1

The Conditions that Support Emergent Literacy

David F. Lancy

A PERSONAL FOREWORD

It was 1980 and three events came together to bring about my own baptism in the religion that was to be called emergent literacy. I had just started writing up the "Indigenous Mathematics Project," a comparative study of culture, cognition, and education undertaken earlier in Papua New Guinea (Lancy 1983) and was, hence, attuned to the sorts of issues we will be talking about here.

I also had two young daughters who feasted on books and stories like some kids gobble down Halloween candy. Nadia confounded the school authorities because she did not know her alphabet, yet read at a "fourth-grade level." Sonia, two years her junior and in nursery school, was chafing at the bit. At the dinner table after Nadia had shared the day's school stories, Sonia used her turn to complain about how much math homework she had to do! Since her school experiences didn't seem as academic as Nadia's, she made them up. A master storyteller, she, too, learned to read as easily as she had learned to talk (see Baghban 1984; Lass 1982).

Then there was Dorothy, the girls' mother, who was enrolled in reading courses at Arizona State University (ASU) to complete qualifications for an Arizona teaching credential and her school stories were grim. She struggled to make sense of a curriculum worthy of nuclear physics. These courses presented literacy acquisition as an extremely complex process, like a delicate watch that must be handcrafted by experts and could be damaged by the slightest deviation from standard procedure.

Like a moth, I was drawn to the flame sparked by these apparently contradictory views of children's literacy. ASU in the early 1980s was a fortuitous place to begin such a personal odyssey as it contained, within the education faculty, some of the leading proponents of what became opposing schools of thought on the subject of reading acquisition—Nick Silvaroli and Carole Edelsky, to name but two. It was at ASU, also, that I initiated—with Kelly Draper—the study reported in Chapter Five.

The deeper I probed, the more convinced I became that emergent literacy represented both an accurate theory of how most children become literate, and, contrariwise, also explained illiteracy. Likewise, I have become very excited by the promise that emergent literacy holds as a wellspring of ideas for intervention with at-risk children and curricular reform.

WHAT IS EMERGENT LITERACY?

Adherents of emergent literacy are concerned with an old and well-studied question—how do children become literate? But Teale and Sulzby (1986) indicate that emergent literacy must be viewed as a "paradigm shift" (Kuhn 1970) where aspects of children's literacy that formerly seemed central—letter-naming—are now seen as peripheral, and aspects that were seen as trivial, or even dysfunctional—invented spelling—are seen as critical. The old paradigm, of course, is still alive and kicking (see, e.g., Adams 1990) and, indeed, the majority of parents, educators, policy makers, publishers, and even educational researchers still adhere to it. But there are signs of defection, *en masse*, to the new paradigm.

Emergent literacy places the onset of literacy at shortly after birth—even earlier if babies are read to in the womb (De Casper & Spence 1986). Becoming literate, in this view, occupies every waking moment throughout childhood. This contrasts with the view that literacy begins with reading instruction, in the first grade, or that, prior to first grade, pupils should receive training in pre-reading and reading readiness skills such as learning to identify letters or phonemes. Storybook reading by the teacher in preschool has not necessarily been seen as making a direct contribution to the child's literacy. Likewise, Head Start was developed to remedy the problem of poor academic performance—of which reading is the linchpin—by provid-

ing "compensatory" education. Yet, literacy in any guise is (or was, until recently) virtually absent from the Head Start curriculum. In Sweden (Chapter Six, this volume) this disjunction is even sharper than it is in the United States. Swedes believe that young children benefit from exposure to storybooks, rhymes, and conversations, but that this has nothing to do with learning to read, which they must be taught to do but no earlier than age seven when they begin formal schooling.

At least part of the reason for the assertion that literacy begins at an early age is that it follows from a second fundamental assertion—that reading, writing, and speaking are interrelated (Hiebert 1981). The child who will, eventually, become literate is exposed to and uses language in ways that are distinctive (Bernstein 1971). In Dickinson and Snow's research (Chapter Three, this volume) children who experience regular family talk around the dinner table and who have opportunities to use narrative and explanatory speech patterns are advantaged in learning to read. This contrasts with the prevailing view that separates learning to talk from learning to read. EL also challenges the notion that learning to write must *follow* learning to read.

It follows then, that children probably acquire the use of literate forms like story-telling, letter-writing, and menu reading from telling stories, writing letters and reading menus, not from "training" in skills far removed from real literacy, like "matching opposites" (c.f. Moffett & Wagner 1992).

