

Review Essay

Family Literacy from the Eyes of an Empathetic Ethnographer: An Appalachian Case Study

Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995). **Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy**. New York: Teachers College Press. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Particularly relevant to this discussion are the preconceived stereotypes of minority cultures held by mainstream members of society. These stereotypes interact in pernicious ways with minority learners' attempts to gain access to literacy and the literate world (p. 187).

Research Traditions

Based on the academic discipline of cultural anthropology, ethnographic studies seek to examine something of the “lived experience” of the subjects of their study. Requiring direct observation and “thick description,” the ethnographer walks a delicate balance between the more distanced stance of the traditional academic scholar and the emotionally committed posture of empathy as a participant-observer in the lives of the subject of the study. The scholar trained in positivistic social science research traditions may be limited by a posture of detachment and a methodological framework that masks as much, if not more than what it discloses in the quest for “objectivity.” The ethnographer faces the opposite temptation of “going native” in embracing the culture that is being researched at the risk of muting a critical attitude in the effort to achieve a sense of empathy toward the subjects of a study. This tension may well be inescapable as research traditions are embedded in a variety of ideology and power discourses reflecting various canonical perspectives that have given shape to 20th century social science discourse (Mertens, 1998). Calls to consider strengths and weaknesses of various viewpoints are always pertinent. So is the difficulty of its achievement, particularly in

such a value-laden field of adult literacy education, as interpretation is embedded in the moral value system, politics, and pedagogical assumptions of the researcher.

As a participant observer, an ethnographic researcher, “a teacher, a guide, a mentor, and a friend” (p. 2), Victoria Purcell-Gates, then director of a university-based Literacy Center, does not escape this tension. As the author of *Other People’s Words* expressed it, “[w]e [Jenny and the author] established a close personal relationship and affection that continue to this day” (p. 3). The main line of the narrative, Jenny’s desire to be able to help her young son Donny with his homework and the capacity to negotiate the print demands of her own environment, is characterized by a profound empathy that drew the author into Jenny’s world where Purcell-Gates brings the reader. Clearly, Jenny is the central protagonist of the story.

As a reader and one who works with adult literacy students on a daily basis, it is difficult not to feel Purcell-Gates’ profound empathy for Jenny and the mutual respect and dignity they evidently expressed for each other in their two-year encounter. Thus, when Jenny “found her way up the hill” to the university’s Literacy Center, one senses the immediate connection between the two women of such different social, cultural, and educational backgrounds in their sharing of a common human and womanly understanding that pervades the text. Notwithstanding the invariable biases, it was this very empathy that provided the author with a profound entry point into many subtle insights into the nature of Jenny and Donny’s learning that may not have been accessible through a more critically distanced stance.

Emergent verses Socio-Cultural Interpretations of Literacy

Purcell-Gates began her research with a “cognitive” and “psycholinguistic” focus in probing into “the relationship between the parents’ nonliteracy and that of their son” (p. 210). As the work progressed, her research expanded into the realm of culture and the exploration of social context in the quest to probe into the multidimensional “layers” which gave shape to the family’s educational situation. Thus, the author’s research gradually shifted outward to examine the impact of this Appalachian family’s “invisible” hillbilly status as embedded in the racially mixed urban context where more “mainstream” values permeated the dominant culture of the city against what was perceived as the family’s rural culture of poverty. The more proximate linkage, a main focus of the book, was the large gulf between the family and the expectations of the child’s school’s faculty and administration over what consisted of right instruction and the competence of Jenny as an informed and inquisitive parent.

Proponents of emergent literacy point to the accessibility of print in the home in the pre-school years as a powerfully contributing factor in the literacy development of children. On this interpretation, literacy “emerge[s] developmentally as children observe and engage in experiences mediated by print in their daily lives,” even if they are not formally reading, a view that contrasts with a more traditional perspective that “children *begin* [original italics] to learn to read and write only at the onset of formal literacy instruction” (p. 7).

Through such early interaction with print found in the home environment, children “learn about (a) the nature of the relationship between speech and print; (b) the conventions of print...[such as] linearity, directionality, and word boundaries; and (c)

print related terms like *word* and *letter*” (original italics). (ibid). Interpreting how learning takes place from a cognitive perspective through schema theory, Purcell-Gates was initially perplexed on how Donny could learn to read when literacy played virtually no role in the life of the family. As Donny’s instruction proceeded at the Literacy Center under the author’s meticulous guidance, Purcell-Gates anxiously sought to instill literate behavior in the family’s home, viewing such transference as the key to Donny’s literacy. She was similarly perplexed and frustrated when her efforts failed even though Donny gradually increased his mastery of print literacy during the tutoring sessions, and *in principle*, could work with print at home if he so chose.

