially those without the resources of middle- and upper-income families—to view the young primarily as students whose academic standing had to be improved. Gone for the most part were opportunities during the nonschool hours for these youth to take on roles that advanced their sense of agency, initiative, and interdisciplinary learning demonstrated through performance. Now they had to learn to play well the primary role of student. Doing so meant being passive learners who focused on earning good scores on tests that relied exclusively on reading skills and, to a lesser extent, on writing skills.

Through the first decade of the 21st century, notions of equity narrowed to mean everyone reaching certain levels on standardized test measures of achievement. Popular media, educators, and political and legal spokespersons for underrepresented groups raised to national awareness the idea of the "achievement gap," or the disparity of scores among racial groups. Descriptors such as *minorities* or *inner-city* stuck to young people confined in their local schools. Busing mandates and equal-opportunity ideals fell away from policymakers and judicial systems; the equity these had strived for fell back onto the shoulders of individual teachers and occasionally their principals (Baldacci, 2004; Fisher, 2007; Thomas-El, 2003). They were left to take on both blame for the

achievement gap and responsibility for closing it. Urban and rural schools alike in poor districts faced the realities of too few quality trained teachers (especially in mathematics and the sciences), safe school spaces, textbooks and laboratory equipment, and opportunities for extracurricular activities and field trips. The arts, science clubs, special-interest projects, and enrichment trips disappeared in many school districts. The comparative status of American public education to achievements in other economically advanced nations became a matter of national shame and a strong reminder that earlier rhetoric about equal opportunity for all had no match in current political and educational realities.

Families in the 21st-Century Economy

From the opening of the first decade of the 21st century, perhaps no topics entered public debate as frequently as those surrounding family. What makes the *family*? What about *working class* as a designation? Had this class of families simply become the *working poor*? (Ehrenreich, 2001; Hicks, 2002). Such questions surrounded controversial issues that ranged from adoption and abortion to real estate and retirement. Adopted children sought and gained access to information about the identity of their birth mothers. Long-term, live-together agreements meant that *legal parents* had to be rethought in pragmatic terms. Dual-mother lesbian couples or dual-father gay couples offered challenges not only to norms and expectations of gendered roles but also to what had long been school-based celebrations of Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Single-parent families, multiple-family households, and separate parenting obligations under custodial arrangements offered a host of challenges to those seeking signatures on parental permission forms.

Meanwhile, in many communities—rural and urban—children and youth working as entrepreneurs in the underground economy of trafficking drugs, guns, and sex supported their families. Yet when they entered classrooms, they were seen only as students, asked to take their seats, forego their agency and independence, and become passive learners (Venkatesh, 2006). The number of foster children and children living with grandparents skyrocketed. Identification of children with special needs (especially autism) was no longer a private matter for individual families but a national crisis for the United States and a challenge to the medical establishment (Grinker, 2007). Spousal and child abuse increased. Inevitably, teachers, counselors, community-organization leaders, and librarians witnessed the effects of children's firsthand and secondhand

exposure to violence in their homes and communities. An entire genre of young adult literature recounted the ingenuity, resilience, and creativity of children whose families had turned violent and abusive. More and more children were abandoned, left largely on their own by parents who disappeared or were imprisoned for crimes against society.

Long-standing expectations of home and family have centered on a single space as *the* home of a student and on biological heterosexual parents as *the* responsible caregivers. However, by the opening of the 21st century, more and more public observers and scholars pointed out the discrepancy between expectation and fact. Homelessness, parents with addiction or mental health problems, and growth in the prison population left more and more children on their own. Multiplying patterns of living arrangements meant more and more children *stayed* more than they *lived* at certain addresses. Back-migrations to home countries, as well as the realities of a precarious existence for undocumented or illegal immigrants, challenged norms of permanency and the clear identification of parents. Adult family members tutored young children on how to give only just enough information to satisfy authorities and when to claim fictional family membership and addresses.