Also, those who are expert in the uses of literacy—parents and older siblings as opposed to reading teachers—model and introduce these uses to children. They create situations—dinner table conversations, interactive bedtime story rituals—where children can flap their stubby little literacy wings without fear of crashing to the ground (see Vygotsky 1978).

If literacy is influenced by conversations a child has participated in, by being read to, by opportunities to enact stories in play, and so on, it follows that his or her literacy will be dynamic. It will grow and change. It will emerge.

So what do we offer, in this volume, that advances beyond these generalities? Strickland and Cullinan (1990, 427), in a recent defense of EL, argue: "Rather than classify children as readers or non-readers, we believe it is more accurate to consider their literacy development as being on a continuum of increasing competence." But, as Kamberelis and Perry (Chapter Seven, this volume) show in their study of nine first-graders, there is an evident discontinuity that occurs during the

transition to "conventional literacy." This stage-like process is not a theorist's invention, it is grounded in the data obtained during a probing microgenetic study.

Another discontinuity occurs, according to Pellegrini and Galda (this volume, see also Figure 13.2), between reading and writing. Although obviously related, their research shows that reading is promoted primarily through joint storybook reading—where children learn to attend to metalinguistic verbs, whereas writing is driven by the child's growing capacity for symbolic representation—a capacity nurtured in verbal interaction with one's mother and symbolic play with peers.

Again we hear from Strickland and Cullinan (1990) that, "Unlike many early researchers, most contemporary researchers talk about what children *can* do rather than what they *cannot* do" (p. 430). We must not let our commitment to seeing literacy as emerging blind us to some unpleasant realities. As several chapters in Part One show, there is enormous variation in where any two children of the same age fall along the EL continuum. In the Kamberelis and Perry study (Chapter Seven), for example, they dropped from their sample children who made the transition early in first grade and those who hadn't made it by the end of the year. Similarly, in the study reported in Chapter Five, there were children—from the same school—who were reading fluently in kindergarten while others still weren't reading fluently by the end of first grade. Further, we know from Connie Juel's (1988) massive study that children who are behind in first grade don't catch up, they fall further behind. Donny, the main subject in Purcell-Gates's case study (Chapter Four), already shows signs of developing various coping mechanisms that will permit him to "pass" in school even though he is a nonreader.

Purcell-Gates's work also shows quite clearly that, contrary to the Goodmans' assertion (Goodman & Goodman 1979), the presence of environmental print and the wide availability of print material in a literate society is no guarantee that children will naturally become readers and writers. All through these research reports (Bergin, Lancy, and Draper, Chapter Five; Dickinson & Beals, Chapter Three; Svensson, Chapter Six), we read sobering stories of children growing up with limited exposure to books, to decontextualized speech (see Snow 1983), to assisted performance (see Tharp & Gallimore 1988) and to fantasy play (Smilansky 1968) with predictable consequences for their acquisition of literacy. Hence, although the United States

and, by extension, the industrialized world may be a literate society in a statistical sense and in the sense that to fully participate in this society requires a level of literacy never before associated with "the masses" (Resnick & Resnick 1977), emergent literacy is more consistently found within the cultural mainstream than outside it—a topic we will take up shortly.

The major contribution we make to the corpus of material supporting EL is a series of studies of programs aimed at changing the environments—home, preschool, kindergarten, primary classrooms—where emergent literacy occurs. Teale and Sulzby's (1986) collection includes but a single "rare example of an intervention study that takes an emergent literacy perspective" (p. 90). In Part Two, "The Design of Emergent Literacy Environments," we offer case studies of ten such interventions.

LITERACY IN CULTURE

Ultimately, emergent literacy occurs within specific cultural contexts, so we must first consider these contexts. For centuries, scholars have been drawn to the study of the origins of writing (Schmandt-Besserat 1978) and to theorizing about the impact this invention has had on society. Havelock's (1976) analysis of the impact of alphabetic literacy on Greek society is but one example. Goody (1987) and Olson (1984) have carried these arguments further: "It is now generally agreed that literacy is associated with both a distinctive form of social organization, a *literate society*, and with a distinctive form of thought and talk, a *literate mind* " (Olson 1984, 185). In particular, Goody (1977) discusses the vastly expanded information store that writing and numbers make available to us. Postulation on the transformative effects of literacy on individuals and societies has been the inspiration for national literacy campaigns in the Third World (Freire 1970).

