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AWAKENING TO LITERACY

*The University of Victoria Symposium on
Children's Response to a Literate Environment:
Literacy Before Schooling*

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2. Social and Institutional Influences on the Development and Practice of Literacy

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This chapter inquires into the sources of life experiences that lead to the development of literacy. We address this question because we share a concern with many fellow citizens and scholars that the scholastic achievement in the United States of the economically poor, particularly those people usually referred to as *ethnic minorities*, falls short of that of the country's mainstream students. We also share a belief in the relevance of literacy to schooling; only in exceptional circumstances are the two separable (see Scribner and Cole, 1981). However, we do not share two key assumptions that seem to characterize much of the literature about the sources of high levels of literacy and scholastic achievement in children. These assumptions are that books provide the only valuable source of literacy experience for preschoolers and that ethnic or cultural factors mitigate against literacy development and practice.

The Equation of Literacy with Books

Few people would argue with the assertion that the United States is a literate society. Writing and its associated technologies are central to scientific discourse and the organization of industry, government, and education. "Get it in writing" is not merely an adage; it is the accepted legal practice. Literacy also is used extensively by businesses in their dealings with the public. Advertising, product labels, billing systems, directions, and receiving and distributing the family income all make use of written language. In the United States, literacy is an integral part of food gathering, the acquisition and maintenance of shelter and clothing, transportation, entertainment, and other recreational activities. Literacy seems to be involved in many of the essential domains of human activity as they are organized in this society.

Despite the obvious importance of literacy to everyday functioning in many different contexts, it has appeared plausible for social scientists to concentrate their attention on only a few of these contexts, especially cases in which parents engage their children in reading in a deliberate and planned manner. Book-reading, storybook time, and other experiences related to books (Wells, 1981; Scollon and Scollon, 1979; Varenne et al., 1981) are not the only sources of literate experience, although these are the ones typically focused on when the child's preparation for school is being considered. In summarizing this body of research, Heath (1980b, 15) informs us that children with book-reading experience at home arrive at school

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already socialized into the school-preferred approach to teaching literacy. With such socialization, the school can best capitalize on what the child has already learned about print and its functions and meaning through early exposure to books. Thus, one predominant source of poor school performance of lower-class children is considered to be a lack of experience with books.

However, as we will demonstrate later, book-reading, storybook time, and other experiences related to books are *not* the only sources of literate experience even among the urban poor of the United States. In fact, these book-related experiences represent a minority of heterogeneous activities involving print. Lower-class children have considerable experience with print in addition to books.

Everything we know as social scientists suggests a very simple truth—that the literate practice observed within a group can best be accounted for by examining the external restrictions on the uses of literacy within a community. In West Africa, Scribner and Cole (1981) show this to be true of the Vai. The extent and structure of literate skills practiced by the Vai matched the range of contexts and functions encountered in their daily lives. Vai literacy is restricted because many of the contexts in which literacy would be functional are controlled by government agencies, schools, and modern economic institutions. Insofar as United States communities also are defined by such constraints, the contexts in which literacy is practiced and the links between local contexts must be known if much is to be said about literacy development. In fact, we see the whole notion of levels of literacy development as contingent, in this case, on the overwhelming power of schools for determining entry into a wide variety of important contexts. Consequently, we sought not only a principled, reproducible, description of different learning contexts but some notion of the frequency of various types of events as a basis for characterizing the patterns of different fundamental kinds of literate activity in homes where young children are being raised.

We already know from the work of Heath (1980a, 1980b) that even among working-class people there are many ways, in addition to reading books, that adults arrange for their children to come into contact with print. Her reports are detailed and suggestive with respect to the deliberately constructed contexts in which parents teach their children about print. She notes different orientations toward the kind of reading that one will need to do in school, which split along both class and ethnic lines, and arrives at three different configurations of home literate activity with three resulting patterns of school-home correspondence.

Based on such evidence, we may conclude that literacy is not absent in these working-class families' homes. Literacy encompasses a wide range of everyday practices, and these practices are important aspects of the knowledge people acquire about literacy.

Ethnic and Cultural Aspects of Literacy Development

As an ethnically and socially diverse group of social scientists, our research team¹ is very concerned with seeking to clarify the basis on which such phrases as *ethnic group differences in literacy* or *literate practices associated with poor people* are used. In our opinion, far too much emphasis has been placed on the cultural impediments to literacy, making it difficult to see the ways in which social and

institutional forces operating on groups of people structure these groups' exposure to and uses of print.