Religious and political organizations, social science reports, and individual spokespersons for nonprofit groups argued that "families still matter" (Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002). Yet more and more libraries and community organizations had to find ways around bureaucratic demands for a single address or head-of-family designation in requisite paperwork related to grant support, liability reporting, and so on. In urban centers and small towns across the United States, many homeless families consisted of a single parent and child on their way to somewhere else and in search of only temporary housing. Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, separated and scattered families not only from prior physical locations but also from school and medical records. The worst outcomes that might have been imagined from Lasch's (1977) predictions about intrusions into family life and the wiping away of traditions rolled in with the flood waters of Katrina and the extended aftermath of consequences—medical, social, and economic.

The economic recession at the end of the first decade of the 21st century brought to a rapid end the American dream for families that had undertaken mortgages far beyond the realities of their wages or salaries. Public media surrounding the recession, which many felt to be a depression, brought into the open the extraordinary variations in families created by class, regional, sexual

orientation, and immigration differences. The development of niche marketing for products related to home design and decoration, vacation planning, parenting, and dieting laid open only some of the many types of families living in the United States. Special interests, choices of vacation spots and recreational activities, along with demographic data such as combinations of languages in homes and numbers of households owned by individuals, could be picked up from Internet research. Americans, with little regard for real income, became consumed with acquiring and purchasing. One author described this consumption as resulting from markets corrupting children, infantilizing adults, and swallowing citizens whole (Barber, 2007).

Behind the commercial facade, however, were the realities of immigration status, poverty, number and types of jobs held by family members, and access to health care and mental health stability. Today it is irresponsible, perhaps unethical, for educators and policymakers to tout the family, as though the ideal family whose description opens Lasch's (1977) book exists as the norm or even as representative for the making of policies for the opening of the 21st century.

Accounts of Hurricane Katrina pointed to the inadequate, inept, and often unjust governmental response to this crisis as the cause for the broad scattering of families in the United States. What fell under the flood waters and in subsequent revelations was a general public faith that individuals could expect to bring together physical home, personal possessions, and healthy family members into a vibrant safe community of friends, churches, and schools. The tear in the American social fabric rendered by Katrina reached much further than Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas (cf. Eggers, 2009).

Citizens across the country identified with relentless portraits of families' dispersal and despair, as many other families felt their own internal storms and floods, whether in the spread of new forms of drugs, such as methamphetamine, or by unemployment and eviction (Reding, 2009). Estimates in several regions of the country claimed that the majority of foreclosed homes had been purchased by grandparents raising their grandchildren, single parents trying to start anew with their children, and dual-families created by second marriages of parents with children from previous marriages. All these arrangements of family gave would-be homeowners rationales for taking advantage of sub-prime loans, delayed payment of interest, and heavy consumption through purchases made with credit cards. The need for more and more space became the mantra of advertising that hawked everything from real estate developments to home renovations, gazebo construction, and second homes in remote locations. Multiple

computers and televisions, as well as entertainment centers, sent children of middle- and upper-class families scattering into their own rooms. Meanwhile, parents in two-working-parent households and single-parent households scurried off to work or play on their own computers. Social networking through Twitter and other brief means of connecting electronically kept family members in touch with distant others more often than with those living in the same household. Carbon footprints multiplied from flying to vacation homes that increasingly needed to replicate the communication hook-ups, entertainment centers, and easy access to customary foods that primary homes offered. If books went along on these travels at all, they increasingly did so through technological means made possible by digital reading devices.

Where, Then, Is Family Literacy in the Future?