However, recent research suggests that these claims may be overstated. Stock (1983) shows the profound effect that print had on European society as, for example, in the church, such issues as sainthood and heresy were increasingly examined in light of written documents, rather than resorting to torture and scapulamancy (a form of divination). But this process took several centuries. Similarly, Reder and Green (1983), in their study of the Seal Bay Eskimo community,

show how conservative society is with respect to the adoption of literacy. While public school instruction in English has been available locally for at least 50 years, levels of academic literacy remain low. In this fishing and hunting community, literacy is of little value. Only recently, with the growth of a social service bureaucracy, has the lure of paid employment provided sufficient incentive to induce some community members to become literate. On the other hand, there remain individuals able to recite in Slavonic from Cyrillic sacred texts 125 years after the end of Russian sovereignty because the Orthodox church is still active in the area.

Historians (Graff 1986; Resnick & Resnick 1977) have also documented how few individuals could actually read and write in so-called literate societies. In a landmark study in Liberia, Scribner and Cole (1981) showed how the cognitive effects of literacy can more appropriately be credited to prolonged exposure to formal education. In a society with an indigenous script but no tradition of school-based literacy, literacy is used to a very limited extent and, consequently, its practice does not confer the sort of general abilities associated with the term "literate mind." Also, Heath (1986a) in a comparative study of three distinct but neighboring communities, found that literacy seems to have few of the effects claimed for it.

> In both Trackton and Roadville, the patterns of uses of literacy and the presumed benefits of literacy do not match those predicted from the general literature. . . Neither group has the receptive and productive skills and values surrounding reading and writing that fit those described for "modern" communities. Written materials are not a major source of new information for either community, and neither group writes to distribute ideas beyond their own primary group. In neither community does literacy bear any direct relationship to job status or chances for upward mobility. (p. 225)

Heath (1982, 1983) has led us away from the literate/oral dichotomy toward the view that there is a gradation from communities where literacy plays a valuable but very limited role to those that are saturated with literacy, where literacy functions not only as a tool but where reading and writing become ends in themselves (Nell 1988). Even more important, for the goals of this chapter, Heath shows how literacy in culture also includes a complex of beliefs and routines about how adults and children should interact vis-à-vis literacy and connects these patterns to the varied experiences that children from

these communities face when they encounter academic literacy in school.

Heath's three communities of Maintown (middle-class white), Roadville (working class white), and Trackton (impoverished—in the view of outsiders, not of the residents themselves—black) reflect three points along this continuum. Literacy is present in all three communities but, as she says of the seven uses of literacy in Trackton, "It is significant that these types do not include those uses—critical, esthetic, organizational, and recreational . . . usually highlighted in school-oriented discussions of literacy uses" (1986b, 22). A fourth possibility, that of a community in which literacy is absent, is identified in Purcell-Gates's (Chapter Four, this volume) research. A parallel gradation has been found by Carraher (1987) in Brazil and by Wagner, Messick, and Spratt (1986) in Morocco, where the elite are literate in French and send their children to schools where the language of instruction is French, through communities where scribes are available, for a fee, in the marketplace to perform literacy services for their illiterate clients. In Morocco, we also see a widespread form of literacy primarily for "...communication to or about God . . . . [which] . . . was a restricted literacy." (Goody 1987, 139). That is, individuals laboriously *memorize* lengthy passages in order to "read" the Quran.

Literacy in the Home

> The other night Ellie [7] and I bought a copy of *Peter Rabbit* in French for Hannah [11], to put in her stocking (for Christmas) because we wanted to have a toy or something. And Hannah has always loved *Peter Rabbit*, so we had it out here and we were looking at it trying to decide whether Ellie should have it because she just started taking French or whether we should really give it to Hannah. Hannah came in from dancing class and said, "Oh my goodness, French *Peter Rabbit*" and picked it up and we both said to her, "Well, Merry Christmas to you". . . and she sat down with it and she opened it up and began looking through it and she said, "Look, the pictures are exactly the same." We always keep *Peter Rabbit* right here, so we got the English and we read a page and then she read a page and the next thing we knew we were going through all the *Peter Rabbit* books . . . it was twenty minutes to eleven and we were reading *Peter Rabbit*, curled up on the couch, the three of us. What a marvelous evening that was, to go back all the way back to the age of three or four, and it was just a wonderful time (Taylor 1983, 82-83).

