

The Importance of Family Literacy

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### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

~~There is often a~~ **A common** misconception ~~is~~ that children begin to develop literacy skills such as reading and writing print when they start school, typically in kindergarten (McGee & Richgels, 2012; Strickland, 2004). However, research has shown that children begin their literacy and language development as young as infancy (McGee & Richgels, 2012; Santos, Fettig, & Shaffer, 2012; Strickland, 2004). As Santos et al. state, “From birth, children are comforted by hearing and listening to their caregivers’ voices. The language used by families supports young children’s development. . .” (p. 88). Literacy and language development emerge through literacy experiences and opportunities that children receive from their families, as well as their home and school environments (Carter, Chard, & Pool, 2009; McGee & Richgels, 2012; Santos et al., 2012). Such family literacy experiences and opportunities help develop listening, oral language, and reading and writing skills, as well as foster positive social-emotional growth (Santos et al., 2012). Thus a child’s literacy and language development begins before they enter school; it begins through the early experiences of the child’s social and cultural contexts in which they live (Carter et al., 2009).

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Research has shown that children’s language and literacy development ~~is~~ **are** dependent upon the support and encouragement of their families (Carter et al., 2009; Strickland, 2004; Swick, 2009). When children are exposed to literacy experiences in their home environment, they develop many skills, concepts, attitudes and behaviors that will positively affect their interest and development in literacy (Carter et al., 2009; Zeece & Wallace, 2009). Family involvement is crucial because families provide opportunities for learning and mastering. Children benefit from the help their families and cultural upbringing can provide for them.

According to Vygotsky's theory, ~~of~~ the zone of proximal development represents the difference between what children can do without help and what they can do with help. To reach the next stage and function independently, children benefit from scaffolding by more knowledgeable peers or adults ~~through scaffolding~~ (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Scaffolding is the process in which competent peers or adults provide help to a child within their zone of proximal development and withdraw their aid when no longer necessary (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Research has indicated that children's problem solving skills improve when the person they are receiving aid from is an "expert," a person who is more knowledgeable and capable, who can provide the child with new ways to approach the problem (Berk & Winsler, 1995). This social experience is termed by Barbara Rogoff as, "guided participation," which is defined as "active involvement by children in culturally structured activities with the guidance, support, and challenge of companions who transmit a diverse array of knowledge and skills" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 20). For children, this guided participation ~~may beis often~~ provided ~~to them~~ by their family members as well as teachers or peers at school or in the community.

## **Family Literacy**

### **Historical Background**

"Family literacy" is a concept that has come of age in the past quarter of a century (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). Family literacy is "a concept that encompasses the ways that people learn and use literacy in their home and community lives" (as cited in Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006, p.261). Historically the contributions that families have brought to literacy have been somewhat inconsistent (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). In the past many children were denied the right to an education, therefore, the task of providing reading and writing instruction fall on the parents, extended family, and community members. However, by the mid-

1900s, education in the United States began to be viewed as something that was best taught by “experts who could develop and present instructional material in a systematic scientifically based manner” (as cited in Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006, p. 262). Public education became important for all children to have and parents took a “hands-off” approach to their child’s education and in some cases the family involvement in school begun to decline.

In the later part of the twentieth century, new research ~~was being conducted that~~ provided a different perspective on the relationship of families to their children’s development (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). Marie’s Clay groundbreaking research on early literacy indicated that “young learners could not be neatly divided into groups of ‘readers’ and ‘pre-readers,’ but rather that children were on an emergent continuum of literacy learning,” (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006, p. 262). Clay’s research introduced the idea that children can learn to read in their home environment, and be ready to apply what they learn at home to their school (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). The growing research on this idea, as well as on the importance of parent involvement, also led to the development of early childhood programs that focused on supporting literacy learning in school and home environments.

### **What is Family Literacy?**

Parents and caregivers play a fundamental part in the development of their children. They typically know and understand their children better than anyone else, as well as be able to offer their children many opportunities for learning on a daily basis. Parents are an essential part of encouraging and fostering their child’s language and literacy development (Carter et al., 2009). A pedagogical practice in which parents can use to help their parents is the practice of “family literacy.” As Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2009) write, family literacy is:

A straightforward term that describes any number of pedagogical practices related to the home-based literacy learning. In its descriptive form, the term honors parents as their children's first teachers and refers to the many ways in which they, along with siblings and extended family members, have the potential to impact the literacy learning of children. (p. 262)

The pedagogical practice of family literacy is a shared experience between family members that offers the opportunity to help enhance and support the language and literacy development of children. Family literacy is a lifelong learning practice for the entire family and therefore it is often one of the best practices to help children with their language and literacy development. As Rosenkoetter and Barton state, a child's early years ideally provide the foundation for literacy development, which later will help build on specific literacy skills (as cited in Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 35).