Since the 1970s, most social scientists have worked with keen awareness of designations of deficit that prevailed before the Civil Rights era for families, children, and youth of backgrounds diverse in immigration experiences, language backgrounds, and cultural heritage. Study after study has laid bare strengths and resources of multicultural identities, bilingualism, and diverse routes of growing up (Zentella, 1997, 2005). Social justice has been a primary goal of social science research. This work has increasingly exposed the expanding gap between democratic goals of schooling and exclusionary effects of policies and practices that prevail in formal education. Statisticians and demographers point out that the achievement gap so widely discussed at the end of the first decade of the 21st century does not reflect the underachievement of young learners so much as it reveals continuing inequities of economic and educational possibilities and misunderstanding by parents of what must be done to protect their children from electronic media (O'Connor, Tilly, & Bobo, 2001).

The achievement of equity in schooling, family time, and community organizational life—all of which stimulate and reward literacy—has proved elusive even as more members of ethnic and racial groups formerly held down by unjust laws and discriminatory practices enter the upper classes. Scholars reveal that consumer habits and lifestyle choices of middle- and upper-class minority families now contribute to differential school performance (Yeakey & Henderson, 2009). Philosophers, empiricists, and theoreticians urge academics and policymakers to take care in generalizing about the sources of the self, or roots of self-definition (Taylor, 1989). They caution that rapidly increasing

global moves—of people, resources, labor, and conflicting values—bring instrumental and atomistic outlooks sure to devalue the traditional and the civic. This devaluation feeds a growing inability to take the long view and to project unintended consequences.

This inability results from the nation's loss of processes and incentives for deliberative discourse around matters of severe consequence for all citizens. Health care, environmental change, educational innovation, and public works respect no particular persons or groups; these issues apply to everyone. Yet greed and refusal to think beyond individual goals shut off civic reasoning. There can be no better illustration of these points than the worldwide economic recession at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The course of this event resulted from consistent denial of the relationship between act and consequence in an unregulated system of artifice and greed encouraged and rewarded through public forces that appear to families to obligate acts of consumption and norms of separation. This sense of obligation centers on an ideology found among parents of all classes, regardless of immigration status, geographic location, or specific familial needs and demands (such as inclusion of a special-needs child).

These obligations reach into families on welfare, the working poor, and the middle class, as well as the wealthy. The pressure is on for parents to *give*—things, opportunities, and immediate gratification. Parents in families across all types of situations today speak of their struggle to make sure their children get ahead. From every angle, parents are encouraged to believe they must give their children every possible opportunity; accountings that parents ask for from children focus on how children are using these opportunities (cf. Ochs & Taylor, 1995). Unquestioned is the obligation of parents to give their children opportunities for high school completion and movement into higher education.

Higher education, with its demands for academic achievement, pursuit of extracurricular service and engagements, and development of special talents in art, science, and civic commitment, stands as the general measure of parents having met their obligation. Family ideology thrusts parents into the position of involving their children in both the institutional life of school (and its requisite homework) and organizational opportunities of child care, recreation, and entertainment. This ideology projects the child into a future in which benefits accrue from successful achievement in current engagements. Many of these engagements require special uniforms and equipment, transport to places of practice, extra lessons, spectator opportunities, and other investments of time and

money by parents. Along with these engagements comes socialization into competition, rank ordering by power and achievement, and expectations of praise for trying even with relatively mediocre success.

Missing from messages of obligation, however, are two critical factors that have long been central to concepts of family literacy: sustained language interactions with children and real pleasure in doing and being *with* children in all stages of development from infancy into young adulthood. From its beginning years, family literacy programs have been based on an underlying principle that promotes enjoyment and delight, wonder and curiosity, playful thinking and leisurely work of children and parents doing something together. Across classes, these norms find little credence or promotion among those who push the idea that parents must give opportunities to the children. The preposition *to* seems all wrong; instead, the preposition *with* would wipe out any notion of one-way giving. Mutual benefit and exchange of talents, skills, insight, and humor come into projects undertaken by adults with children. Such projects, whether reading or acting out a book, writing or drawing one's own book, or building a robot under guidance of an illustrated text, bring two individuals together in unique experiences that become indelible in memory.

