

Critical Discourse Analysis:

An example of the good mother in literacy-advice texts

by **Linda M. Phillips**

One of the relatively new strategies of inquiry used in qualitative research is critical discourse analysis. Michel Foucault, in his seminal work on the archeology of knowledge in 1972, proposed that a discourse includes not only written and spoken ideas and knowledge, but also attitudes, the way topics are addressed, the terms of reference used and the social practices embedded in conventions. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) extends textual discourse analysis by including conversations, interviews, observations, written materials and visuals. CDA is thus a hybrid of linguistic and social theory that focuses on discourse within social practice.

But whether CDA is a method of discourse analysis or a means to study the use and implications of language as a social practice is controversial. The emerging consensus is that CDA is not a method of discourse analysis per se, but rather a means to relate textual analysis to the social and political context under study. CDA is an interpretive study of how language-in-use, in whatever form, reflects sociopolitical relations.

Historically, CDA was used to study everyday practices and social interactions within distinct settings including asylums, hospitals, and prisons (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). Current applications of CDA have evolved to include more open settings. One interesting and impressive example of CDA is captured in Suzanne Smythe's research for her doctoral dissertation "The good mother: A critical discourse analysis of literacy advice to mothers in the 20th century" (2006).

Smythe argued that communicating literacy advice to parents is the central strategy used to address the persistent literacy achievement gaps between socio-economic groups. The implication, according to Smythe, is that if families accepted and followed the advice, then their children would become literate, succeed in school and be productive members of society. However, her research demonstrated that contemporary literacy advice to parents is deeply rooted in the cultural ideal of the good mother. The good mother is portrayed as being sensitive, smiling, calm, patient, attentive, and a sympathetic caregiver.

The discourses of domestic pedagogy, intensive mothering and the so-called normal family regulate middle-class domesticity and create an ideal of the good mother that is essential to children's literacy acquisition and academic success. Her findings suggest that relying upon women's domestic literacy work to promote children's academic success not only reproduces gender inequalities, but has implications for equity in literacy-learning opportunities among diversely situated children and families (Smythe p. i).

Research Questions

Four research questions directed this extensive inquiry:

1. What discursive formations are associated with the "mother as teacher of literacy"?
2. What discourse strategies are associated over time with the normalization of the "mother as teacher of literacy"?
3. What forms of literacy and of mothering are excluded within these discourses?
4. Who has gained power within the discourses of literacy and mothering? (Smythe p. 10)

Methodology

Smythe identified and collected three sources of texts published in Britain and North America between the beginning of 19th century and the end of 2005. They included best-selling child-raising manuals and reports, popular parenting magazines and family literacy promotional materials. She used some 300 literacy-advice texts as the primary discourse data. In addition, secondary sources, that included policy documents and theoretical and philosophical works used to frame and contextualize the primary documents, were analyzed for evidence of shifting trends in reading research, the project of schooling, parent-school relationships and changing views of what counts as literacy (p. 15).

Using a modified version of Foucault's genealogical method and adopting a critical approach to discourse analysis, Smythe systematically studied the literacy-

advice texts. The genealogical method allows for the examination of such influences as the historical style of the writing, methods of interpretation, as well as the body of historical work itself for relevant social trends and patterns. Each of the literacy-advice texts were grouped into similar time periods. They were compared across and within those time spans, as well as for differences across decades, on the basis of the following questions:

1. What are the differences and similarities across these texts?
2. What are the consequences of these differences and similarities?
3. Which understanding of the world is taken for granted and which is not recognized?

She used the genealogical method to identify the ways in which power and knowledge come together in discourse. By capitalizing on feminist theories and the concept of mothering and literacy as situated practices, Smythe used a critical approach to study literacy advice to parents as a gendered practice of power rather than an institutional truth. In other words, Smythe was keenly interested in finding the source(s) and use of the literacy advice offered in the texts.

Smythe reports that her topic arose from her lived experience as a young mother acting upon "literacy advice I had barely been conscious of reading or hearing" (p. 44). Drawing on the guide developed by Jean Carabine (2001), Smythe followed several recursive steps:

1. *Getting to know the data*: "[I] read and reread literacy-advice texts as I collected them, often searching out data that had intertextual relationships to those already collected" (p. 45).
2. *Identifying themes*: "The process of identifying themes was embedded in the reading and rereading of advice" (p. 46).
3. *Looking for evidence of interrelationships among discourse*: "[Examine] existing scholarship on child-raising advice and mothering as well as an analysis of literacy advice to mothers in the Nineteenth Century" (p. 47).
4. *Identifying the discursive strategies that are deployed*: "[Attend] to how the discourses of intensive mothering, domestic pedagogy and the normal family are kept