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### **Implementing Family Literacy**

#### **Early Childhood Family Literacy Programs**

Implementing the pedagogical practice of family literacy is an immense learning tool to help children with their development. One method of implementing family literacy is attending and participating in early childhood literacy programs. As Swick (2009) writes, early childhood family literacy programs are programs that:

. . . promote the emergence of literacy in children's lives and thus create a stronger foundation for school and life success. Integral to this effort to promote literacy is a focus on helping the entire family become ready for having successful school experiences through their meaningful growth in acquiring literacy skills. (p. 403).

According to Vygotsky's social-constructivist theory, which emphasizes on the role of more knowledgeable peers or adults scaffolding the learning of children, programs that support parents in helping their children are more likely to be effective (as cited in Doyle & Zhang, 2011, p. 223). Early childhood family literacy programs that are high quality focus on enhancing the skills of children and family members, while at the same provide support and resources for families (Swick, 2009). When literacy programs are family-centered, engaging the entire family in literacy learning, there is hope that everyone's interest in and application of literacy learning will be enhanced.

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Swick (2009) advises that successful comprehensive early childhood literacy programs should address five important components: early childhood education, adult education and literacy, parenting education, parent and child interactive literacy activities, and family support services. When early childhood literacy programs are high quality they produce successful outcomes, such as: school readiness, school success, economic gains, and quality of life advancements (as cited in Swick, 2009, p. 403). By engaging in a family-centered design, family literacy programs send the message that they value the input from parents and family members. Such programs seek to nurture and encourage families to use their daily lives and experiences as literacy resources, as well as becoming capable of implementing long-term literacy to school success.

#### **Family literacy program study.**

Antoinette Doyle and Jing Zhang (2011) conducted a study on the impacts of early childhood literacy programs on children and their families' literacy development. Doyle and Zhang examined the parents' motivation to participate, their expectations of the program, and their valuation of the program. Parents with preschool children, between the ages of three and

five, were invited to participate in an eight week family literacy program. Parent-to-parent interactions and facilitator support was used to enhance parents' knowledge and provide strategies to help foster their children's literacy development (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

Parents were offered two models, a parent-only model and a parent-child model. In the parent-only model, parents attended sessions with other parents that were lead by a facilitator. Parents shared their literacy experiences and personal feelings with other parents that were connected to the topic provided by the facilitator. In each session the facilitator provided suggestions for engaging children in literacy activities, as well as provided with books to take home. In the parent-child model, parents and children attended sessions together. First the entire group of participants engaged in reading a story aloud followed by songs and or nursery rhymes. Afterwards breakout sessions were conducted by facilitators who worked with the parents and children separately. The parents engaged in the adult-only discussions, while the children, in a nearby room, they participated in activities related to the session topic. Afterwards the parents and children engaged in activities together, related to the topic of the session.

Doyle and Zhang found that parents in both program models were motivated by the same goal, supporting their children's literacy development. The study found that difference between the two groups was the manner in which they felt the program was meeting their goals. The parents came into the program assuming that the best learning experience for their child could only be provided by "experts," (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). Parents expressed concerns in their ability to carry out the program ideas in their homes. Some parents also shared concerns that they felt their own learning would be impeded because they would have to focus their attention on their children's behavior. As the parents participated in the eight week program, they expressed that they continued to attend the program because they were learning something that would

benefit the development of their child. The parent interaction with other parents and facilitator was cited as an important resource for their own learning. Parents felt that being able to share their concerns with others, as well as learn from others, helped them find ways in which they could help their own children.

Children and families who participate in early childhood literacy programs have the potential of thriving in their literacy development. They are more likely to be ready for school, have larger vocabularies, increased comprehensions skills, increased social competence, and higher intellectual curiosity (as cited in Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Swick, 2009). Families benefit from literacy programs because the powerful learning opportunities they receive will benefit and enhance their overall development for school success.

### **Home-School Connection**

Research has shown that the home is a child's first learning environment (Santos et al., 2012). The home environment creates opportunities for children to engage with language and text, which reinforces early literacy development (as cited in Carter et al., 2009). As Gonazlez and Uhing (2006) summarize, "Reading with children, opportunity for verbal interactions, value placed on literacy and experiences with print are some key ways in which the home environment influences children's early literacy development," (as cited in Santos et al., 2012, p. 88). The family and home environment of a child plays a critical part in their child's emerging literacy and family involvement in a child's literacy development will help increase a child's academic achievement (Barbour, 1998).