This passage epitomizes the culture of literacy in mainstream, middle-class homes. It is taken from a study of six stereotypical "All-American" families: fathers all professionals, mothers well educated but working at home, with 2 or 3 children; their lives permeated by literacy. Here a mother describes an episode that illustrates the critical role that literacy and literature play in bonding family members. Heath (1982) similarly shows how, in Maintown, adult-child interaction pivots around books or "book-talk." She notes the large libraries of picture books, of bedroom furnishings patterned with literary characters and themes, and the complexity of the bedtime story ritual. The field of emergent literacy has its origin in studies like these.

Parent-child interaction in reading has attracted a great deal of attention from scholars (Teale 1984a). Ninio and Bruner (1978) observed a mother reading to her infant over the period from one month to 18 months and showed that far more than just reading is involved. The mother labeled and talked about the pictures, asked her non-verbal child questions about the book, then supplied the answer. In middle-class homes, storybook reading is an occasion for knowledge acquisition and for learning about a myriad of language conventions. Many parents use what has been called an expansionist strategy (Lancy, Draper, and Boyce, 1989). With somewhat older children, parents ask questions about the text that have a different structure from those asked about the illustrations (Many 1988). In another study (Altwerger, Diehl-Faxon, and Dockstader-Anderson, 1985), one "mother used prosodic features such as rising intonation followed by a pause to encourage the child to predict and join in . . . [she] was aware of her daughter's unfamiliarity with the word 'wink' and read it in a higher pitch with greater intensity thus calling attention to it" (p. 482). Heath (1982) and DeLoache (DeLoache & Mendoza 1985) have shown that the character of the bedtime story undergoes subtle changes as children get older. Mothers escalate their demands, but they seem cognizant of the children's "zone of proximal development"(ZPD) (Teale & Sulzby 1987; Vygotsky 1978). "I skipped some things because he doesn't know what they are yet. Then, as he learns more, I go on to something else. He doesn't really know what a kite is but he knows his brothers go to fly a kite, so I feel I can talk to him about that . . . . At least that's how I feel I'm teaching him" (DeLoache 1984: 15). Clearly, children are acquiring both a story schemata (Kintsch & Greene 1978) and a model of book reading

(Cochran-Smith 1986) during this process and, not surprisingly, by the age of three they "read" to themselves, their pets, and each other during make-believe play (Heath 1983, Teale 1984b) practicing the schemata before they can actually decode print.

Other social conventions not directly related to reading are also implicated in storybook reading. Language is broken down and treated as an object (Heath 1986a), and children are exposed to linguistic forms (termed information structures by Snow and Goldfield (1982, 1983)) that are implicated in school and in adult discourse in this community. "Picture-book reading may, in addition to its substantive contribution, be the basis for transfer to participation in the discourse structure of classroom lessons several years later" (Cazden 1992, 106). As we shall see, these efforts do pay off and account, in large measure (Adams 1990), for these childrens' success in school. However, it is interesting that mainstream parents do not view themselves as teaching their children to read or getting them ready for school in these storybook and "book-talk" encounters (Clark 1976; Cochran-Smith 1986; Svensson, this volume). They take these largely for granted. Rather, their primary goal seems to be to create "conversational partners," family members who will, when they are older, be able to hold their own in the heavily academic discourse that is characteristic of this society.

Growing up in a Storied Environment

While storybooks and someone who enjoys reading to children are clearly a central part of the support structure for emergent literacy, they are not by any means the only part (Bissex 1980). In mainstream homes, parents begin holding conversations with their infants. Throughout childhood, mothers, in particular, model more advanced communication structures than their children are capable of employing at the time but that may be within their ZPD. They also expand their children's simple two word utterances—"want ball"—into grammatically correct and conceptually sophisticated statements—"Tommy would like the red ball?" Children are asked "known answer" questions—"What does Tommy have on his head?" to stimulate the children's vocabulary development.

Families exploit a variety of "activity settings" (Wertsch 1985a) that are routinized and designed to assist with the business of encul-

turating children (Lancy, in prep.). Storybook reading and dinner-table conversations (Dickinson & Beals, this volume; Heath, 1986c) are two activity settings with ample scope to support emergent literacy. Cartrips are another activity setting where the parent may draw children's attention to signs and other print in the environment and engage them in conversations about the world passing by. Yet another example is provided by Hudson (Chapter Fifteen, this volume), in which a father uses the occasion of a football game to engage his son in a school-like lesson, as in "What's the story here? What's going on?"