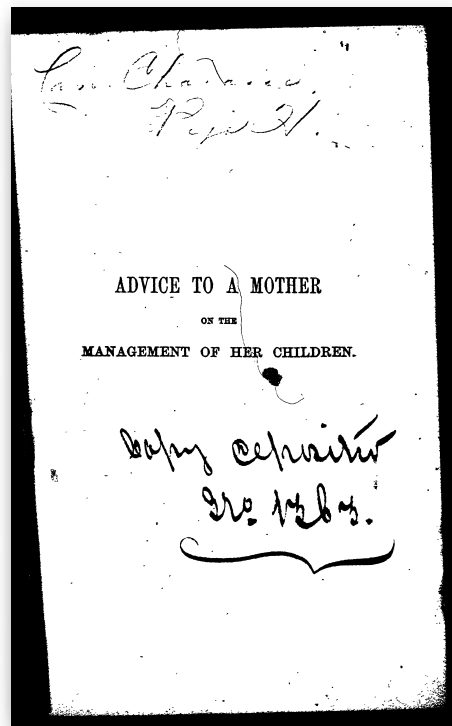
in place all circulated through literacy advice...[I] looked for ways in which both mothering practices and literacy practices were compared, distinguished and/or divided" (p. 48).

5. *Looking for absences and silences*: "[s]trategies of substitution...[I] looked for inherent contradictions in advice which often suggested silences" (p. 48).
6. *Looking for resistances and counter-discourses*: "The analytic strategy of multi-vocality was useful in identifying resistance and counter-discourses in advice...another strategy...was to include in the analysis texts outside of the mainstream of popular culture or commercial publishing" (pp. 48-49).
7. *Identifying the effects of discourse*: "[T]his step refers to analyzing the implications of discourse in terms of how power and knowledge are valued and circulated" (p. 49).
8. *Situating the analysis in the broader discursive context*: "Situating discourse analysis within a broader oeuvre, or terrain, is a central component of a Foucauldian approach" (p. 50).
9. *Attending to the limitations of the research, your data and sources*: "[D]ata used in this study represent but one small window into a diverse and complex set of practices and experiences" (p. 50).

This elaborate and intensive analysis identified some very fascinating, persuasive and provocative findings.

Findings

Several themes emerged from Smythe's analysis of these literacy-advice texts and they include: that it is just common sense that mothers are pedagogic teachers of their children; that mothers' roles as their children's first teachers was not considered work, but rather was rendered invisible by embedding literacy in everyday routines associated with their domestic work; that storybook reading was privileged over other literacy practices; and that the different material conditions in which North



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American women do the work of mothering and in which children are raised were completely invisible.

The findings from Smythe's research are grouped here in four clusters: mother as teacher; ideals of motherhood over time; who is excluded; and who benefits.

Mother as teacher

The prevalent and dominant literacy-advice texts consistently entangled the discourses of mothering (intensive mothering, domestic pedagogy and the normal family) with the discourses of children's literacy. According to Smythe, this entanglement suggested that there are "regimes of truth" surrounding policy and practice in the support of children's literacy (p. 272). These entanglements persisted in literacy-advice texts across time and location and the only differences were minor variations in style. Furthermore, the 19th-century discourse is evident in contemporary literacy-advice texts and reflects dated gender and race theories (p. 273).

Ideals of motherhood over time

Nineteenth-century literacy ideals are enduring and continue to shape literacy and mothering discourses. Women's domestic literacy work was, and still is, considered to be an important part of maintaining social status and fostering appropriate morals and habits in their children. This sacred maternal duty and responsibility was not only visible but celebrated in advice literature (p. 274). By the early 20th century, mothers' roles changed to be more didactic and pragmatic than sacred: mothers were promoting children's success in school and contributing to the development of a more secular personality, rather than developing a spiritual and morally enlightened character.

By the 1950s, the bedtime story regimen emerged and the former practice of family and friends engaging in social reading waned. The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a decline in literacy advice, which was concurrent with

the intense social debate about the purposes of schools and the roles of women in North American society.

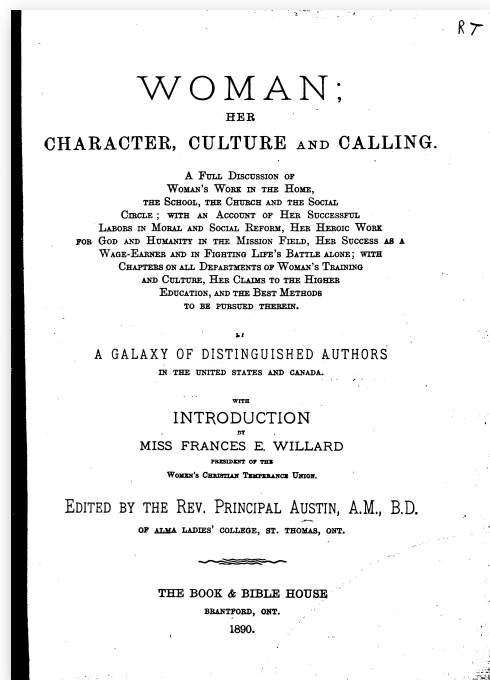
Subsequently, the late 1970s marked the beginning of a dramatic increase in the quantity of literacy-advice texts. By 2000, there was a flood of mainstream best-selling texts on child-raising and literacy development that expressed higher expectations for children's literacy attainment. Expectations for normal families along class lines included messages such as: read 20 minutes to your children every day, choose their schools, monitor teachers and find new ways to stimulate children through home schooling.

