Becoming Literate in Working Class Homes

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Abstract

This study reports the results of a comparative investigation of the literacy practices that occur in the homes of preschool children from three different ethnicities (Black, Anglo, Hispanic). A literacy event is considered to be any continuous action sequence in which actual production or attempted production or comprehension of print plays a significant role. The data are fieldnotes collected by Anderson et. al. (1980) and coded with the Literacy Event Analytic System (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Anderson & Thomas, 1984). This study extends prior work done on this data base to include 13 more families in order to examine variations within and between ethnic groups. Of particular interest are questions concerning the frequency with which literacy events occur in the presence of the children and the ways in which children are involved in them. The kinds of actions (e.g., reading and writing vs. teaching), and who initiates the events (children or others) are among the dimensions which may vary. Variations in pre-school literacy need to be understood for those hoping to capitalize on early experiences for school success. The major findings of this study are:

1. When they are alone, Black and Hispanic children engage in the same relative amount of reading and writing as do their parents, thus suggesting a modeling effect. However, this is not true in the Anglo sample: Anglo children do much more writing than their parents.

2. The actions performed by the children in adult-child interactive literacy events vary depending on the adults' actions in the joint activity, on who initiates the event and on the ethnicity of the family.

3. Children of all three ethnicities were more often the initiators during adult-child (interactive) literacy events than were adults.

Discussions focus on the extent to which these patterns suggest that the preschool child plays an active role in structuring his or her socialization into the practice of literacy.

Introduction

It is generally agreed that the process by which a child becomes

literate begins in the home, years before the child enters school

(e.g., Clay, 1979). There is much debate, however, over what the

child might learn at home and how this learning is organized by

the members of the child's family. Implicit in much research on

reading is the hypothesis that discontinuities in the practice of

literacy between home and school are responsible for low levels

of school literacy, especially among low-income Black children

(e.g., Coleman et al., 1966; Moon and Wells, 1979). The assess-

ment of such discontinuities, and the resulting prescription for

reading instruction, should properly be based on careful studies

of how literacy is structured in the two settings. Unfortunately,

much discussion of discontinuities is based on restricted obser-

vations that document only the absence or low frequency of cer-

tain experiences in certain homes, particularly low-income homes

(Anderson & Stokes,1984).

Perhaps the most studied of these 'experiences' is that of a

literate person reading to the preliterate child. Correlational

studies have shown a positive relationship between amount of

reading to the child at home and (a) the child's eagerness to

read (Mason and Blanton, 1971), and (b) the child's success in

reading (Almy,1949; Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966; Walker and Kuer-

bitz, 1979). Various attempts have been made to explain the bene-

fit of reading to a young child. Smith (1976,1978) and Clay

(1979) argue that, by being read to, children learn that print is meaningful, that it is different from oral language but that it can be turned into sound. Holdaway (1979) argues similarly that, in their attempts to understand the structure and meaning of print, children practice reading-like behavior in which self-regulation and self-correction play an important part. Some interesting details of this regulation in the context of picture-book reading have been provided by Ninio and Bruner (1978). These authors examined the interactions between a mother and her child, when the child was between 8 and 18 months, and concluded that mother and child engaged in routinized reciprocal dialogue, which they called 'scaffolding'.

The focus on story-book reading that is evident in the above-mentioned studies seems to be the result of a research strategy in which literacy is equated with book reading. An alternative strategy, and one which takes a broader view of literacy, can be found in certain ethnographic studies of social-ization into the practice of literacy. For example, in a study of literacy in a Black working-class community, Heath (1980) showed that preschoolers were able to read many types of information available in their environment, even though book reading was rare in their community. It was argued that this reading behavior occurred because the preschoolers

> watched others reading and writing for a variety of
> purposes, cooperated and participated in the process
> with older children and adults, and... often wrote
> independently at a very young age. (Heath, 1980: 127)

In another observational study, Anderson and Stokes (1984) categorized the literacy activities of preschool children according to a small set of objectives and noted that the children were involved with a literate person for more than just "story book reading." Anderson and Stokes note that activities within which literacy was embedded ranged from parents' constructing shopping lists to filling out welfare forms, to studying the bible. In some cases, these activities involved solitary behavior, but group interactions characterized a great many of the other literacy events. The types of activities appeared to influence the type of literate behavior that was observed (e.g. reading vs. writing) and the type of materials (paper & pencil vs book) that were used by the participants.