Martini and Mistry (1993) demonstrate just how information rich and educational these parent-child exchanges can be. They note that preschool-age "children initiated 74% of their interactions with adults by offering or asking for new information (p. 182)," and "their parents acknowledged, accepted and responded to these initiations 77% of the time. The children knew they had an audience. Parents answered children's questions, commented on their statements, and asked questions of their own to encourage children to elaborate their reports" (p. 184). "The well-prepared children also talked a great deal about experiences they had had away from their parents . . . used complete sentences, explicit vocabulary and complex sentences . . . asked parents how to do things, what things were called, how things worked . . . [they] asked the observer if she was married, had babies, where she lived . . . what kind of car [her husband] drove (p183)." However, a contrasting pattern was found in families of children who were "less-prepared" for the linguistic and literacy environment of the public school. We will address these results below.

There appear to be two general outcomes of raising children in a "storied" environment. First, they learn an elaborated linguistic code, a way of speaking (and thinking) in which the immediate context is transcended. Children who have had this kind of stimulation, for example, use more metalinguistic verbs ("say," "talk," "listen") in their speech and this fluency is, in turn, predictive of success as a reader (Pellegrini & Galda 1991, this volume). Second, these children seem much more likely to engage in symbolic (fantasy, pretend, imaginative) play, which is implicated in emergent literacy, especially narrative competence (Pellegrini 1985) and vocabulary and story comprehension (Dickinson & Beals, this volume). Hall (1991) points out that the scripts children use in play closely resemble, structurally, the stories they will soon be asked to read in school (Mandler & Johnson 1977).

Pellegrini and Galda (this volume) find a stronger connection between symbolic play and writing, both empirically and, drawing on Clay (1975) and Vygotsky (1978), theoretically. Writing, at least initially—since it is largely pictographic—is seen as first-order symbolization, as is symbolic play. Reading is, from the beginning, second-order symbolization.

The following episode from Roskos and Neuman's (1993) extensive study of literacy-related elements in four-year old pre-schoolers' symbolic play illustrates both the influence of activity set-tings and the very obvious contribution that such play makes to the child's emergent literacy. Dana and Hilary are enacting a letter-writing and post-office script.

> *Dana*: (scribbling on paper) Now, this should be ready.
> *Hilary*: (writing name on paper) No! We hafta sign our names. Our real names.
> *Dana*: What is our real names?
> *Hilary*: (pointing to her name) See?
> *Dana*: (writing name on paper) Oh-h-h!
> (Both girls fold their papers carefully, put them in envelopes, and seal the envelopes . . . . For the next 22 minutes they repeat this sequence 7 times, taking turns "writing, reading, and receiving mail.") (pp19-20).

Where the Support for Emergent Literacy Is Less Certain

As we move out of the middle-class mainstream, the picture is less clear. We see both a "restricted" (Goody 1987) role for literacy in these communities and considerable variation among families within the same community (Chandler, Argyris, Barnes, Goodman & Snow 1986; Varenne & McDermott 1986).

Among the Amish, parents stress the importance of becoming literate and do a variety of things to promote early literacy, but the goals are different from the cultural mainstream. The family is annoyed if children bring work home from school, and they strongly discourage their children from continuing beyond the eighth grade. There is a wide variety of printed material in regular use; however, much of it is unique to the Amish, on the one hand, and on the other, many texts—

such as paperback novels—found in most homes are absent. The parents "attempt to carefully control the reading material that enters their home" (Fishman 1990, 31). Similar restrictions extend to writing at home and in school. Creative writing, for example, is nonexistent: "not only do community constraints limit the number of appropriate topics and forms an Amish writer may use, but original approaches to or applications of these topics and forms is explicitly discouraged" (p. 37). Similarly, in Roadville, a white working-class community:

> residents use writing only when they have to . . . . Few write letters . . . [and] the content and form of their letters are predictable. . . . Roadville family members . . . collect reading material . . . and . . . talk about how they are going to learn to do something by reading . . . but do-it-yourself projects and plans, old magazines, and brochures often simply accumulate in the garage, kitchen and beside the "reading chair" (Heath 1983, 231-32).