Hence, in our analysis we have taken special care to link practices in the home to the social sources from which they spring. In effect we ask, "When we see a literate practice in the home, where did it come from?" When we see cultural forces at work, we see resources for coping with print as part of the mix.

The Study

Our work, undertaken at approximately the time that Heath's work was beginning to appear in print, shares with hers a concern with ethnographic description. Although we were interested in the situations stressed by Heath, which we might term *instructional* in the broad sense, we also had a greater interest in a variety of events in which print enters all but unnoticed by the participants. That is, we wanted a description of those literate events that were so much a part of people's lives with one another that they pass largely unnoticed. It was our belief, based on the work of Goody (1977) and Scribner and Cole (1981), that many mundane uses of print, if described carefully, can yield evidence of important elements of literacy practice that, although differently structured than the pure essayist style of literacy which is so much a part of formal teaching situations, represent a very important part of what it is that adults pass on to their children.

We conducted approximately 2000 hours of observation of our sample over a period of 18 months. The average number of home visits per child was thirty-four and the average number of hours of observation per child was 91. All of the families lived in the metropolitan area of San Diego and equally represented three ethnic groups (Black American, Mexican-American, and Anglo-American). Observations were focused on the preschool children but also included the daily activities of their families when the child was present to observe or participate in them.

Data-Gathering

Ethnographic participation in everyday affairs as a member of the community is an ideal way to experience the community members' point of view. Ethnography often has yielded descriptions about the details of mundane events, but it often is vague as well. "Spot observations" are a contrasting tradition, in which behavior samples are taken from time to time by someone who is normally a member of the community in question. Spot observations offer the advantage of repeated systematic observation, which allows ethnographers to make statements about the relative frequency of different kinds of events of importance to them. In our research, we attempted to link the best of the ethnographic and spot observation techniques; in other words, we employed *emic observations*² which are grounded systematically.

Our basic approach was to make observations in the homes and community which were preserved by detailed field notes. By this approach, we attempted to describe as fully as possible all literacy events that occurred during observation periods. We defined a literacy event as "any action sequence involving one or more persons in which the production or comprehension of print plays a significant role." Any time a target child or anyone in the child's immediate environment directly used any type

of literacy technology (such as a book, a pencil or a newspaper) or was in any other way engaged with written language, the observer described the event in detail. The focus was on providing a description of the actions that took place, the contexts in which the event arose and was played out, the participants in the event, any activities that occurred simultaneously or alternated with the literacy event, and the activity that took place after the event ended.

Observations were made at various hours of the day during which the child was awake over the 7 days of the week. We attempted to interfere as little as possible in the normal activities of the families and thus assumed the role of passive observers. The presence of an observer in the homes seemed in no way to stifle the reading and writing of the members of the household. On the contrary, in a few families extra literacy events almost certainly were staged for our benefit until the novelty of having an observer around had worn off. Also, some events were clearly inspired by the observer's presence. These two types of events were not included in our analyses. One such event is presented here:

The target child (T.C.) notices the observer (O.) taking notes. He asks O. what she is doing. O. answers, "Writing." T.C. responds: "I want to write." O. gives T.C. a sheet of paper. Mother (M.) hands him a pen. T.C. asks O. to draw him a happy face. M. tells him to draw one himself. M.: "You know how." T.C. draws. (He wanted to make a happy face, but the shape came out rectangular so he called it a pillow.) T.C. turns the paper over and makes what he calls a happy face. T.C. notices the print on his pen and studies it.

The Research Population

Our attention was focused on preschool children to attempt to uncover what constitutes their experiences with literacy. In particular, we wanted to know whether there were kinds of literacy experiences other than story-reading that provide these preschoolers with systematic and useful sources of learning about print. Since the family unit represents the smallest and most familiar social organization that transmits early knowledge of literacy, we selected the family as the focal setting for our observations. We were especially sensitive to the way patterns of literacy related to the total configuration of people's lives. We hoped to build a broader notion of literacy practice in the home, not only for the sake of ethnographic description but also for use in future research as a source of either independent variables (to predict school success) or dependent variables (to measure the effect of some intervention).