What dawned on the author was the extent to which the family’s life did not depend on print for virtually anything at home. The world of print was simply not seen or used. Instead, family members possessed a range of alternative strategies to meet a variety of informational and communication needs and purposes that proved largely functional within the confines of their existing milieu, notwithstanding the need that Jenny perceived both for her and for Donny to enter into the world of literacy in order to meet the challenges of the future. Though there were books and other print artifacts in the home, they were not utilized by the family, and therefore, irrelevant as written text. The “startling insight” that dawned upon Purcell-Gates “was that for Donny, print did not signify; it did not code his world; it was not linguistically meaningful. Donny did not *notice* (original italics) the print around him; it did not emerge perceptually from the background of his life.” (p. 64). For a family lacking a basic framework in literacy, oral sources of communication and learning played a more critical instructional role.

It was this perceived anomaly that drove Purcell-Gates to examine culture as a way of coming to terms with “the significance of nonliteracy in Donny’s world” (pp. 145), which, in turn, enabled her to understand “his passive-aggressive resistance to reading and writing” (p. 147). In identifying with his father, a man of action who rejected reading as important for himself, the author noted that for Donny, print literacy lacked the positive connotations needed to engage in reading and writing at home. When not at his tutoring sessions at the Literacy Center, Donny preferred to do things that did not require reading, including drawing and crafts, and other hands-on activities that enabled him to imitate his father and shape his emergent identity in a manner that he viewed as vital to his young life.

Eventually both Jenny and Donny were able to bring the world of print into their lives, but only after a longer, more circuitous process than what the author initially expected based upon the original concept of emergent literacy in which she began her research. For Jenny, it was driven in part by necessity in the longing to communicate with her husband who was sent to jail for six months for marijuana possession. It was also stimulated by her religious quest once she joined the Jehovah Witnesses and began to participate in Bible studies as well as in her desire to help Donny with his homework and to read the messages sent home from school. Donny also began to draw on literacy at home to write letters to his father. In one poignant scene after the father returned to the family, the author recounts Donny reading a nature book to his father and younger brother. The author also tells of the entire family attending a Christmas concert at the school, where Donny, for the first time, was playing a role with his classmates. Though a shift toward a full literacy identity (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997) was considerably a

ways off both for Jenny and Donny, “[t]o the extent to which it was used for real-life purposes, written language now coded their world and was now available to them” (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 143) like it never had been before.

It is from these emerging experiences, from the inside/out that Purcell-Gates’ socio-cultural interpretation evolved. This enabled the author to view Jenny and her family “as cultural beings whose identities and perceptions reflect the nested cultural contexts of ethnic heritage, education/literacy level, gender, and socioeconomic status” (p. 179).

One gains a sense of the poignancy of these achievements as reflected through the author’s imaginative portrayal as we learn of Jenny and her husband’s schooling. Both dropped out in the seventh grade and never learned to “read a lick” (p. 13). Not only they, but according to Jenny “[a]bout half of their friends, relatives, and neighbors” (ibid.) rooted in the upper white Appalachian culture of eastern Kentucky, never learned to read. This “low-status” minority group comprising a sizable “proportion of urban dwellers throughout the Midwest,” like other groups, “has migrated to the cities in search of work and a better life for their children” (p. 16). Such migration has come with costs and benefits.

In addition to discrimination, limited job opportunities and difficulties in communicating to mainstream schooling bureaucracies, the sense of cultural dislocation among this “invisible minority” has also been pronounced. In addition, disease, early death, drunkenness, and violence is a pervasive element in the lives of this group, in their “displaced” urban environment from the world that they have lost and for which they long, even if only in a nostalgic way. Deeply religious, blue-collar, dependent on family

and broader kin rather than more impersonal functional relationships and communication channels, many Upper Appalachians have experienced isolation in what they perceived as an alien urban environment that has cut them off from the country life of their heritage.

While pointing to these problems of cultural displacement and marginality, the author also portrays a positive sense of values among the descendants of the Appalachian mountain culture—the deep sense of love and loyalty among family members, a strong set of rural values, a love of nature, straight-forward speaking, and love of fun, sport, and action. Purcell-Gates captures something of these values in her sensitive portrayal of Jenny. By situating the family’s plight within their “nested” Appalachian heritage, the author was able to gain a fuller picture of the multiple causes of the depth and role of illiteracy in their lives.

