Most urban middle school students learn in spaces where creativity, choice, imagination, and agency relate to how they view their worlds and experiences (Emdin, 2016; Lewis Ellison, 2014, 2017; Vasudevan, 2006). They learn through movement, touch, and play to describe how things are simplified and complicated and how learning is demonstrated through affinity spaces (Gee, 2003). One way to explore youth learning, more specifically African American youth learning, is to look among their family members. Examining learning within the context of African American youth and families is significant when thinking about ways to understand this population against the cultural-deficit viewpoints that have dominated research concerning their rich and complex literacy practices (Smagorinsky, Guay, Lewis Ellison, & Willis, in press), the level of education that urban middle school learners need to compete with their age-group peers outside the city, and the importance of understanding the number of salient literacy practices that can be attributed to urban middle school learners’ involvement with their parents at home.

We wanted to discover what kinds of digital and nondigital activities African American parents were doing with young adolescents at home. In this study, we examined how a father and his two sons used a do-it-yourself (DIY) video to create Christmas ball lights and the effect this project had on their learning together. In their home, Tisha observed how each member worked collaboratively to create the lights. For instance, she observed how they took on various roles to guide each other within the activity. She also observed their verbal and nonverbal interactions that reflected their familial practice. In addition, she noticed how these familial experiences helped shape their understanding of themselves, something not regularly acknowledged in some school settings.

Watching DIY Videos and Creating Christmas Ball Lights

In December 2015, Tisha visited the Talley home after learning that 39-year-old Billy and his two sons, JJ, 13, and Tobias, 11, would be making Christmas ball lights. Sitting and standing around their dining room table, each child took on roles and collaborated to create Christmas ball lights from a DIY video. Billy explained how he introduced this activity before the Christmas holiday:

We put up Christmas lights every year. This year, my wife Porsha wanted me to get Christmas ball lights. She saw the type of lights on Pinterest and actually came up with the idea for us to make them. So one Saturday morning, I asked the kids to look it up [how-to videos]. They researched “how to make Christmas ball lights” and we took it from there.

The more that Tisha watched each family member taking their position around the table, she noticed that, while Billy was the initiator and adult in this activity, he relied on assistance from JJ and Tobias to complete practices such as searching for the DIY video, holding the measuring tape, measuring the wire, reading the instructions aloud to everyone, and cutting the wire.

Tobias: I was trying to find the most minimal job of just telling them what to do from the computer. I think my dad chose me to be on the computer because he knew I was a little tired. So I was telling him what the computer said to do. I found a website that told us how to make the balls and how to cut it. I was reading it aloud to them. We looked up “wired Christmas light balls” to
The stories of an older family member can explain family traditions and establish heritage—and they can be cherished possessions that are passed among family members for years to come. Teens can take part in the process of building family histories by recording the stories, or memoirs, of family members. The activity suggests a range of ways to record stories, from writing memoirs to composing an alternative artistic representation such as a photographic collage, a series of panels telling a story, a painting, a video, a musical composition, or a sculpture.

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Here, JJ describes his (dis)interest around creating the lights. At first, he was unable to envision the outcome of the activity. While he could have left the activity, he chose to stay and realized that when he was able to imagine the outcome of the practice, then he was able to see the connections, and later, the benefits. Tobias enjoyed the activity even though his part was not as complicated as JJ’s or Billy’s. He was more interested in being in the practice and helping, even for a short period of time, but he was engaged throughout. According to Knobel (1999), social practice is “shared purposes, values, beliefs and so forth of those people participating—and not participating—in it” (p. 16). Therefore, language, culture, political, moral, and economic interests are all associated with social practices whether individuals participate in them or not. In other words, an individual can be in the same room participating in a social practice or in the same room not actively participating and still be involved in the practice. Billy noted his roles and how everyone was engaged in the activity, which helped all of them understand the process from start to finish. JJ added,

I enjoyed seeing how the end product of what we did paid off. The process was good and we all did something as a family—that was fine, but seeing the end and what we had finished and accomplished was great.
In other words, seeing the end product and creating the Christmas ball lights as a family was a meaningful practice for him.

Discussions/Implications

Within the familial practice observed in this study we saw various roles that taught family members how to work and learn together by doing. For this trio—two middle schoolers and their father—this practice was a normal feature of the cultural practices that they usually engage in. As JJ stated, “It was exciting that we were doing Christmas balls because it was the first thing we had done in while.” More specifically, we were interested in how observing the practices around this minimal activity made apparent to us how learning is construed and mediated by tools through activity systems. As a result, we found that the family roles play a part in student learning and that teachers need to take this into account most especially when teaching middle schoolers. Observing this family working on this project is what helped the authors make this connection.