The Analytic Framework

The wide range of literacy events we ultimately observed represented a major coding problem for us. Before we could begin analyzing, we had to figure out what there was to analyze. Our field notes were not check sheets. We had no prespecified categories to guide us. Storybook time might be considered an exception, but it serves only to illustrate the problem we faced. Suppose that we agree that we know what is meant by *storybook time* and that it is a reliably scorable unit of activity to be observed in any home. What other categories are there? *Homework* might suggest itself, but we were working with preschoolers. The fact is, there was no accepted

taxonomy of home literacy events that might involve 2- to 4-year-olds. We had to build a descriptive scheme and then, using this scheme as a starting point, we could code each event for purposes of data aggregation.

The results reported in this chapter represent our solution to the complex problem of building a descriptive scheme that was both faithful to the everyday experiences of our study sample and comprehensive. The analytic framework we present evolved from a detailed analysis of the more than 1400 literacy events observed. We have attempted to maintain the descriptive focus of our ethnographic methods and, at the same time, to present a summary of the major configuration of literate practice within the present sample which could be generalized to similar populations of low-income people in the United States.

Domains of Literacy Activity

Our data clearly indicate that literacy events function not as isolated bits of human activity but as a connected units embedded in a functional system of activity generally involving prior, simultaneously occurring, and subsequent units of action. In other words, the literacy events we observed were socially assembled transactions. Through a careful analysis of the literacy contexts we obtained from our field notes, we were able to identify several elements of these complex literacy situations: the materials, the people, their goals, the participant structure,³ behavioral rules and expectations, the physical setting, and prior and subsequent units of action. Based on this qualitative analysis of the context surrounding the literacy event, we were able to construct an analytic system of *domains of literate activity*.

Once we began the detailed qualitative analysis of our field descriptions, we noticed that the types of literacy technology being used and the actions constructed around them were linked in nontrivial ways. First, the content of the material could be linked to organizations and institutions outside the home. That is, the originating point of the material involved in most literacy events could be traced directly back to particular segments of the society, such as the trade economy, the school, the church, or the welfare system. Second, various materials involving different kinds of text structure entered differentially into various kinds of contexts. For example, television or movie lists were used in an instrumental way to select entertainment; biblical narrative was used to learn or teach the Word of God; a list of food items was used for shopping; and isolated alphabets, the names of family members, and isolated words were used to teach phonics, letter identification, and word recognition lessons to young children. Very often these kinds of activity carried a familiar label (such as "shopping," or "paying the bills"). Within each of the domains of literacy activity, we attempted to characterize how print mediated the activity.

Consideration of these aspects of the literacy context enabled us to organize our literacy events into the following nine domains of literacy activity: daily living, entertainment, school-related activity, religion, general information, work, literacy techniques and skills, interpersonal communication, and storybook time.

Daily Living

Literacy events coded into the domain of daily living were embedded in activities that constitute the recurrent practices of ordinary life for the families in our

samples, including obtaining food, maintaining shelter, participating in the requirements of social institutions, and maintaining the social organization of the family. Literacy events appeared in daily living activities such as shopping, washing clothes, paying bills; getting welfare assistance, preparing food, and dressing the children.

Entertainment

Literacy events coded into the domain of entertainment were embedded in activities that passed the time of the participant or participants in an enjoyable, constructive, or interesting manner. Literacy was observed to occur in a wide variety of activities in this domain. However, depending on the activity, literacy itself was (1) the source of the entertainment (for example, reading a novel, or doing a crossword puzzle), (2) instrumental to engaging in the entertainment itself (for instance, reading the television guide to find out what programs will be on, or reading the rules for parlor games), or (3) a facet of media entertainment (such as reading that occurs in the course of a television program or film).

School-Related Activity

In most cases, the material that served as the focal point of the events coded into the domain of school-related activity came directly from the school. In other cases, the direct link to the school was provided by the event participants' labeling of their ongoing activity as school-related. For examples, literacy events were coded in this domain when siblings were "playing school," or when parents were getting their children "ready for school," or when parents were helping their children "do better in school." Parents or siblings organized these types of events around workbooks purchased at the supermarket or other literacy technology such as tablets and cutout pages of magazines.

Religion

A distinguishing feature of literacy events coded into the religion domain is that they typically involve more sophisticated literacy skills than do events in most of the other domains. For example, it was not uncommon for these events to require individual or group text analysis skills as a part of Bible study sessions.