The preposition *with,* central to family literacy, has been wiped out for parents across classes through the dominance of equipment for children at every stage. Designed for the child's solo exploration, much of this equipment (often labeled as *educational toys* or *edutainment*) centers on spectatorship, repetitive hand-eye coordination, and mimicry of adult toys. Miniature mobile telephones, computers, DVD players, drive-and-ride automobiles, kitchen and workbench tool sets, and even recreational vehicles put children into actions that mirror those of adults in their work. In families with more discretionary income, children wear miniature versions of the same clothing their parents wear during their recreational pursuits: baseball caps, sweatshirts, activity vests, backpacks, helmets, and sports shoes. Similarly, bed linens, lunchboxes, purses, sports bags, and sweatshirts carry images of figures known to children only through electronic media.

As many child-development specialists and public intellectuals began to note early in the 21st century, peer play, as known for centuries, significantly decreased in most parts of the United States (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Exploration in nearby forests and parks, neighborhood bike rides, and peer-planned projects of building or creating backyard forts, all but vanished (Louv, 2005). Even walking to school became a thing of the past (Hoffman, 2009). With the loss of

free play, the ability to roam the neighborhood, or to explore the "wilderness," children have lost many of the personal connections to reading childhood classics with parents that have been treasured in past generations (Chabon, 2009). Classics of children's literature set children loose to find crawl spaces through holes in fences, step through the backs of cupboards, and explore deep dark forests (e.g., *The Secret Garden*, The Chronicles of Narnia, *Alice in Wonderland*). Parents today live in fear of unknown strangers and potential harm to their children. Thus they hire intimate strangers (e.g., coaches and other organizational providers of services to children) to watch over and guide their children.

Often these strangers have control over the young between the hours of 3:00 and 7:00 p.m., guiding lessons, clubs, and teams. When dinner comes, food, not a meal, is consumed. Most of this food is outsourced—characterized by fat, salt, and sugar content and brought in from take-out or fast-food restaurants— or bought as frozen dinners, pizzas, or fries in bulk packages at wholesale clubs and stuck in the microwave (Kessler, 2009; Pollan, 2006). Regular times for talk, planning joint play and projects, and exploring parks and beaches has fallen almost out of the realm of possibility of parents and children.

Shopping for food, clothes, or sports equipment could be a time for such talk. Instead, it often becomes routinized, as either a quick order on the Internet or a run to the mall by a parent and one or more children. Significant in such occasions is the resulting freedom for one parent to do something else while the child is occupied by the other parent on the outing. Talk on such outings tends to center on what *is*; the objects currently present in the environment of the wholesale club, grocery, or deli and not on what *is to be* or *to come*. Conversations such as these (as well as those that surround doing homework) are action-scripted, both drawing from artifacts in the immediate environment and centering on the pacing of the current activity. Explanatory talk (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002) primarily includes spurts of short utterances centered again on the immediate (Goodwin, 2006) or in argument that lacks one or more of the usual triangle of components of *because, then,* and *since* (Andrews, 2005; Tannen, 1998). Similarly, such explanatory talk lacks conditionals that set up future plans, assess past events in terms of consequences, or offer extended accounts of past events.

Every generalization about family life, whether with regard to family literacy, child language and art, or informal learning of science, has to be seen as only one arena in the vast array of potential combinations of behavior and ideology of young people and the adults with whom they interact. Yet largely

anachronistic ideologies of family and literacy persist so fiercely that little is likely to jar these long-standing ways of thinking significantly in the near future. Most people still use the term *family* as noun and descriptor (as in *family dinner*) with more than a hint of romanticism. Numerous ideas linked with literacy and family time around and with books appear not only in curricular materials but also in announcements that go home from school, public celebrations, and numerous advertisements.

For those who remain concerned with family literacy, it is worthwhile to take stock on a regular basis of at least some of the realities of both *literacy* and *family* in rapidly shifting economic conditions.

Looking at the Future Through the Keyhole of Language

I close this chapter and open this volume with a keyhole through which to look—that of language. To look through a keyhole means that though we look through a tiny aperture, we see a larger vista beyond.