These studies of the wider range of literacy practices are consistent with the assumption that higher psychological processes (for example, those that underlie the practice of literacy) arise from the individual's contact with the objective world (Nadel, 1951; Leont'ev, 1981; and Scribner and Cole, 1981). From this perspective, school literacy success or failure would be related to the successes of the school in extending the kinds of contact with print that the children experience at home. The work of Heath and of Anderson and Stokes especially point out the importance of writing in early reading experience and suggest

that concepts like 'scaffolding' and 'regulation' can be applied
to writing as well as to reading and to the child's interactions
with materials other than books.

A quantitative approach to literacy development.

The research reported here seeks to integrate the concepts
and methods of psychological and ethnographic approaches to the
study of literacy development. The approach, developed by Ander-
son & Thomas (1984), derives from the view that the development
of literacy, like other types of socialization processes, is the
product of the interaction between 'learner' and 'teacher'
(Vygotsky, 1978) and that this interaction can be satisfactorily
described through observations in a naturalistic setting (Carew,
1980). Anderson and Thomas (1984) provide a description of the
full range of literacy-related activities which occurred in the
homes of 8 Black preschool children. They relied on detailed
fieldnotes, gathered by trained observers, and extracted the
features that were relevant to literacy practice, but had not
been noted in many prior studies of early literacy experiences.
Anderson developed a coding scheme, some elements of which were
adapted from Carew's observational system, C-ties (Hays et al,
1983). Anderson and Thomas found that literacy occurred in many
situations which traditional methods would have been insensitive
to. For example, children were observed to engage in reading
print on milk cartons, T-shirts, road signs and license plates.
In fact, results suggested that traditional approaches (i.e.,

observance of frequency of story-time experience) would capture
less than 50% of the actual literacy practice that a preschooler
typically engages in.

Anderson and Thomas found that, in general, the relative
frequencies of reading and of writing by the Black preschool
child depended on (a) whether or not the child was interacting
with an adult, (b) whether the interacting adult was teaching,
writing or reading, and (c) whether the literacy event was ini-
tiated by the child or by the adult. These results suggested,
contrary to common expectations, that the child was actively
involved in structuring his or her socialization into the prac-
tice of literacy.

Present Study

The present research adapts the approach of Anderson and
Thomas (1984) to consider a comparative analysis of the literacy
practices of children of different ethnicities. In addition to
the data from the original 8 Black family participants, the data
have been coded and analyzed from 13 more families, 8 of which
are Anglo and 5 of which are Hispanic. This new corpus allows
the formation and testing of hypotheses about variations in the
organization of literacy practices encountered and constructed by
preliterate children from three different cultural and ethnic
backgrounds.

The fundamental unit of the LEAS coding system (Appendix 1,
reproduced from Anderson & Thomas, 1984) is the literacy event,
which is defined as "any continuous action sequence in which the
actual or attempted production or comprehension of print plays a
significant role." Each literacy event is characterized by the
set of values assumed by the variables in the coding system. The
event ends when at least one of the variables changes its value.
The coding system records features of the context within which
each literacy event occurs, as well as features of the event
itself.

These data can be used to address a number of issues center-
ing on literacy in the home and school. This study concentrates
on the home. First, there is a general description of the total
range of literacy practice that the preliterate children are
exposed to. This description reflects the broader scope of
literacy considered, and thus encompasses many sources of
literacy that are often overlooked by traditionally focused stu-
dies. From this general description certain patterns of variance
are identified in order to motivate more specifically designed
and detailed analyses.

The detailed analyses start with a view of the actions of
adults and child when they are alone compared to their actions
when they are interacting. This will provide information about
how literacy is organized differently depending on whether or not
the child is interacting with an adult.

Much of the literature on the literacy experiences of
preschoolers at home leads to the expectation that the child-
adult interactive events would involve, almost exclusively, the
adult reading books to the child.

Next, in order to investigate the possibility of modeling
effects on the child's activities, there is a direct comparison
of the actions of the adult and child when each is alone. These
analyses are taken to the interactive event level with examina-
tion of child's response to the varying adult action (reading,
teaching or writing). If the child's activities are the result
of copying an adult model, the data should reveal similarities
between adult and child activities in both the solitary and
interactive events.