General Information

The information being accumulated in general information literacy events covered a wide range of topics and may or may not have some future use.

Work

In most cases, the literacy events related to employment were associated with producing a product, performing labor, or providing a service that was exchanged for monetary resources. However, in some cases the literacy event was associated with either gaining or maintaining the opportunity to earn money in this way.

Literacy Techniques and Skills

Literacy events coded into the domain of literacy techniques and skills were those in which reading or writing was the specific focus of the ongoing activity: That is, print is the thing that initiated and organized the activities. Specifically, these activities were organized to teach or learn literacy techniques, skills, or information. The events sometimes were initiated by a literate person, but more frequently they were initiated by the child. In either case, at least one participant in an event (and sometimes both) is required to shift abruptly out of some unrelated ongoing activity to participate in the new literacy event.

Interpersonal Communication

Literacy events classified as interpersonal communication involved printed communication with friends or relatives, usually in letter form.

Storybook Time

The domain of storybook time comprised those literacy events in which a caregiver read to a child or children in the family as a part of the caregiver's *routine* activity. Of course, not all events in which a caregiver read to a child involved narratives (stories). Typically the books involved in these events were alphabet books or books that have objects pictured with their corresponding labels; such materials contain no story line in the conventional sense. However, the category storybook time included such readings and emphasized the planned regularity of the event.

Evaluating Literacy Within the Domains

The nine domains of literacy activity organize the literacy events we observed according to salient features of the contexts within which they occurred. Within each domain, we first wished to know the frequency of events and their duration. The *frequency* of events is expressed as a proportion to standardize it across all families in the sample. This proportion was obtained by dividing the total number of literacy events by the total hours of observation. The *duration* of events is measured in minutes and also is expressed as a proportion for purposes of standardization. This proportion was obtained by dividing the total minutes of literacy events by the total hours of observation. Using the parameters of frequency and duration, we could compare the patterns of literacy activity in the different ethnic groups being observed.

*Results**Frequency and Duration*

Table 2-1 summarizes the frequency and average duration of literacy activity that occurred in each of the nine domains. In the interest of representing the data more accurately, we have differentiated two of our domains in this table. The entertain-

Table 2-1. *Average Duration and Frequency of Literacy Events per Hour of Observation, by Domain*

Domain of Literate Activity	Duration		Frequency	
	Average Minutes	Percent of All Literacy Activity	Average Frequency	Percent of All Literacy Activity
Daily living	1.28	17.1	0.17	23.9
Entertainment				
Source	1.66	22.1	0.11	15.5
Instrumental	0.26	3.5	0.09	12.7
Media	0.03	0.4	0.01	1.4
School-related activity	1.16	15.5	0.08	11.3
Religion	1.27	16.9	0.02	2.8
General information	0.68	9.1	0.06	8.5
Work	0.09	1.2	0.01	1.4
Literacy techniques and skills				
Adult-initiated	0.19	2.5	0.03	4.2
Child-initiated	0.58	7.7	0.10	14.1
Interpersonal communication	0.17	2.3	0.02	2.8
Storybook time	0.13	1.7	0.01	1.4
Total	7.50	100.0	0.71	100.0

ment domain has been subdivided according to the three ways print enters into this activity: one in which print was itself the source of entertainment, one in which print was instrumental to entertainment, and a special category in which print was provided through the television media. We have differentiated the literacy techniques and skills domain according to who initiated the event (the adult or the child being studied).

Interpretation of Table 2-1 is facilitated when the reader keeps in mind that the averages represented in the table are proportions based on the number of literacy events or the time (in minutes) spent in literacy activity *per hour of observation*. Table 2-1 reveals that, on the average, the preschool children who participated in our study either observed or participated directly in 7.5 minutes of literacy during every hour of observation. Also, nearly once every hour a literacy event occurred and our preschool children either observed or participated in it. If we take into account that the average low-income child who participated in our study is awake 10 hours per day, we then can estimate, if our sample is representative, that this child is going to observe or participate in nearly eight literacy events or approximately 75 minutes of activity involving print virtually every day of his or her life. However, these events are not organized one after another, and all the reading or writing time is not condensed into one period. Rather, the frequency and time of events is distributed across the nine domains.