By contrast to Maintown,

> Roadville adults do not extend either the content or the habits of literacy events beyond book reading. They do not, upon seeing an item or event in the real world, remind children of a similar event in a book and launch a running commentary on similarities and differences. When a game is played or a chore done, adults do not use literate sources. Mothers cook without written recipes most of the time; if they use a recipe from a written source, they do so usually only after confirmation. . . by friends who have tried the recipe . . . . Adults do not talk about the steps and procedures of how to do things; if a father wants his preschooler to learn to hold a miniature bat or throw a ball, he says "Do it this way." He does not break up "this way" into such steps as "Put your fingers around here," . . . Over and over again, adults do a task and children observe and try it, being reinforced only by commands such as "Do it like this," "Watch that thumb.". . .They do not ask questions of the child, except questions which are directive or scolding in nature ("Did you bring the ball?" "Didn't you hear what I said?") (pp. 61-62).

Newly migrant Hispanic families also utilize literacy to a limited extent although some do read to their children. Many also tell stories specifically to enlighten and entertain children (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). Parent book reading outside the mainstream does not have an expansionist quality; parents merely read the book (Allexsaht-Snider 1991) or, at best, engage the child in picture-labeling (Miller,

Nemoianu & DeJong 1986). There is a tendency to wait for the child to initiate any literacy activity (Jacob 1984; Levin, Brenner, & McClellan 1993; Chapter Nine, this volume).

These parents apparently do see themselves as getting children ready for reading when they read to them. Those who fail to read to their children rationalize it by saying it is the teacher's job to teach reading (Lareau 1989). Those who do read with children stop doing so when the child starts school and, in contrast to parents who think reading should be for meaning and pleasure, parents who view reading as a skill, use a reductionist strategy when reading with children (Lancy, Draper, & Boyce 1989; Chapter Five this volume). They tend to punish the child for errors and to force him or her to rely exclusively on decoding rather than semantic or meaning-oriented strategies.

Talk between parents and children may be more limited in extent and variety. This is a typical finding: "Middle-SES mothers verbally engaged their children using more cognitively demanding language than low SES mothers who used language that basically directed and commanded the listener" (Roberts & Barnes 1993, 161). Réger (1990) finds that, even in a country as culturally and socially homogenous as Hungary, there are reliable differences across social class in mothers' speech to children. Lower SES mothers use shorter sentences and sentences of less variety, and rarely use other than the present tense. The connection that Bernstein (1971) identified over 20 years ago between speech patterns, social class, and children's development has held up in study after study.

In impoverished black communities such as Trackton (Heath 1983), children are not encouraged to ask questions and adults do not "scaffold" (see Vygotsky 1978) children's language acquisition by expanding holophrases, asking known answer questions, and simplifying speech directed to them. This same pattern has been observed widely in non-Western societies without print literacy (Duranti & Ochs 1986; Reder & Green 1983).

Earlier, I referred to a study by Martini and Mistry (1993) that compared home language and literacy experiences of Hawaiian children who were "well" or "less" prepared for school. Whereas well-prepared children were invited by their parents to exchange information, "the parents of less-prepared children ignored, refused, or actively rejected 66 percent of their children's initiations" (p. 185). These findings almost exactly parallel those of Norman-Jackson (1982) in an

East Coast African-American community and are strikingly consistent with the behavior of parents of "good" versus "poor" readers in Bergin , Lancy, and Draper's study (Figure 5.2, this volume). Also, as compared to their well-prepared peers, these children engaged in less symbolic play and less school or literacy play while they engaged in more physical play.

Where Support for Emergent Literacy is Almost Nonexistent

Scholars have also given us a glimpse of homes in which literacy is *extremely* limited:

> During our visits we saw no physical evidence of books, magazines, or newspapers. Ms. Pagliucca said she never read books and could not remember the names of any favorite childhood authors or books . . . . All the children in this family spent a great deal of time watching television. They had no special chores or other responsibilities around the house and participated in no organized after-school activities . . . . Mrs. Pagliucca did not seem to be interested in what Derek was doing in school, what kind of homework he brought home, or what he was reading. She knew Derek went to the bookmobile weekly with either his older brother or with friends, but she never asked to see his books or talked to him about what he was reading (Snow, Barnes et al 1991: 76).

Purcell-Gates (1991, this volume) describes how even environmental print is invisible for a nonliterate Appalachian migrant family in Cincinnati. When members of this family ask over the phone for directions they request visual cues that do not require reading signs. Since they are familiar with trademarks and logos from television ads, they are able to grocery shop without reading labels. There may be books in the home that parents have acquired at garage sales in the hope that children may read them, but they remain unread.