Though research has shown that family involvement is crucial to a child's literacy development, parents and family members may be unable or unwilling to participate in school-based programs or family literacy programs. As Barour writes families may be unable to be



involved because, “. . . they are physically culturally isolated or because they are consumed by providing basic needs. Families limited by time constraints may not respond to solicitations to become involved at school,” (p. 1998). Educators should not limit family involvement only to volunteering at their children’s school or attending school-sponsored events. Schools and educators must encourage parents and families to help their children’s literacy development by using creative methods outside of school learning. When schools and educators support the characteristics of family environments they reinforce the importance of parents and families as educators which can lead to positively influencing children’s learning (as cited in Barbour, 1998, p. 71).

#### **Home-literacy bags-**

A creative strategy parents and educators can use to encourage family literacy at home is the use of home literacy bags (Barbour, 1998; Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006; Hammack, Foote, Garretson, & Thompson, 2012; Zeece & Wallace, 2009). A home literacy bag is an interactive form of homework that involves a two-way communication between families and the school (Barbour, 1998; Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006; Hammack et al., 2012). It is also a manner in which families can be involved in their child’s learning if they are unable to volunteer in the classroom or in school literacy activities. Home literacy bags may include the following items:

- a parent letter of instruction explaining how to use the literacy bag, as well as ideas for use and care of the books and materials;
- developmentally appropriate activities such as: coloring books, phonics and math games, trace-and-write sheets, interactive mini books;

- a logbook or journal that families can use to record what they did with their child, as well as communicate with teachers;
- books related to the classrooms' learning objects (Zeece & Wallance, 2009).

Using a family literacy bag is a learning tool for families. As Richardson et al. (2008) state:

developing and sharing take-home literacy bags is an exciting literacy-promoting activity that may be shared with children and families to provide support for emergent literacy while reducing the pressure to 'perform' in the presence of a program teacher or other parents (as cited in Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 36).

Home literacy bags can "reach" all families and place appropriate high-quality literature at the hands of families (Barbour, 1998). Overall, home literacy bags have the ability to empower families to advocate for their children and be influential teachers of literacy.

### **Family Literacy in the Home Environment**

As research has well established, family involvement has tremendous potential for school readiness and enriching a child's literacy development (Crawford & Zygouris-Cole, 2006; Santos et al., 2012). Family literacy does not merely have to be restricted to the school environment, early childhood literacy programs, or home literacy bags provided by teacher. It can be implemented in the home by families through their everyday lives and routines. Teachers can encourage families to create literacy-rich home environments that will support their child's literacy development (Santos et al., 2012). Families should be encouraged to notice and make use of the print material around their home and community environment, such as food labels, cookbooks and recipes, magazines, newspapers, and books (Santos et al., 2012). Families can help their children understand print environment by pointing to it and reading the print to their child.

Families can use their daily routines to encourage emerging literacy and social-emotional growth (Santos et al., 2012). One daily routine that can enrich literacy development is meal time. Preparing a meal, eating together, and cleaning up afterwards are a great opportunities for literacy enhancement. As children engage in these routines they are learning self help skills, the ability to read and follow a recipe, and cooperative social skills. Families can introduce and encourage new vocabulary words during conversations around the table. Running errands such as going to the grocery store is another literacy opportunity for literacy development. Children can help write and read a grocery list, as well as point out when they see the item on the list. During a car or bus ride, on a walk, families can share stories, sings songs, read a book or listen to audio books (Santos et al., 2012). Families can use all their resources around them to encourage and expand their child's literacy and language development.

### **Conclusion**

As Carter et al., writes, "Language and literacy skills are an essential element of young children's development and allow them to interact meaningfully with other people and to develop knowledge in all subject areas," (p. 519). The learning process of a child's literacy and language development is vital to their overall development. Thus, family literacy is essential to implement in its many different forms, such as early childhood literacy programs, home literacy bags, and home literacy activities produced by families. When families provide a strong and nourishing environment for a child, they are ensuring the child's school readiness, academically, socially, and emotionally (Santos et al., 2012). Children need a strong foundation in literacy and language development in order to be able access the information about the world around them in meaningful and productive manners. Overall family literacy is a rich and complex pedagogical practice that will provide the building blocks for early literacy learning in young children.

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