Inspection of Table 2-1 also reveals that the domains of activity in which print most frequently becomes involved are daily living, entertainment (where print is both the source of and instrumental to the entertainment activity), literacy techniques and skills, and school-related activities, respectively. Regarding the amount

of time spent in literacy events, the highest percentage is committed to entertainment (especially where print is the source of the activity), followed by daily living, religion, and school-related activities.

Ethnic Group and Cultural Contrasts

When we compared the experiences that families in our population had with literacy across the domains composing our analytic framework, we found considerable variability distributed across all families in all ethnic groups. However, all families did come into contact with print. In turn, the frequency and duration of particular experiences that a preschool child has with print apparently are determined in large part by the interactions that his or her parents and other literate people in the home have with various organizations and institutions that exist outside the home. These experiences do not seem to be determined by the cultural arrangements particular to each ethnic group.

Table 2-2 and 2-3 indicate that the patterns of activity by ethnic groups differ across the nine domains. However, the differences are statistically significant in only four of the domains of activity: In the domains of daily living and entertainment (where print is instrumental), there are significant differences between the ethnic groups in the duration of activity, and in the domains of religion and literacy techniques and skills, the frequency of activity is significantly different.

Table 2-2. Average Frequency of Literacy Events per Hour of Observation, by Domain and Ethnicity

Domain of Literate Activity	Anglo-American		Black American		Mexican-American	
	Average Frequency	Percent of All Literacy Activity	Average Frequency	Percent of All Literacy Activity	Average Frequency	Percent of All Literacy Activity
Daily living	0.22	21.1	0.16	30.2	0.12	20.3
Entertainment						
Source	0.13	12.5	0.12	22.6	0.09	15.25
Instrumental	0.21	20.1	0.02	3.8	0.03	5.1
Media	0.01	1.0	0.002	0.4	0.01	1.7
School-related activity	0.10	9.6	0.05	9.3	0.09	15.25
Religion	0	0	0.05	9.3	0.02	3.4
General						
information	0.10	9.6	0.05	9.3	0.03	5.1
Work	0.01	1.0	0.01	1.9	0.02	3.4
Literacy						
techniques and skills						
Adult-initiated	0.06	5.8	0.01	1.9	0.03	5.1
Child-initiated	0.13	12.5	0.06	11.3	0.13	22.0
Interpersonal communication	0.06	5.8	0	0	0.01	1.7
Storybook time	0.01	1.0	0	0	0.01	1.7
Total	1.04	100.0	0.532	100.0	0.59	100.0

Table 2-3. Average Minutes of Literacy Events per Hour of Observation, by Domain and Ethnicity

Domain of Literate Activity	Anglo-American		Black American		Mexican-American	
	Average Minutes	Percent of All Literacy Activity	Average Minutes	Percent of All Literacy Activity	Average Minutes	Percent of All Literacy Activity
Daily living	1.31	18.4	2.03	20.1	0.52	9.9
Entertainment						
Source	1.42	19.9	2.88	28.5	0.68	12.9
Instrumental	0.55	7.7	0.15	1.5	0.08	1.5
Media	0.05	0.7	0.02	0.2	0.02	0.4
School-related activity	0.97	13.6	0.94	9.3	1.57	29.9
Religion	0	0	2.68	26.5	1.09	20.7
General						
information	1.47	20.6	0.41	4.0	0.15	2.9
Work	0.02	0.3	0.21	2.1	0.05	1.0
Literacy						
techniques and skills						
Adult-initiated	0.27	3.8	0.07	0.7	0.24	4.6
Child-initiated	0.40	5.6	0.72	7.1	0.63	12.00
Interpersonal communication	0.36	5.1	0	0	0.14	2.7
Storybook time	0.31	4.3	0	0	0.08	1.5
Total	7.13	100.0	10.11	100.0	5.25	100.0

Of these four differences, the most interesting occurs in the domain of literacy techniques and skills. The events we observed in that domain focused on the production or comprehension of print symbols. Many of these events also provided the preschool child with value statements regarding literacy, such as "it is better to write than to color." Although all the events in this domain could be characterized as literacy lessons, only a portion of them followed the familiar initiation-reply-evaluation sequence (Mehan, 1979). Our findings regarding the frequency of these kinds of events generally replicate those reported by Heath (1980b). It is the case that Anglo-American parents more frequently ($p = 0.07$) initiate activities that specifically communicate about the value of literacy or its techniques and skills. It also is interesting to note that, as Heath (1980a) found in Tracton, literate adults in Black families usually wait for the preschool child to initiate this kind of interaction rather than initiating it themselves (see Table 2-2). However, our data suggest that when preschoolers did initiate events in this domain, the events tended to last longer in Black families than in Anglo-American families (see Table 2-3).