A Balanced, Contextual Approach

The Literacy Center that Purcell-Gates directed promoted a balanced, contextual approach to literacy development that integrates key aspects of a bottom-up skills-driven pedagogy with more holistic forms of learning as characteristic of whole language learning theory (Pressley, 2002). Purcell-Gates rejected the “autonomous” (Street, 1988) model of literacy as a discrete set of universal skills applicable to any context where learning to read results from mastery of phonemes, individual words, and abstract comprehension exercises not vitally connected to content that students consider significant. She also avoided approaches that viewed learning as totally “caught” through practice and unconscious assimilation with “real” text over time that rejected sustained practice of the basic skills (Smith, 1997).

Rather, the author took a “whole-part-whole” (Purcell-Gates, 1997) approach to literacy instruction, drawing on language and texts that students (children and adults) would view as meaningful (an inherent socio-cultural definition), but also identifying persisting decoding problems, and practicing systematically in them as deemed useful by the teacher and the students in a given learning context. The basic skill focus was largely derived from the context of the reading students worked on, though it also included a certain degree of “autonomous” work in basic skill building. This whole-part-whole approach includes improvisational and experimental aspects in working interactively with students in identifying sources of motivation, strengths to build on, and corresponding areas of growth to tap into. Purcell-Gates applied this balanced, contextual, and socio-cultural approach to literacy in different ways with Donny and Jenny.

Donny

Though in second grade when Purcell-Gates met him, Donny was unable to read anything other than his name and the word *the* even though he had attended Head Start. While Jenny had petitioned the school to have Donny repeat first grade, the authorities ignored her wishes and passed him on, even though from the beginning of the year to the end, he was unable to come close to mastering the reading requirements of his class. Purcell-Gates had concluded that the traditional skills-based approach to reading, which the school followed, had failed Donny and that another means, namely a balanced contextual approach was needed if he was ever going to “encode” the written word and incorporate it as part of his meaning-making of personal identity formation.

Purcell-Gates focused a good portion of her energy on helping Donny to encode the many ways that literacy linked up with his own interests and reading of the world.

She sent him postcards, they read stories together, he produced storybooks, they read newspaper stories about “the space shuttle, the Gulf War, advertisements for four-wheelers” (p. 76), all of which peaked this young boy’s attention. The author utilized whatever sources available to spark Donny’s interests and drew on such “natural” text to teach Donny basic decoding skills. He began to use “invented spelling” that, with his accent factored in, was usually phonemically correct.

In line with the contextual/balanced theory of literacy, the author was able to include direct phonemic instruction once it was clear that Donny possessed the basic capacity to break the code between oral and print literacy, that is, once he had learned to read some. Purcell-Gates worked diligently in maintaining an experimental approach in sifting through various sources of learning and motivation with this young boy to keep progress forward moving, while drawing on various graphophonic, syntactical, and semantic cueing mechanisms as deemed relevant by her and Donny. For unless print could begin to “signify” for Donny, the author surmised that any focus on isolated skills, however systematically attended to, would prove futile.

Progress in Donny’s two-year tutorial was limited in terms of his capacity to catch up with the pace and focus of his class. Nonetheless, the author discerned that this former non-reader had made significant progress based on his own development, and more importantly, had begun to signify with and through print, which she discerned was the key to his long-term success. Though one senses a mood of doubt in Purcell-Gates’ assessment that Donny would be able to master the demands of school given the disconnect between his learning needs and the institutions approaches and methodologies

of the, we learn elsewhere that Donny did become a reader and entered high school (New Educator, 2000, p. 2).

Jenny

Jenny's code-switching emerged from a shift in her understanding that learning to read and write resulted from the instruction of the teacher and mastery of the basic rules of word learning, to that of recognizing that her own life experience and language could serve as the basis for engaging the world of print. Purcell-Gates states that this paradigm shift in perception was particularly important, as Jenny had viewed her "countrified" way of speaking as the key impediment to her learning to read. In an effort to shift this perception, Purcell-Gates took a writing approach with Jenny by encouraging her to keep a journal that the teacher, in turn, typed up and corrected the spelling and punctuation. This scaffolding was essential, Purcell-Gates argued, if Jenny was going to process print automatically by reading back her own texts and applying what she was learning to other contexts. For that, she needed to read words that were spelled correctly.