TOBIAS: I enjoyed working with my family. It was very fun getting the opportunity to work on different things together.

JJ: It was good to work with my dad. He's usually good with projects and stuff and he gets them done quickly.

BILLY: We all were pretty involved, and we enjoyed engaging with the activity and each other.

How can educators support middle school learners by rethinking the processes of classroom literacy curriculum, instruction, and practices that involve their parents in this discovery? Following are some suggestions for thinking about middle schoolers’ learning in ways that recognize already-existing practices from home that contribute to their learning and that have yet to gain much attention from school systems and traditional pedagogy.

Parents as Partners

Households have an interconnectedness that assists with the “acquisition of knowledge, skills, and information, as well as cultural values and norms” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 21). These community funds of knowledge are often accessed through work and participation in social environments outside of the education sector, but they can also be a major resource for educators. The Talley family drew from multiple content area literacies in the creation of the Christmas ball lights—they used STEM-related activities to measure and cut the materials and to assure that the lights worked properly. They used comprehension skills to read the directions and discuss the creation process and artistic concepts to ensure the project was aesthetically pleasing. The role of educators in acknowledging and supporting this work inside and outside the classroom is crucial to students’ positive academic and social achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Activity Apprenticeships

Young adolescents are capable of learning from those around them and maintaining an active apprenticeship to learn from skilled members of society. They observe and work with these members to develop skills that will enable them to handle “culturally defined problems with available tools and building from these . . . to construct new solutions within the context of sociocultural activity” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 7). The key to apprenticeship is the relinquishing of power, allowing the learner to control the tools necessary for learning. Billy was lenient in the activity system, which gave Tobias and JJ control of the Christmas light project. Similarly, educators could utilize this notion of apprenticeship by giving students a level of agency in their learning activities, granting students the autonomy to take control of the learning process.
Parental Involvement in Home/School Practices

Although parental involvement can reduce the achievement gap, especially the one that exists for racially diverse students (Jeynes, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006), the type of home interaction matters greatly. According to Hill and Tyson (2009), “Among the types of home involvement, educationally enriching activities were positively related to achievement, but helping with homework was associated with lower levels of performance” (p. 757). In other words, parents’ assistance with homework did not have as high a correlation with reading achievement as parents’ assistance in other knowledge-enriching tasks. Billy and his wife often assisted their sons in completing their homework assignments, but the opportunity they provided for the construction of the Christmas ball lights as a practice is another learning resource. In this study, Tobias and JJ participated in activities and used technology to frame their individual and communal knowledge and create a product. Although not a conventional school practice, the increased focus on project learning enacted in the home is essential for educators to acknowledge and support. In addition, educators can even design and create assignments that promote family- and community-based practices in their classrooms (e.g., recording cooking videos; creating digital stories).

(CHAT)ting in the Classroom

These two middle school students and their father participated in project-based learning by choosing a project for creation, analyzing the steps to completion, gathering the materials necessary to complete the project, and working together to promote learning. Project-based learning has the benefit of being active, relevant, and interesting, and it can also provide students with the ability to be autonomous and self-directed while enhancing their communication skills (Wurdinger, Haar, Hug, & Bezon, 2007). Allowing students the autonomy to create and learn through projects like these enhances their learning while also ensuring that the system of schooling is constantly remade and reimagined. This process provides students with the ability to take on various roles and learn by creating their own activity systems within the classroom.

Once educators recognize the educational value that rests in the home literacy practices of young adolescents and their parents, we can think about ways to improve African American middle level students’ literacy outcomes, inform practices and programs, create rigor in research, and transform polices.

Notes

1. This research, the Dig-A-Fam: Fathers’ Digital Literacy Practices Project, was funded by the National Academy of Education Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship Program. This year-long, qualitative research study occurred in 2015–16 and examined the digital literacy practices of African American fathers and the potential impacts they had on their children’s education. Using audio- and video-recorded semi-structured interviews, digital photos, and photo-elicitation to capture narratives and practices from each family member, Tisha interviewed Billy three times, from 60 to 90 minutes at his church, during a focus group comprising seven African American fathers, and at home with his children. S.R., and two former graduate research assistants from another university, Deanna Donald and Gregory Boatwright, transcribed and analyzed data through open- and color-coding methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. Figure 1 was adapted from the Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research. (2003–2004). The activity system. Finland: Department of Education, University of Helsinki.

References


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