

Chapter 7

Implicit Perceptions and Explicit Messages: Poverty, a Hispanic Family, and the Damaging Juncture Between Literacy Reality and Literacy Demands

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ABSTRACT

The present study offers implications for teacher-researchers by expanding prior ethnographic literacy research providing knowledge and understanding to educators interested in home-based family literacy activities and functions and the interface between these and school-based literacy expectations from public school educators. While generalizations cannot be made to all Hispanic families based on the data from the research family, a theoretical construct can be built based on data gathered. In understanding the data from this study, educators can contemplate and move away from negative assumptions about what literacies occur in the households of poor, minority families. Educators can then build confident relationships with families if and only when there is real knowledge of and from families themselves.

INTRODUCTION

She thinks because we are poor that we don't know anything and don't help our kids with reading and school. And she's Mexican too, and I know she's been poor and had to learn English. You would think she would understand.

Marta (pseudonym), mother of three children, referencing the principal of the school the children attend.

Families living in poverty face numerous challenges. Children in these families, especially students that attend urban schools, many times face added difficulties. Families living with low-income and low socioeconomic status in urban communities encounter such realities as hunger, familial instability,

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poor health, as well as social and emotional insecurities, including high stress levels. These internal and external factors, shaped by poverty, can have damaging, long-lasting effects (Parrett & Budge, 2016; Vasconcelos, 2017).

Urban families living in poverty can also face numerous educational demands that can create challenges, including pressures from those in school settings to attain literacy knowledge (Christianakis, 2010; Nevarez, 2012). Literacy demands from educators and administrators can include extensive prior literacy experiences and understandings, attaining solid reading grades, literacy knowledge progression from the beginning of the year to the end of the school year, and passing state mandated state assessments. Specifically for English learner families with children, these literacy demands can generate great stress because the wealth of literacy-based experiences and knowledge within these families and their communities are often not fully understood and embraced (Nevarez, 2012). Even though many educators recognize that literacy acquisition begins in the home and occurs through sociocultural, literacy-based interactions countless do not understand that home-based literacy practices occur daily, are relevant, and offer opportunities to enhance the learning of academic literacies required by educators (Compton-Lilly, 2017).

Often non-academic, home-based literacy practices of poor, minority families, including English learners are marginalized by educators and deemed unimportant and/or unrelated to school literacy knowledge and expectations (Compton-Lilly, 2017; Lesaux, 2012). In response to this perceived mismatch, many schools approach non-academic literacy practices of poor families, from a deficit perspective. What educators often do not understand is these familial practices are valuable forms of home-based, non-academic literacies that can connect and make academic literacy practices more applicable, while assisting in meeting the demands of classrooms, including those educational settings that serve students living in poverty (Compton-Lilly, 2017; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2018).

Studies from Bowman, Comer, & Johns (2018) and Shannon-Baker, Porfilio, & Plough (2020) indicate many parents want to meet the demands of school and educators. Parents also want their children to meet these demands as many believe education attainment of their children is a means to future success. Yet in meeting these requirements, explicit and implicit messages and pressures from those in the school setting can occur. With this messages and pressures can create immense familial struggles and amplified emotions to meet those demands. These struggles and amplified emotions can create negative home environments for the children and parents damaging familial relationships. This harm can include emotional, psychological, and physical. In this context, the question could be asked, “Are academic literacy demands by educators creating negative circumstances for families living in poverty who want to meet these demands?”

This study focuses on a poor, English learner family addressing the academic literacy demands from teachers and an administrator. The demands contribute to the often negative emotional, psychological, and physical familial reactions. Reactions that are centered in anger, frustration, anxiety, and fatigue. The reactions are frightening as they are from a mother who loves her children so much but perceives she is failing in meeting the educational demands placed on her as a parent to assist her children with academic literacy expectations.

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