The patterns of initiation for literacy events could be an
important determinant of the types of literacy a child is
involved in. The standard literature leads to the expectation
that the great majority of child-adult events would be initiated
by the adult (e.g. reading books to children). In other words,
this literature views the child as a passive participant in a
dialogue that is usually orchestrated by the adult. The data
allow an examination to see if this expectation is warranted, and
if there are differences between child-initiated events and
adult-initiated events. This examination can be accomplished by
using the distribution of

child/adult actions when each is alone as a baseline for com-

parisons with the types of events the children initiate when they

are interacting with an adult.

Finally, a pervasive theme throughout the entire paper is

the main focus of this study which is to investigate differences

in the types of literacy events that members of different ethnic

groups may be involved in. The coding scheme could elucidate

certain sources of cultural variation that lead to differences in

the literacy patterns observed. Such variation could be evident

across many variables in the coding scheme. The comparisons will

thus center around topics such as, for example, the differences

in teaching patterns of Black, Hispanic, and Anglo adults, and

differences in the initiation patterns of children in each of

these ethnic groups. These comparisons should allow a focus on

questions such as how a Black parent's response to the child's

request for help with reading differs from either a Hispanic or

Anglo parent's response in the same situation, and secondly, what

types of events are more likely to be initiated by children in

the Black , Hispanic and Anglo families.

Method

Research Participants

The research participants were low-income families, in each

of which there was a preschool child. Observations focused on

the 21 preschool children, one in each family, who were between 2

1/2 and 3 1/2 years of age when the study began. The children
were grouped according to their ethnicity. Anderson & Thomas
report on the same 8 Black children used in this study. This is
the first analysis and report of 13 additional families, 8 Anglo,
and 5 Hispanic. The parents in these families were either unem-
ployed or held positions as unskilled laborers. In no case did
family income exceed $10,000 annually during the course of the
study. The formal educational level achieved by the parents
ranged from grade 10 to grade 12.

Materials.

Fieldnotes

Observers in this study followed the target children wher-
ever they went during the observation period (Anderson et. al.,
1980). The observers took detailed fieldnotes concerning what
the target children did -- what they could have observed and what
they experienced actively. The focus of the observations were
literacy events. The observers were trained to describe as fully
as possible all literacy events that involved the target children
(Anderson & Stokes, 1984). Observations were taken in the homes
and communities of the research participants. The observation
periods were distributed across various times of the day during
which the child was awake, and across the seven days of the week.
The number of months over which these observations were taken
varied from 3-18 across families. The number of home visits per
child ranged from 5 to 47, and the number of hours observed per

child ranged from 14 to 142. The total number of hours of observations is 708.

Coding Scheme

Subsequently, the field records of the literacy events were coded along 12 categorical dimensions. The categorical dimensions of the Literacy Event Analytic System (LEAS) are:

1. where the literacy event takes place(location),

2. the dominant theme of the activity in which the literacy event is embedded,

3. the time of day at which the literacy event occurs,

4. who is present in the immediate vicinity,

5. whether the immediately prior event was a literacy event or not,

6. who initiates the literacy event,

7. the initiating action,

8. who is involved in the literacy event,

9. what are the actions of each participant,

10. what materials each participant is using,

11. source of termination,

12. outcome.

A complete description of each variable, as well as examples from the fieldnotes are presented in Appendix 1.

Results and Discussion

A total of 988 literacy events were coded from the 708 hours of observation of the 21 families in this study (see Table 1).

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Children and/or their parents practiced literacy for about 20% of the total hours they were observed. Ninety-percent of these events were less than 20 minutes long. These data are the results of the pooling of 3 separate group analyses for the Black, Anglo and Hispanic samples; the following is an overview of the data for each of these populations. Table 1 presents an overview of the literacy experiences observed in the homes of the 21 families in the study.

Black sample

A total of 394 events representing 76 hours of literacy practice was recorded during 250 hours of observation for the Black sample. Children and/or their parents practiced literacy for about 30% of the time they were being observed.

Table 2 provides more information about the distribution of

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literacy practice. The target child was coded as directly involved in 56% of the total events.