No keyhole is more pertinent to family literacy than that of language. Between 2000 and 2009, my study of language use between adults and children and among peers between the ages of 12 and 18 has shown changes in syntax that relate to shifting patterns of peer play, transport, solitary time with technology, and structured time with intimate strangers.

In contrast to the corpora of language collected in the 1970s and 1980s, talk during the 1990s began to reflect simplified syntax, a shrunken genre range, and reduction in the range of verifiable sources of conversational content. In short, the young in the first decade of the 21st century talk less about more and with less use of the creative potential of language than did their counterparts in the two preceding decades. Though it is true that many children and adolescents talk unceasingly with peers about contemporary media artists and forms as well as about technologies, software programs, electronic games, and Internet sources, their knowledge of what lies behind and within the majority of these sources is relatively shallow. On the other hand, for areas of genuine interest to them as individuals or in peer groups, they can rattle off the equivalent of pages and pages of an encyclopedia. Pushed, however, to compare origins, styles, content, and genres within these interests, young experts often wind down quickly. Asked to think of historical counterparts or counterpoints, their

silence persists. Verifiable sources and influences on even their major interest areas cluster in recency, with little use of historical references.

In short, both between adults and children and among peers, the locus of attention centers primarily on the here and now and the management of current interests. It follows that particular grammatical structures indicating past and future time and variable conditions for consequences, and extended narrative forms, appear more and more infrequently. In public interactions, service personnel within institutions and organizations manage their daily interactions on the back of certain language forms: direct answers to frequently asked questions and referrals to managers or supervisors for matters that go beyond written and rehearsed instructions and procedures. The phenomenon of the "tipping point" may be relevant here (Gladwell, 2002). In the near future, we may reach a tipping point at which certain syntactic forms and vocabulary domains all but disappear from daily interactional use. Examples of language change abound in social history in relation to cultural and economic shifts. Cognition is intimately related to culture (Tomasello, 1999). The use of subjunctive forms that posit hypothetical or might-be worlds offers one such example in English and other Romance languages. Though frozen forms remain (such as "If I were you,..."), today's corpora of conversations across a range of circumstances have fewer and fewer creative forms of the subjunctive. The same is true for vocabulary items that have come into English from Greek, Latin, French, and Italian, the most common foreign sources of lexical items in English. Words such as *penumbra*, *hermetic, bon appétit*, or *decimated* rarely enter conversations the young take part in or hear.

Changes in the economy have brought new patterns of work and play. With these have come radical alterations in time, the uses of space, and views of what is important for and to parents and children. With all these changes have come reductions in sustained interactions between young and old around books and the kind of talk that books generate and provide. While sales of picture books and specialty and series books for children and young adult readers stay steady and have even accelerated on occasion since the opening of the 21st century, the sharing of books between adults and children has dropped off sharply according to numerous reports from the American Library Association, National Endowment for the Humanities, and local library and school surveys. When children reach the age of 4 or 5—even in families with discretionary income and literate-oriented ideology—reading together all but disappears. Thus this valuable time for the meaningful practice of the kinds of language needed to

reason out, explore, and argue with a dilemma, problem, or imagined scenario is not taking place in conversations around books between adults and the young.