A final point should be made regarding the overall differences in patterns of literacy activity between the three ethnic groups that participated in this study. Inspection of the totals presented in Tables 2-2 and 2-3 reveals that, overall, members of Anglo-American families involve print in their activities more frequently than do members of Black or Mexican-American families. However,

Anglo-American families do not spend more time involved with print. Thus, preschool children in Anglo-American families can be expected to observe or participate in a comparatively larger number of literacy events than do their Black or Mexican-American peers. However, these events can be expected to be of comparatively shorter duration than those that occur in Black or Mexican-American families. By contrast, preschool children in Black and Mexican-American homes can be expected to observe or participate in comparatively fewer literacy events than their Anglo-American peers, but for Black children, these events can be expected to last for comparatively longer periods of time than they do in Anglo-American families.

Rethinking the Notion of Culture and Literacy

We began our study by asking what were the sources of life experiences that lead to the development of literacy, particularly among ethnic minorities and the poor. We were aware of the large body of social science research that suggests that the culture of the poor and ethnic minorities in the United States accounts for these people's failure to develop sufficient skills in reading and writing to do well in school (for reviews, see Downing and Thackray, 1975; Cullinan, 1974; Simons, 1974). Thus, from the beginning we thought we would find that culture exerts a significant influence on a child's development of literacy and that this was likely to be true even within our lower-class sample.

We were careful to select our research sample in a way that would allow us to investigate this hypothesis. At the outset we reasoned, as many social scientists before us, that any variability in literacy activity resulting from ethnic group membership may reflect cultural differences in literate practice. However, when comparing the patterns of literacy practice presented by the three ethnic groups in our sample, we found it difficult to conclude that ethnicity was a uniformly significant source of differences.

Social Institutional Influences on Literacy

The elements of the context used in building our descriptive scheme of domains of literacy activity were the source and type of material involved in the literacy event and the sequences of action that were clustered around the particular function of the material. Using these criteria to define the relevant features of the contexts in which literacy occurs suggests that *literacy is influenced largely by social institutions and not cultural membership*. In fact, the closest we came to a source of cultural influence on literate practice concerned religion. Even there, the organization of religious practice was not consistent with traditional accounts. In our study, the Black and Mexican-American families who practiced religion were not engaged in "oral tradition." On the contrary, the churches our families attended encouraged and even required an active, assertive approach to print. A statement from a Black mother accurately captures the role of literacy in the way most of our study families practiced religion:

Reading the Bible builds up your faith. The more knowledge you take in the more faith you have. It helps you build a better relationship with God. . . . Besides, scripture says that from babes you should inculcate them with the Word.

In this woman's church, the congregation is responsible, under the leadership of the minister, for reading, analyzing, and applying the Word of God. The Word also instructs the woman to read the Bible to her children from the time they are infants until they can read for themselves. This religious imperative led many of our parents who practice religion to include the children in their semi-weekly Bible study sessions conducted in their home or at the home of a friend. Sometimes Bible study groups were specially organized for the children. Also, one of our mothers conducted regular bedtime Bible-reading events for her children. In these events, the child we studied either pretended to read along with a literate person or said the Lord's Prayer while pretending to read it from the Bible.

Another factor that would seem to be a possible source of cultural influence is language or dialect. Some of our families spoke Spanish, and even more of our families frequently spoke vernacular Black English. However, these factors seemed to exert relatively little influence on the patterns of literacy use that we observed during the study.

It became increasingly clear over the course of the study that many of the businesses and institutions of society exert a strong influence on literacy practices of low-income people. Aside from using print to carry out official and routine activities, social institutions also were involved in the recreational activities of the people who participated in the study. Many of the businesses in United States society design and distribute printed material for use during leisure-time activities. The proliferation of print for entertainment includes such items as children's and adults' games. Instructions and rules for playing games, comic books, paperbacks, all varieties of television listings, some television game shows, and the theater guide. In the United States, the production of print for entertainment purposes can be a very profitable enterprise. With such a wide availability of print for entertainment, people at all income levels in the United States are provided the opportunity to interact with print on a regular basis. In fact, in low-income homes we visited during the past 2 years, entertainment represented the most frequent use of literacy. We have observed both children and adults using printed materials to entertain themselves alone and jointly.