Across all events, adults read 57% of the time that they are engaged in literacy, write 16% of the time, and teach most of the remaining 27% of the time. The child was observed to read 52% of the time spent on literacy, write 27% of the time and listen 20% of the time.

Anglo sample

As Table 1 shows, a total of 397 events representing 40 hours of literacy practice was recorded during 229 hours of observation in the homes of eight Anglo preschoolers. These children and/or their parents practiced literacy for about 17% of the time they were being observed. As Table 2 shows, the target child was directly involved in 64% of these events. Considering all literacy events, Anglo adults read during 54% of them, write 15% of the time and teach most of the remaining 26% of the time. The child was observed to read during 35% of the literacy events, write 40% of the time and listen 22% of the time.

Hispanic sample

A total of 197 events totalling 27 hours of literacy practice was recorded during approximately 229 hours of observation in the homes of five Hispanic preschoolers. Children and/or their parents practiced literacy for about 12% of the time they were observed (see Table 1). As seen in Table 2, the target child was coded as directly involved in 72% of the literacy events. Across all events, adults read for 53% of the time spent on literacy,

write 19% of the time and teach for 20% of the time. The children were observed to read during 53% of the literacy events they were involved in, write 15% of the time and listen 31% of the time.

Generalizations from the overview

Clearly, a great deal of literacy experience is available to the preschool children in these 21 low-income families. Variations among the ethnic groups at this general level are somewhat backgrounded by the sheer volume of experience available to all the children. Table 3 juxtaposes the ethnic variability in the

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percentage of time literacy was practiced by the families and the variability in the proportion of literacy events in which the child was not merely present but was actively engaged. The time the children spent on literacy (the product of these two percentages) shows little ethnic variation in exposure to literacy during the day, but it does show that the 2, 3 and 4-year-olds in these families were engaged in literacy related activities for quite a bit of the time. If we assume that the child is awake for about twelve hours, these figures indicate that these children actively participated in between 1 and 2 hours of literacy experience during the day! 1

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1. In Appendix 2, the values for all of the variables in the coding scheme for all the observations of the three samples are given.

Certain patterns of variance are apparent upon examining the three subsamples. It is instructive here to note a few of these patterns in order to motivate the more detailed analyses presented below.

General notes

Two very general patterns are discernable in the data. These ca be characterized as follows:

It takes two to tango.   All ethnicities are more likely to have the children involved children in the practice of literacy than to have them simply co-present during literacy events. To describe these interactive types of events, there are two sets of details to focus on. First, there is an investigation of how the child and adult respond to each other's actions during interactions; secondly, there is a discussion of the patterns of initiation by children during these events. The patterns of initiation should provide an idea of the types of literacy experiences a child actively seeks out. The analysis will focus, then, on the type of events the children initiate and will include a discussion about how these differ from when the child is alone and when the adult initiates interactive events.

Acting like adults. There is some similarity in the distributions for adult and child actions (see Table 2). The strong similarity between the adult-action distribution and the child-action distribution in the Black and Hispanic samples suggest

that the Black and Hispanic children are modeling the literacy

related activities of their parents. Conversely, the absence of

similarity between Anglo adult- and child-action distributions

suggests that modeling does not occur to the same extent in Anglo

homes.   Relevant to this point, the analyses below focus on what

could be the sources of the Anglo child's strategy of "doing

his/her own thing" as well as on the detail of the the apparent

modeling in the Black and Hispanic families.

Specific analyses

In order to detect patterns of variance we separated the

data into 3 separate samples which vary across ethnicity as

described above.   In order to describe possibly significant

sources of variance, a rule-of-thumb was adopted as in Anderson

and Thomas (1984).   The mean squared error of a proportion is

given by the binomial formula, $p(1-p)/n$, where p is the mean of

the proportion and n is the number of observations on which the

proportion is based.   This mean square is greatest, namely, $1/4n$,

when $p=0.5$.   The difference between two independent proportions,

both based on n observations, therefore has a mean square of at

most $2/4n=1/2n$. Such a difference would be statistically signifi-

cant at about the 5% level if it is greater than $2/sq.2n$. This

least significant difference is about 20% when n is 50, and is

about 15% when n is 100.