Other types of opportunities may, however, be on the rise among families and within communities who have chosen to reject the fast life of consumption, over scheduling, and electronic communication take-overs. Some few community groups are now considering slow cooking, community gardening, community arts, and the green movement (Elizabeth & Young, 2006; Kingsolver, 2007). All these collaborative work projects resemble those practiced in the home countries of many immigrants and in rural life in the United States in earlier centuries (Klindienst, 2006). These engagements call for joint planning, actions counter to the mainstream, thoughtful justifications, civic deliberation, and family literacy. Deliberative discourse works in connection with reading sources of information and creating diaries, recipes, and records of garden life, as well as accounts of community arts and science projects. Grassroots opportunities for citizen participation in deliberative democracy may be on the rise in U.S. communities (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Mutz, 2006). The notion and practice of community literacy resurfaced at the end of the 20th century, often through the arts and led in a majority of instances across the nation by communities of immigrant origin and often by young people (Goldbard, 2006). Within a decade, journals and books, as well as several documentary films, were absorbed by citizen science and the green movement (for example, *Community Literacy Journal*). Barack Obama's successful campaign for the presidency of the United States in 2008 modeled the mingling of family and community talk with electronic media and the importance of keeping abreast of new forms of communication such as twittering. Such literacies mean reading the media for instrumental, project-based means, but also comparing one's thoughts, activities, processes, and products with those of others. Doing so builds reading comprehension and critical reading and writing skills (Hobbs, 2007).

Activities and incentives for joint work and play that generate deliberative talk rely primarily on a mix of novice and expert, young and old. Times together abound with stories, explanations, questions, counterexamples, and bits and pieces of information from written texts and other verifiable retrievable sources, such as the Internet, films, and television programs. But there are already some hints that commercialization will transform even these efforts by private citizen groups and individuals into demands for special products and equipment. For example, in 2009 the phenomenon of slow cooking, a "new" old idea taken up

in the popular press, was treated in only a handful of books and then primarily in relation to a product or piece of equipment. Dozens of books newly celebrated the slow cooker (first introduced under the trade name Crock-Pot in the 1980s for women who needed to leave dinner to cook in the pot all day while they worked at jobs outside the home). The slow cooker was the focus of cookbooks setting out recipes and explaining ways to use the cooker. Other project-based think-and-do-together activities, such as garden composting, quickly found their way into the world of niche marketing and the hawking of "essential" products and pieces of equipment meant to make these projects faster, easier, and more efficient.

Family literacy, however, like all forms of reading, will never lend itself to being fast, easy, or efficient. Reading together calls for real time committed and unattached to a specific goal or tangible reward. Intangible are the rewards that reading together gives: social intimacy, laughter, fulfillment of curiosity, and contemplation of the wonders of real and imagined worlds. These values and pleasures cannot be co-opted by consumerism; as a consequence, they do not lend themselves to widespread adoption or promotion. Thus family literacy proponents and educators who depend on reading, writing, and talking within families to support the work of schools may be faced with a constantly receding horizon of what can be expected of family interaction and discourse. The accumulation of material goods, mediation through technologies, and limits on time and space for comaintenance and generation of projects by family members are sure to continue to influence changes in language structures and uses. Fluency or practiced competence with certain linguistic forms (such as those related to self-monitoring and self-regulation) may well continue to decline in usage among the young. As this fluency recedes, so may children's abilities to self-monitor their sense of order, predictability, and control.

Perhaps, however, we may take some solace in reminders such as that of writer George Eliot in *Middlemarch*: "But let the wise be warned against too great readiness at explanation: it multiplies the sources of mistake, lengthening the sum for reckoners sure to go wrong" (2003, p. 422). The pace of change in the current era adds intensity to Eliot's warning. Change in matters of intellect today come rapidly, particularly through the dizzying pace of research in the neurosciences and robotics. Before the end of the first decade of the 21st century, scientists predict that robots may go in thought and action further than their human creators intended. Moreover, neuroscientific breakthroughs prom-

ise to make possible devices to be implanted in the brain to control impulsive behavior and misfiring neurons.

As intelligent creativity flourishes, it is sure to bring not only entirely new and previously unimagined changes to older technologies and bodies of knowledge but also innovations not yet dreamed of. Changing forms of family and literacy will hold some role. But we also must expect more community literacies, ranging from targeted advertising and marketing based on patterns of Web surfing to communal responses to dwindling supplies of clean air, water, and safe food. In all these will be texts, oral and written, visual and verbal, inherent to projects of joint work and play upon which the futures of human life and the planet depend.

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