Communities where literacy is limited and where parents do not introduce children to books do tend to be poor, but are not associated with any particular ethnic group, nor are they exclusively comprised of single-parent households (Anderson & Stokes 1984; Teale 1986a). In these homes even literate parents who are positive about the value of reading do not read bedtime stories because they claim to find it boring, and their children would rather be doing other things

(Svensson, this volume). As Paula Levin and her colleagues (1993) note for the working-class Hawaiians they studied: "early literacy activities such as story reading and word recognition were recently accepted ideas for which parents had few models in their own experience. . . . When asked about the skills necessary for beginning school . . . [the] skills they mentioned . . . sound very much like traditional reading-readiness . . . emergent literacy skills were among the least well-defined" (p. 210). While these families had well-defined activity settings for socializing children into their culture—routines to teach helping, for example—they lacked the kind of activity settings found in mainstream homes like the bedtime story. "Children often choose their own bedtime, frequently falling asleep in front of the television" (p. 210).

As a sequel to her research in the three Piedmont communities, Heath has been investigating literacy in the lives of young Trackton females who find themselves living with their children in urban public-housing ghettos. If emergent literacy opportunities were somewhat limited in Trackton, she makes clear that they are even more limited here. "Young mothers, isolated in small apartments with their children, and often separated by the expense and trouble of cross town public transportation from family members, watch television, talk on the telephone, or carry out household and care giving chores with few opportunities to tease or challenge their youngsters verbally" (Heath 1989, 369). She asked Zinnia Mae, an unemployed mother of four, to tape-record her conversations over a two-year period:

> In only 13 instances within the [400] hours of taping did she initiate talk to one of the children that was not designed to give them a brief directive or query their actions or intentions. She once asked Donna to come sit beside her to see the puppet on television, twice asked one of the twins to give her a bite of cookie and talked about why she liked that particular kind of cookie . . . . On 9 occasions, she talked to the children as a result of introducing some written artifact to them . . . . Rarely involved in manipulative activities . . . and engaging in these without talk, . . . while they were in process, Zinnia Mae could provide few occasions . . . to co-construct tasks or talk for more than a fleeting minute or so (p. 510).

When Zinnia Mae went shopping, a neighbor looked after the children. They had no playmates and, whereas Zinnia Mae grew up in Trackton, a highly verbal and socially stimulating community com-

posed of neighbors and extended family members, in the Atlanta slum her children call "home" no such community is available.

Even when children have access to playmates, the absence of literacy activities and literate talk in the home will be reflected in their play. Studies in Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States, all show that children's play activity varies as a function of social class. Symbolic play—of the sort that both reflects and contributes to emergent literacy—is far less common among poor children (Shefataya 1990). Indeed, Hispanic parents may actively discourage pretend reading and writing as being too immature (Goldenberg 1989).

We have traveled along a continuum. At one extreme we met families—anchored in broader cultural patterns—that provide a myriad of supports for their child's emergent literacy. At the other extreme, we found homes—again fully reflecting the values of their respective communities—which provide few to no such supports. In the next section we will consider the implications of such variation for children's acquisition of conventional literacy.

THE TRANSITION TO READING IN SCHOOL

A large part of the motivation to study the home as a literacy environment comes from research that links aspects of this environment to the classroom. We study "how families participate in reproducing their own literacy, and through this, the literacy of the whole society" (Varenne & McDermott 1986, 204). The mainstream preoccupation with providing a rich early literacy experience for children is not recent. As far back as 1800 in Sweden, books were published for parents advising them on the value of such experience. In this Lutheran country in which literacy was a precondition for church participation (indeed, one could not marry without first demonstrating literacy), teaching children to read was a family responsibility (Söderbergh 1990).

There is ample evidence of a connection between home and school literacy (Plessas & Oakes 1964). For example, "children who have been read to during their preschool years posses lexical and syntactic knowledge of sentence-level features typical of written narrative before they begin formal literacy instruction" (Purcell-Gates 1988: 129) and "there is a strong . . . relation . . . between children's knowledge of nursery rhymes and the development of their

phonological skills . . . [which] children acquire . . . a long time before learning to read" (Maclean et al. 1987, 278).