The process, then, was two-fold. Jenny would initiate a text based on her own experience. This was essential for her capacity to "signify" through print literacy. Purcell-Gates would write a response to the content and type up Jenny's narrative, making corrections as a means of helping the student to progressively shift from invented toward conventional spelling and punctuation. Over time, not only did the content of Jenny's journal deepen in its probing of emotional and subject matter complexity. Her ability to spell and use punctuation accurately increased.

Drawing on her desire to help Donny in school, Purcell-Gates also had Jenny listen to children's books on tapes while she followed along with the written text. With

much practice, Jenny was able to take the books home and read them to Donny and her younger son, Timmy. As part of her effort in learning to read the books independently she would start by reading the books on her own, then only use the tapes to help her with the few words with which she was still having trouble. While the scaffold was still needed in the form of the tape, she increasingly drew upon her own agency in becoming a self-learner.

As Jenny's learning progressed, Purcell-Gates formally introduced the concept of phonemic awareness as one tool among others "to get close to what the word might be" (p. 115). As evidence of Jenny's increasing phonemic competence, Purcell-Gates found a 24 % increase in the accuracy of Jenny's spelling by comparing initial journal entries with writing samples taken toward the end of their two-year collaboration. Even in words she had misspelled, the author identified a 90 % finding for accurate phonemic representation by the end of the second year (p. 128). Purcell-Gates agrees with those that espouse the importance of phonemic mastery for the purpose of attaining automaticity in reading. Still, the critical factor in the discussion on reading theory remains on *how* such knowledge is gained (Adams, 1990; Smith, 1997). While Jenny was able gradually to internalize the scaffolding process, she still needed guidance from Purcell-Gates, while moving toward autonomy as a reader and writer of texts, driven by her own desire and needs.

The School System and the Browning Family: A Socio-Cultural Chasm

Purcell-Gates refers to the "terrible mismatch" (p. 94) between what the school expected of his capabilities and Donny's emergent literacy as it actually developed in the Literacy Center. In school Donny failed to master the largely decontextual language

skills his teacher focused on even though he demonstrated capacity to learn through a balanced, contextual reading program based upon his own interests and areas of growing curiosity through the intensive scaffolding the author was able to provide. As Purcell-Gates put it, given the gap between what Donny knew and what was required, “there was... no real place for him to connect with the school curriculum at school” (p. 96). There was little scaffolding support at school in place to help him to bridge the chasm.

Purcell-Gates drew on the imagery of the “outsider” in depicting the perceptions held about Donny and Jenny with the school system. This was poignantly dramatized in Jenny’s effort to have Donny repeat first and second grade, as she feared social promotion would only result in him falling further behind in his reading and general class work in comparison with his schoolmates. Jenny was not merely an outsider, but, on the author’s portrayal, “invisible” in her ability to be heard and taken into account in her requests. It was only when she arrived at school with Donny at the beginning of his second year that Jenny learned that he was promoted to second grade. No one from the institution had discussed with her the school’s decision to pass him even though she raised her concerns at the end of the previous year. When she protested to the authorities (she couldn’t get past the secretary) she was told “the decision ‘had made’” (p. 157). As a marginalized outsider, there was no need to consult her or even to explain the decision.

The situation repeated itself at the end of the new year when both Jenny and Purcell-Gates expected that Donny would repeat second grade. The author concluded that repeating second grade was essential for Donny in order to hold his schoolwork steady while the Literacy Center worked to enhance his reading and writing skills through a methodology and approach the author deemed superior to that provided by the

school. This time Purcell-Gates intervened on behalf of Jenny, who planned to sit in with her in a meeting with the principal to discuss Donny's status. When informed, the principal relayed through his secretary that "[i]f she [Purcell-Gates] wants him held back, then we'll do it" (p. 160). While the principal and the Director of the Literacy Center both held institutional power as equals, Donny's mother had none. Her powerlessness stymied her repeated attempts to intervene on behalf of her son.

In addition to this more evident exclusion, the specter of invisibility was reflected in the print-based form of communication the school used to send messages to the home through homework that no one in the family could decipher and through written notices to parents who couldn't read them. In one example, the school sent a notice home that Donny was suspended for a disciplinary action, which Jenny only learned about because she brought it to Purcell-Gates for deciphering. In another example, the school sent home an extensive questionnaire that focused on its responsiveness to the parents and the needs of the children. The questionnaire included the following passage, which is perfectly lucid for a competent reader, but indecipherable to adults with limited reading ability:

This survey gives you the opportunity to let us know how you feel about your child's schooling. It's like our report card prepared by you. Within our means, we will correct any deficiencies which are expressed by parents and thus better serve our pupils. Your attitudes and judgments will help us determine the extent to which the goals we have set for our schools are being met. When the surveys are returned the results will be tabulated then reported to the principle as soon as possible....Your honest and frank answers to these questions will not reflect on your child in any way since you will not be identified (p. 169).