In the present study, the two proportions being compared may not
be strictly independent because each family almost certainly con-
tributed more than one observation to each proportion. However,
it should be noted that literacy events occurred at the low
enough rates to assume reasonably that the events are statisti-
cally independent of each other. Thus, if the difference between
two proportions based on n number of observations is greater than
15%, then the difference is considered significant.

Activities of participants

This section examines the effect of variation in participant
structure on the action of the adult and child. The first part
presents the distribution of solitary practice by literate adults
when children are merely in the background. This description is
then used as a baseline for comparison with the distribution of
actions during interactions that actively involve the children.
Next, the examination focuses on children's actions, contrasting
times when the child is working alone with those when she or he
is working with an adult. Finally, there is a comparison of the
actions of the adult and child when each is alone in order to
investigate possible similarities among the two distributions.

Participant Structure. The social organization code on the
LEAS identifies the people who participate in the recorded
literacy event. Each person is identified according to their
ability with print. Specifically, they are identified as either
(1) literate, or (2) preliterate. Of particular interest are

those events in which there is an interaction between one or more
adults and preliterates. By looking at the social organization
coding and its correlates we are able to identify the role that
each participant plays in the literacy event.

    Table 4 shows a cross-tabulation of the distribution of

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adult action x participant structure and ethnicity. As seen in
the table, when they are alone, adults across all ethnicities
emphasize reading more than writing. This result is especially
robust in the Anglo sample. Anglo adults read 84% of the time
when they are alone. This is about 20% more than either Black or
Hispanic adults who each read about 67% of the time.

    When the adults are interacting with the child, there is a
relative decrease in the "reading" category across all ethnici-
ties, but this does not mean that less reading occurs in the real
sense. When interacting, Black parents read 40%, Anglo parents
read 30% and Hispanic parents read 47% of the time.   In both the
Black and Anglo groups the emphasis is shifted to teaching, but
often reading is what is being taught. However, in the Hispanic
group, reading is still emphasized over teaching. When interact-
ing, the Black parent teaches 49% of the time, the Anglo parent
teaches 46% of the time and the Hispanic parent teaches 28% of
the time. Writing becomes a significant activity for the
Hispanic and Anglo samples. Both the decrease in reading fre-

quency and the increased emphasis on teaching are significant

variations from the adult-alone patterns.

Thus, to summarize, adults seem to respond to the co-

participation of a child by engaging in overt teaching most of

the time in both the Black and Anglo samples. In the Hispanic

sample overt teaching is more rare; Hispanic adults instead

respond to children's co-participation by maintaining a relative

emphasis on reading.

Table 5 shows child action x participant structure x ethni-

city.   As seen in Table 5, the distribution of actions for Black

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and Hispanic children when they are alone suggest that these

children prefer reading over writing. When Black children engage

in literacy while they are alone, they read 63% and write 37% of

the time. When Hispanic children are alone with literacy, they

read 86% and write 14% of the time. In contrast, the Anglo chil-

dren emphasize writing over reading: Anglo children write about

65% and read the remaining 35% of the time they spend alone on

literacy.

When interacting, the child's response to an adult's co-

participation in literacy is very often to listen and observe

across all ethnicities.   This phenomenon is especially robust in

the Hispanic sample, where the children listened 48% of the time.

For Blacks and Anglos, the frequency of listening is about equal

to that of reading, which are both near 40%.   In all samples,

writing is least frequent: 23% for Hispanics, 17% for Blacks and

16% for Anglo children.

Table 6 provides a direct comparison of the children's

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actions when they are alone with the adults' actions when they

are alone.   The pattern suggests modeling in the Black sample.

That is, when they are alone, Black children read and write at

about the same relative frequency as their parents do when they

are alone.   Black children and their parents read about two times

the amount that they write.   A modeling pattern is not contrary

to the results for the Hispanic sample.   While it is true that

the Hispanic children spend a relatively greater amount of time

reading than their parents do, the relative emphasis on particu-

lar actions is equivalent across the two distributions (child-

alone & adult-alone).   In contrast, the distribution of action

for the Anglo child is dramatically different than that of

his/her parents.   While the adult emphasized reading, the child

emphasized writing.   This result suggests that these Anglo chil-

dren do not model their actions on the sorts of literacy actions

they can observe their parents doing when they are present but

not co-participating in literacy.

