Young children's learning in the contexts of families and communities

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We first want to thank the editors of this special anniversary issue of *The Morning Watch* for their invitation to contribute this article. We fondly recall as graduate students at Memorial in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of the "debates" in the fifth floor cafeteria of the Education Building precipitated by just-published articles, and have continued to follow the journal over the years.

For the last two decades or so, our work has focused on the role of communities and families in children's development and education, especially in early language, literacy and mathematics.[1] In this article, we share some of the insights gained and lessons learned from work with young children and their families in diverse community contexts in British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador. We first provide a brief overview of the framework that informs our work; then highlight key findings or themes from several studies; and conclude by discussing some implications of our findings.

Our work is informed by socio-historical perspectives and the notion that learning is social as parents and significant others offer structure and support for young children's learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). However, we emphasize that there is considerable variation in teaching and learning across social and cultural groups (e.g., Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, we recognize that much learning occurs as children interact with their environment, without direct, adult intervention (e.g., Piaget, 1963). Moreover, we subscribe to an ecological view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and see children's development and learning occurring in the overlapping contexts of community, family and school. It is against this background that we next share some of the insights and understandings garnered through our own research and community engagement.

In our work with hundreds of families from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, a striking feature is that literally all of them want to support their children's learning and want them to do well in school and in life. However, families have very different beliefs about how they can support this learning. For example, in one study, parents from three different ethnic groups – Chinese-Canadian, Euro-Canadian, and Indo-Canadian were asked to name "the five most important things you are doing to support your child in learning to read and write" (Anderson, 1995). Perhaps as might be expected, all of the European-Canadian parents identified "reading to my child" as most important in supporting their children's literacy learning. Although some of the Indo-Canadian parents identified shared book reading, they also emphasized storytelling and teaching children to spell correctly and to recognize numbers. The Chinese parents however, named "teaching my child to read and write properly", emphasizing correctness and the importance of practice and placing little importance on shared book reading, often portrayed , as Pellegrini (1991) put it, " the literacy event *par excellence*" (p. 380) and *the way* into literacy. As we have pointed out elsewhere, storybook reading to young children is not practiced in some cultures that nevertheless have a highly educated citizenry.

[1] For additional information on our research, please see http://edcp.educ.ubc.ca/faculty/ann-anderson and http://lled.educ.ubc.ca/lled-faculty/current-faculty/jim-anderson

Parents of young children are bombarded with the message in the media, from government agencies, and in the parenting literature that "you are your child's first and most important teacher" which probably connotes for some people, formal, school like lessons for two, three, and four-year-olds at home. It appears though that the reality is somewhat different in that much of the foundational learning that occurs prior to formal instruction in school is more incidental, contextual and in the moment, as for example, when a family member counts the steps along with the two year old as they climb the stairs at bedtime. For example, in her foundational study involving middle class families, Taylor (1983) found that the parents in the middle class families were unaware of how much early literacy knowledge their pre-school children had acquired and how children had acquired this knowledge. Likewise, Anderson (1997) found that parents support a range of mathematics (counting, size comparison and shape recognition) when they interact with their children across contexts, such as reading story books, playing with blocks, drawing pictures and so forth. In a later longitudinal study of eight middle class families, Anderson (2005) indicated that mothers engaged their children in mathematics through every day events such baking, viewing family photos and play activities such as puzzles, follow the leader, and card games.

In addition to holding different beliefs about how best to support their children's early learning, families also support that learning in very different ways. A case in point is a study (Shapiro, Anderson & Anderson, 1997) with middle class parents in which we asked them to read two high quality children's books with their three and four year olds "as you normally would". We video recorded the shared reading and transcribed and analyzed the verbal interactions. Even within this homogeneous group, we found great variation in the shared reading. Some of the families engaged in considerable dialogue about the books, making inferences and connections between the books and the children's experiences; other families shared the books with minimal dialogue.

As educators and researchers, we need to recognize that we live in an increasingly globalized world with unprecedented transnational movement of families and children. As we have pointed out (Anderson, Anderson, Hare & McTavish, in press), much of the research with families and young children has reflected a middle class, Eurocentric world view. Within that epistemological orientation or worldview, particular ways of childrearing, conceptions of families, and activities and events that support young children are considered *natural* and *the best* for **all** families. Given the interest in the early years and the expectation that families will be expected to take on responsibility for their children's early learning, it is important to be cognizant of our taken-for-granted assumptions as we continue to work with families.

As Rogoff (2003) and others have pointed out, different cultural and social groups provide different pathways for their children's development and education and support them in different ways (Heath, 1983; Anderson & Morrison, 2011). We believe it is especially important that educators who develop and implement intervention programs pay attention to the social-contextual background of families and children so that the activities and suggestions "make sense" to them. The families with whom we have worked are eager to learn new ways in which they can support their children and want to learn how to get them "ready for school". We contend we can support families in doing this while also acknowledging and valuing what they already do in supporting their young children's learning.

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