The fact that a large number of parents could not read a word of the survey nor were able to grasp its dense prose did not go unnoticed by Purcell-Gates. Even when she read the questionnaire to her, Jenny was only able to understand the content as she and her teacher worked through it question-by-question. Reflecting on the school's lack of

sensitivity to Donny's needs, Purcell-Gates concluded that there was "no real understanding of the significant ways in which the school curriculum was failing to meet" (p. 175) them.

Concluding Remarks

Other People's Words is a moving depiction of Jenny and Donny's struggles to gain basic reading and writing skills within a social context and culture, symbolized largely through the school system, which has failed them. One is easily drawn into Purcell-Gates' sensitive portrayal in seeing the world through Jenny's eyes as well as the author's in their relationship, through which barriers of class and education are symbolically transcended. The text is enriched by a generous use of Jenny's own words (spoken and written). Purcell-Gates' eminently readable narrative masterfully weaves heartwarming and heart wrenching descriptions of Jenny's family life, her conflicts with the school over concerns for her son's education, her own increasing assertiveness and autonomy, detailed discussions of reading theory and practice described through Jenny and Donny's learning histories, and an analysis of white Appalachian cultural mores.

Other People's Words is part of a growing genre of ethnographic and qualitative studies that provides vivid and complex renderings of adults in their struggles to enhance their lives through literacy (Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett de Marrais, 1997; Fingeret and Drennon, Rivera, 2000, and Martin, 2001). What all of these studies have in common is a depiction of literacy as a complex socio-cultural process that cannot be artificially separated from critical life domains such as work, home, and community settings. From this perspective, literacy is viewed as an intervening variable in the facilitation of life enhancement as defined by individuals and the significant others

closest to them. It is a metaphor for knowledge that includes, but is broader than reading and writing. With Jenny those domains are her child's school, her religious community, and the city in which she lives. Through Purcell-Gates' portrayal, literacy does not change Jenny's identity toward an adoption of a middle class value system, but enhances her capacity to negotiate her own, as well as the mainstream culture on terms that she decides for her own purposes. Much of the ethnographic and qualitative literature provides a similar depiction of the interface of culture, social forces, and emergent literacy within the lives of adult literacy learners. They present an alternative interpretation to statistically based studies that quantifies student outcomes to various indices of normed behavior typically defined by middle-class values (Beder, 1999). *Other People's Words* is unique in its sustained focus on a single family in its dual concentration on the literacy development of the mother and the child.

The book makes a valuable contribution to the field through its thick description in weaving back and forth from the immediacy of the Browning's family life and detailed accounts of Jenny and Donny's learning histories at the Literacy Center, to broad descriptions of Appalachian culture and social theory on the marginality of minority groups. In these aspects, *Other People's Words* exhibits the strengths of the ethnographic research tradition and adds much through its sustained focus on a single family.

Critiques of the book are minor, focusing on omissions, with the caveat that any expansion to include more about Donny himself as well as Jenny's husband could have jeopardized the narrative structure of the book, Jenny's story, which is compelling in every respect. Also, while we would like to know more about the school system from additional perspectives than those of Jenny's, other studies would be needed to fill the

gap in any *substantial* way. Still it is plausible that a chapter might have been added to more broadly sketch out Donny's second grade class without impairing the narrative structure of the text. The depiction as it exists, while poignant, may have blunted the complexity of what the teacher might have experienced in seeking to teach not only Donny, but also the other students. If that were the case, a more ambivalent narrative would have been required that, perhaps, would have added rather than detracted from the story the author sought to tell about Jenny and Donny. The degree to which additional contextual description builds or detracts from the strength of any particular ethnographic study is invariably a judgment call an author has little choice but to make.

Notwithstanding these caveats, *Other People's Words* makes a valuable contribution to the fields of adult and childhood literacy studies. It is one of the crucial texts that scholars, teachers, practitioners, and policymakers would do well to read in order to gain a more informed understanding of the subtle relationships between culture, social policy, literacy, and schooling.

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