Indeed some have found that storybook reading has an impact that goes well beyond emergent literacy (Hale & Windecker 1993):

> What is learned from books changes with development. At 2 1/2 years, the child's focus is vocabulary and syntax acquisition; therefore story-reading exposure predicts vocabulary and syntactic knowledge 6 months later . . . . At age 4 1/2 these . . . children were no longer learning labels from books; rather they were focusing on more complex linguistic and cognitive constructs . . . . These results suggest that story reading with parents is fueling the growth of knowledge at the "leading edge" of the child's development (Crain-Thoreson & Dale 1992, 428).

The Scollons (1981) provide one of the most compelling cross-cultural comparisons, utilizing their own culture to compare to that of the Native Americans of Fort Chipewayan. They show that, by the age of two, their daughter had acquired much of the culture of literacy short of actual reading, she was competent in using literacy conventions that were still not part of the repertoire of 10 year old Chipewayans with several years of formal schooling behind them.

Feitelson and Goldstein (1986) found that high-achieving children in Israeli schools inevitably came from homes with lots of children's books. Nearly 90 percent of the 50+ families in their "high" group had initiated a regular story time with the child before he or she was three, usually at bedtime. In most homes children were read to as often as they wanted and favorite books were read again and again. None of the low-achieving children had been read to before the age of three, and in 31 of the 51 "low" families the children were never read to. There weren't many picture books, and the few books present in the home tended to be on display in the parlor. The authors go on to document other profound cultural differences between the two sets of families, pointing to a lengthy history of a comfortable adaptation to literacy and schooling in the one case and not the other.

However, several studies show that limited storybook reading to children is not sufficient, by itself, to transmit these various conventions (Flood 1977; Lancy et al. 1989). On the other hand, school lessons in early reading are often structured in such a way that students can learn how to get "right answers," at least some of the time, without knowing how to read (Cole & Griffin 1986; Purcell-Gates 1991a).

Storybook reading aside, Heath's (1983) work shows how the different adult-child verbal interaction styles in Maintown and Trackton may contribute to differential success in "show and tell"(Simmons & Murphy 1986) or "sharing time [which] can be seen as a kind of *oral preparation for literacy*" (Michaels 1981, 423). Videotapes of sharing time reveal

> The discourse of the white children tended to be tightly organized around a single topic with a high degree of cohesion, and lexically explicit referential, temporal, and spatial relationships. There was a marked beginning, middle, and end, with no shifts in time or place. This style, which we refer to as "topic-centered," seemed to match the teacher's own style and expectations. With these children she was very successful at picking up on the child's topic and expanding on it through her questions and comments. With a shared sense of topic, teacher and child were often able to develop an account of an object or event that was more complex and lexically explicit than the spontaneous utterances the child initially produced without the teacher's help. The Black children, by contrast, were more likely to tell narratives consisting of a series of implicitly associated personal anecdotes, often involving shifts in time location, and key characters, with no explicit statement of an overall theme or point. This kind of discourse, which we refer to as "topic associating," is often difficult to follow for those who, like the teacher, expect the narrative to focus on a single event or object (Michaels & Cazden 1986, 136).

Children in Trackton are not encouraged to tell stories because adults do not see their narratives as opportunities to play the role of teacher, as Maintown parents do. On those occasions when adults seek information from children, they will permit the child to continue talking if the child is amusing. Hence, they are more likely to reward than to correct grammatical, logical, and pragmatic errors made by the child.

What happens to children whose emergent literacy experience has been less than ideal, who will, in all likelihood, have a difficult time learning to read?

> In every school some children find learning to read difficult, and such difficulties are, unfortunately, too often predictable. It is the children of poverty who are most likely to have literacy learning difficulties. These are the children who are most likely to experience retention in grade, transition-room placement, remedial or special education program participation, and permanent assignment to the "bottom track." Such experiences increase the likelihood that one will never become

> truly literate, will leave school before graduation, will become a teen parent, and will be unemployed as an adult (Allington 1991, 237).

In short, while there are lots and lots of programs, few, if any, work very well. The gap between children who start school on the verge of conventional literacy and those who are still not sure about the functions of print will only widen as they progress through to high school (Snow, Barnes et al. 1991). However, research on children's emergent literacy offers a number of promising avenues for policy and program initiatives. We will examine several of these in Part Two.

NOTE

Portions of this chapter have been adapted from Lancy, D. F. (1994), Anthropological study of literacy and numeracy, a chapter in the *International encyclopedia of education*, 2nd edition. Used by permission of Pergamon Publishers.