The varying power of the adult pattern to predict children's

solitary behavior raises the question of who influences the types

of actions children engage in during the interactive literacy

events. In order to get a closer look at the interactive events,

Table 7 presents the cases where child and adult actions can be

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cross tabulated. Specifically, it demonstrates the distribution

of child action related to the specific adult actions of reading

or teaching. Recall that all adults and the Black and Hispanic

children engage in reading most often when they are alone in

their literacy endeavors (see Table 6). Anglo children stand out

as engaging more often in writing than any other part of the sam-

ple when they are alone. Table 7 shows that the bias toward

reading appears also in the joint activity.

The left column shows that when adults read, no matter what

the family's ethnicity, children participate in the reading,

mostly as passive listeners (74% averaged over the three ethnici-

ties) and occasionally as co-readers. For the Hispanic and Black

populations this outcome cannot address the question of relative

influence of adult and child solitary action, because the child

and adult solitary patterns both show an emphasis on reading.

However, the Anglo children's pattern of an emphasis on writing

disappears in favor of their parents' emphasis on reading: These

children do not take dictation, but participate in the reading as

listeners or co-readers.

The right column shows that more diversity of child action
occurs when the adults teach. The teaching interactions get the
children involved in writing. Consider first the situation of
the Black and Hispanic families. Although the children are still
more likely to be engaged in reading than writing, there is an
increase over the amount of writing the children attempt when
acting on their own (see Table 6). There is no unified account
for the emergence of more writing in the joint activity for
Hispanic and Black children: Hispanic children are pulled in the
direction of the adult-alone proportion of writing (32% Table 6),
but Black children surpass the proportion of writing engaged in
by their parents (31%) or by themselves (37%) when acting alone.
As is the case for the joint activities when the adults read,
this emphasis on reading in the Black and Hispanic teaching
interactions cannot be clearly attributed to influence from child
or adult -- both participants in both ethnic groups emphasize
reading over writing when they are alone.

The Anglo sample allows some testing of the relative power
of the influence of children. When adults teach, Anglo children
write. When the children are alone, they write a great deal (65%)
more than they read (35%) and proportionately more than their
parents write when the adults are alone (16%). Because of this
contrast in emphasis on writing between Anglo adults and chil-
dren, it is fair to conclude that these children are influencing
the re-ordering of priorities in the joint activity when adults

teach.   The anomaly, going against the reading bias, occurs only

when Anglo children get into the act.

    Patterns of Initiation.   So far we have looked at interac-

tions both across events and at the event level.   What is missing

is a description of the types of interactive events that the

child actively seeks out. In order to extract this information

from the data, there follows an investigation of the patterns of

initiation when the child and adult are interacting.

    The "who initiates" code on the LEAS identifies the person,

persons or source responsible for introducing print into the flow

of ongoing activity.   This person is identified as an adult

(literate) or child (preliterate).   This code and its correlates

represents the best measure of the active organization of

literacy practice by the child. Table 8 presents the distribution

of child responses to literacy events initiated by either the

adult or the child.

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    Across all ethnicities, the children initiate a greater pro-

portion of the interactive events than do their parents. Black

children initiate 59% of interactive events, Anglo children ini-

tiate 53% of interactive events, and Hispanic children initiate

55% of the interactive events. This result in and of itself sug-

gests that the child exercises some form of control over most of

the interactive events. Further analyses will focus on the
actual actions that the child is involved in during these cases
where the child is the initiator and, thus, is organizing the
adults' behavior in the service of the child's goals.

Consider first the Hispanic sample. As seen in Table 8,
there is no difference in the distribution of child's actions as
a function of who initiates. That is, the Hispanic child's action
does not depend upon who initiates. Instead, what stands out is
the amazing congruity of child actions, regardless of who ini-
tiates the event. Both the Hispanic child and adult initiate
events that lead to the child listening nearly 1/2 the time (46%)
and reading a little more than 1/3 of the time (36%).

However, significant differences emerge in relation to who
initiates in the Black and Anglo families. As seen in Table 8,
the effect of who initiates significantly affected the frequency
of writing and listening/observing in both the Black and Anglo
samples.