According to Smythe's research, "literacy advice changed to fit new circumstances, but it never altered the fundamental link between mothering, literacy and the reproduction of social advantage and disadvantage" (p. 277). The literacy-advice texts embedded messages of hidden treats and promises for children who were successful in school. The backdrop for manufacturing new pedagogical methods and products was based on claims of a current or social crisis. These crises included immigration in the 19th century; the reading crisis in the 1950s; the crisis in the family in the 1970s; the low levels of literacy in the 1980s; and the technological and new knowledge economy in the 21st century. The literacy-advice texts remained consistent throughout all of these crises, in counselling and regulating mothers on how to use

their domestic time and space. In particular, texts focused on ways for mothers to manage their own and their children's time and the physical space of the home so that literacy, most often defined as homework, storybook reading and doing chores with mom, could take place.

Who is excluded

Lower-class families: The literacy-advice texts implied that there were different expectations for lower-class families in the 19th century and little advice was offered to them. This erroneous view was challenged in the early 1980s when rich forms of literacy were documented in the homes of low-income families (Heath; Taylor). Regrettably, the view that there is little or no literacy in the homes of low-income and low-education families persists in



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some quarters, and the literacy-advice texts have changed little.

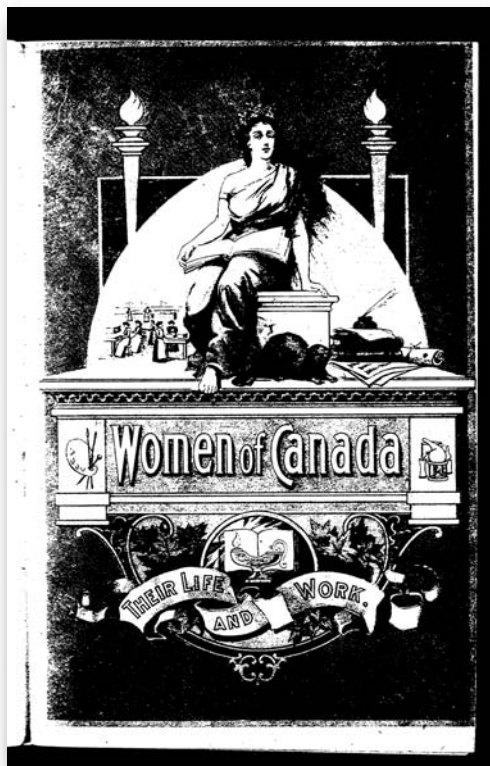
Men: Fathers, and men generally, have a low profile in the children's advice literature, except as authors of the texts. For a very short period in the 1960s and 1970s, fathers were called upon to read stories to their children at bedtime and to encourage other fathers to do the same. Otherwise, they were and are invisible in the world of the literacy-advice texts.

Children: The 21st century has witnessed children engaging in forms of literacy "connected to social worlds that their parents did not necessarily share" (Smythe 283). Literacy-advice texts do not see children as agents in their own literacy practices despite the fact that ample evidence suggests otherwise.

There is an entrenched romantic notion of an ideal family. The mother is seen as nurturer and teacher in a loving, warm and sensitive home where the bonding children need to shape their bodies, minds and souls develops through mother-child storybook reading. Many examples challenge this romantic notion, but they are not mentioned in the literacy-advice texts.

Who benefits

Who benefits from mothering and the literacy-advice discourses is a pointed question. Literacy advice has become more prevalent and insistent since the 1990s. One interpretation of this increase is either that mothers are not following the advice, or, if they are, that the literacy advice is not having its intended effect. Public education since the 1930s seems to have drawn a line in the sand for what is expected of mothers. At that time, literacy learning became more or less institutionalized. Women's domestic literacy work at home was no longer recognized and thus became invisible, "though nonetheless important for the social and cultural reproduction of advantage and disadvantage" (Smythe p. 294).



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Implications

As applied in Smythe's dissertation, critical discourse analysis has revealed the power of inquiry into the language used to situate motherhood and literacy practices. Smythe has mapped out three possible routes into a new territory for mothering and early literacy discourses: (1) develop a critical awareness of the ways in which literacy research sustains the mothering discourses; (2) pay attention to the realistic and situated experiences of contemporary mothering in Canada and the United States as a basis for policymaking; and (3) consider shifting research away from instruction and advice, to questions of how to make social policies for women more equitable and fair. Clearly, the good mother/caregiver role represents a much more expanded one than that portrayed in literacy-advice texts.

The focus of this piece on critical discourse analysis as a research methodology could not take up all of the richness and detail in Smythe's work of over 300 pages, and so I close by recommending that you read her dissertation. ■

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