Anticipatory Preparation for Schooling

More prevalent influences on literacy seemed to be the parents' anticipation of their preschoolers' attendance at school, the routine requirements of daily life, or passing time in recreation. Perhaps the most dramatic example of social influences was demonstrated by our one nonliterate mother who exhibited a strong orientation toward literacy. Despite what would seem to be extreme impediments to literate practice, this parent organizes an incredible amount of literacy for her children. Cultural factors in this instance provide a different set of resources (that is, language referents and style of interaction, see Heath, 1980b), but in themselves, they do not appear to be impediments to literacy. This mother pushed her child in rather creative ways to attain literacy and was improving her own skills as well. She was acutely aware of the importance of literacy and of the constraints her limited literacy skills placed on her. She clearly did not want her children to be illiterate. In this mother's efforts to improve her literacy skills, the church became a primary broker for literacy practice, even though the context of this practice was not religious.⁴ The

child's preparation for school (and, presumably, his subsequent success) was the motivation for much of the mother's literacy interactions with her son. This mother teaches her child what she knows about writing and, as she progresses in her own skills, she teaches the child more. Thus, the mother presents material just outside the child's present realm of understanding and skills in a manner that (for the mother) is the natural developmental sequence for learning to read and write. One would not expect a middle-class variety of parent-directed storybook time in this family, because the mother could not read well enough. However, several interactions around books (such as a wildlife encyclopedia) occurred in which the adult made up stories, attempted to sound out words, and named pictures. Even during play activities in the park, the mother attempted to incorporate literacy by spelling out with sticks any new words she had learned. The mother's own practice with literacy was serving two major purposes at once—the improvement of her own literacy skills and the teaching of these skills (and of the importance of the skills) to her child.

Conclusions

Our observations are especially important in light of some recent trends in assessing the usefulness of literacy for low-income people in our society. There has been a narrow emphasis on one particular set of literacy activities—namely, story-reading and homework. When literacy is equated only with books, the research reports indicate that lower-class families engage much less frequently in literacy activities than do middle-class families. When we turn to studies of other types of literacy events, the little evidence available in the literature also leads to the conclusion that lower-class families are not literate. Except when special constraints are in effect (such as in a civil service examination), people with few or no literacy skills get by by using their general knowledge and social arrangements. Indeed, critics of recent literacy research (Nunberg, 1981) raise the interesting question of the purpose of making people literate if they do not use literacy skills outside narrow technologic realms. Our data suggest that literacy is not a tool used only in narrow technologic realms, but that it is a powerful tool for engaging in many activities in many domains.

The results reported in this chapter suggest a different approach to home intervention. We have observed families engaging in a variety of literate practices with connections to social institutions. Therefore, if we want to reach children in their homes in a manner that will facilitate the development of literacy practice, we would be well advised to focus on the social institutions that serve as the origins of the literate practices they observe. We could introduce interventions through the social institutions where print originates. Thus, we would concentrate on intervening through daily living, entertainment, and religious activities, using the particular organizations and institutions that are the source of these activities in the home.

Notes

1. Research team members include A.B. Anderson, S.J. Stokes, W. Teale, J. Martinez, R. Bennett, B.E. Vaughn, L. Forrest, E. Estrada of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, the University of California at San Diego.

2. Emic observations are those that attempt to adopt the categories and perspectives of the culture studied [Eds.].
3. The original dependent variable in our study (the literacy event) was differentiated along three major dimensions: the domain of activity in which the event occurred, the participant structure involved in the event, and the lesson structure of those events specifically characterizable as "literacy lessons." Of these three dimensions, only the domains analysis will be presented in detail here. Detailed analyses of participant structure and lesson structure of the events in our sample will be presented in detail in forthcoming papers.
4. A sister from the mother's church visits the mother twice weekly to teach her how to write. On one occasion, the mother showed the observer her assignment. The sister (tutor) had written the alphabet, identified consonants and vowels, and made some words by combination. The mother's homework assignment was to write a word for each letter of the alphabet.