In the Black sample, when a Black adult initiates the child
writes only 6% of the time. However, when the child initiates
writing occured 38% of the time. Comparing this frequency to the
Black child-alone distribution in Table 6 suggests that the Black
child, when he initiates an interaction, does as much writing as
he would if he were alone. Secondly, when the Black adult ini-
tiates the child listens 49% of the time, but when the Black
child initiates the child listens only 30%. This child initiation

pattern suggests that the Black child initiates events in which

he is an active participant, unlike his action as passive parti-

cipant for nearly one-half the time during the interactive events

that the parents initiate. One other aspect of the Black child

initiation pattern is noteworthy -- the symetry. Unlike the

other children, Black youngsters are about equally likely to get

an adult involved with them for practicing reading, writing or

listening.

Anglo adults initiate lots of writing (37%) and about equal

amounts of listening and reading, each at 28% of the time. In

contrast, Anglo children initiate events that result in their

writing significantly less (23%) than when the adults initiate.

In addition, Anglo children initiate events that result in their

listening and observing much more than when their parents ini-

tiate. Taken together, these results contrast with the pattern

observed in the Black sample: The Anglo children initiate events

that increase their passivity. The decrease in writing by the

Anglo child when he or she initiates is particularly surprising

given the frequency with which the child engages in writing when

he or she is alone (see Table 6).

Summary and Conclusions

The results of this study have revealed a complex set of

different social contexts and situations in the literacy practice

of young children from working class homes. The forms of

literate practice vary from one ethnic group to another. A brief

outline of the patterns of literacy practice that occurred in

these homes follows:

When adult and child practice literacy alone:

> There is a general bias toward reading that occurs
> across all ethnicities and age groups except for the
> Anglo children. Anglo children write instead.

> The similarity of actions for adults and children when
> each is involved in solitary literacy practice, suggest
> that Black and Hispanic children engage in the same type
> of literacy as their parents do. Their socialization
> motto appears to be "Do as I do!" The Anglo families
> appear to have a different motto: "Do as I say!" The
> Anglo children spend most of their literacy time alone
> doing what their parents teach them when they work
> together in joint literacy activity -- writing.

During interactive literacy events:

> Children are more likely to be the initators of joint
> literacy activitities than are adults, regardless of
> ethnicity.

> Children read or are read to in the joint activities,
> continuing the general bias toward reading seen in the
> solitary literacy events.

> For Hispanic and Black families, the distribution of
> specific actions does not reveal the relative influence
> of children or adult in the joint activities, but the
> Anglo child's influence is seen in the amount of writing
> that occurs in joint activity in their families.

> Hispanic families are more likely to read to their chil-
> dren than to overtly teach them, during interactive
> events. Whether parent or child initiates the joint
> activity in the Hispanic sample bears no relation to the
> child's subsequent actions during the activity.

> Black parents are quite likely to teach their children
> overtly. When the adults initiate, the children are
> more likely to have a passive role than when the chil-
> dren initiate the joint activity. When Black children
> initiate the joint literacy activity, they engage in a
> great deal more writing than if their parents start
> things off.

Anglo adults also overtly teach a great deal, but the
children in the interactions that Anglo adults initiate
engage in a great deal of writing. Anglo children often
initiate interactions that cast them in a passive role.

Conclusion The analysis of the literacy experiences of preli-

terates in their homes has yielded important implications for

future study. It has been strongly suggested by results

throughout this study that children do not wait until their

school years to start practicing literacy. While those children

of different ethnicities may place different emphasis on the

various types of literate actions (e.g. reading, writing, or sim-

pling listening), it is clear that children of all ethnicities

play an active role in organizing their exposure to print. More-

over, reading and writing are relatively frequent events.

Additional analyses of these data are called for in order to

get a better picture of the dynamics involved in the parent-child

interactions in the different ethnic groups. For example, how do

Anglo parents and children arrange it so that the children write

when they are alone, carrying over what they do when their

parents teach them, rather than modeling what they see their

parents doing most frequently? What causes Hispanic children to

fit their parents' initiations so closely? The influence of the

domains of literate practice would also be useful to study. It

may be, for instance, that the domains of reading and the materi-

als used in those domains differ such that those used by Black

and Hispanic adults