

CONNECTING SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES: UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF HOME LITERACY PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Home literacy practices are extremely important in developing early language and literacy skills. Children from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds may be at risk, not because their family literacy practices are inferior, but because their culturally defined literacy practices may not be consistent with school literacy expectations. To better understand the influence of family literacy, more research is needed on home literacy practices to maximize the literacy experiences of all children and to strengthen the home and school literacy connections. This qualitative investigation explores the early literacy events practiced by three low SES mothers and their preschoolers. Drawing on traditions of ethnography, mothers and their preschoolers were interviewed and audio recorded during shared reading interactions at home using familiar and unfamiliar picture storybooks. The interviews and shared reading transcripts revealed several practices that promote literacy development in young children; practices on which schools and teachers can build.

Keywords: home literacy; family literacy; early literacy; language

A top priority for early literacy education is that children develop a strong language and literacy foundation before they enter formal schooling. Research has indicated that a relationship exists between early oral language and reading, writing, and thinking (Loban, 1963; Menyuk, 1984). A variety of factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) may influence the literacy achievement of both native English speakers and English language learners (ELLs) (Neuman, 2008). With the current focus on illiteracy and school failure in the United States, more attention has shifted to family literacy (Yaden & Paratore, 2003). However, few studies have investigated the influence of home literacy practices of lower SES households on literacy achievement. Home literacy practices (i.e. frequency of shared reading, parental interactions and responsiveness) are extremely important in the development of early language and literacy skills. Activities such as shared reading have proven beneficial in improving the literacy abilities of young children (Sénéchal, 2006; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Neuman, 1996). Furthermore, the conversations that occur as a result of shared reading interactions are considered as important as the actual reading itself (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

Children become literate beings by participating in literacy events defined by their home culture (Heath, 1983; Mays, 2008; McNaughton, 2001; Nyhout & O'Neil, 2013). Home literacy practices vary greatly among cultures. For example, some families have routines that include reading nightly from

a diverse home library and others may have limited access to books. Some families stress the importance of educational reading over reading for pleasure and, for others, discussions about literature may not take place at all (Owodally, 2014). When children enter the school at ages five or six, some may encounter difficulties due to the differences between their home and school literacy practices (McNaughton, 2001). As a result, current school structures may not fully meet the needs of families with cultural and linguistic identities that are different from the majority (McNaughton, 2002). Children from lower SES families may be at risk, not because their family literacy practices are inferior, but because their culturally defined literacy practices may not be consistent with school practices (Heath, 1983). The differences between home and school cultures can inhibit the language and literacy development of some children (Gee, 2002). Therefore, it is important for schools and families to work together to provide a complimentary and consistent literacy learning experience for all children.

In order to understand the influence of family literacy, it is critical that we gain a broader perspective regarding the specific literacy practices that impact academic achievement. Heath (1983) describes literacy learning as a culturally bound activity, heavily influenced by a child's home and community. In order to ensure success for all children, regardless of their culture, it is imperative that teachers are aware of differences in order to incorporate and support the existing literacy practices that occur in lower SES homes. To this end, this study expands the current knowledge base by examining the dialogue that occurs when low SES mothers and their children share books together in their homes. One question guides this study: What are the conversational exchanges that occur between lower SES mothers and their preschool children during shared reading interactions?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A collective case study research design comprised of three mother-child dyads was used in this study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the cases selected best illustrate the population and process being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). All participants selected lived below the national poverty level and qualified for the free school lunch program.

DATA COLLECTED

Three primary sources for data collection were used: 1) individual interviews with each mother to collect relevant background information regarding existing family literacy practices, 2) field notes of individual interviews, and 3) audio recordings of mothers reading with their children in their homes. During the initial interviews, the mothers were asked to describe their existing family literacy practices and routines. Each dyad was given five picture storybooks appropriate for preschool-aged children to use during the shared reading events; however, some selected to read electronic books or books from their home collections. For eight weeks, participants were asked to record their shared reading sessions, and each audio recording was labeled with the date and time

and name of the picture book used during the session. Using the protocol developed by Hammer and her colleagues (2005), mothers were not given specific directives on how and when to share the books. Each session was subsequently transcribed. Field notes from the subsequent parental interviews provided insight and perspective on the shared reading events.

DATA ANALYSIS

Initially, open coding was used to identify and categorize phenomena found in the shared reading transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A thorough analysis of the data was ensured by examining each entry multiple times to uncover recurring themes, categories, and patterns. A second layer of codes emerged through an analysis of the data: labeling, prediction, inferencing, wait time, questioning, commitment, encouragement/affirmation, correcting and repeating, digital attitude, reading attitude, adult modeling, and distractions. Using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967), the data were analyzed to highlight initial categories, patterns, and themes. As the themes emerged, audio and field note data were consulted to see if they supported one another and to establish trustworthiness (Silverman, 2004).

SHARED READING STORIES

KAY, ALEXANDRIA, & ABBY

Kay (all names are pseudonyms), a Hispanic single mother of two young children and recently divorced, lived near her daughters' school in government-subsidized housing. During the initial interview, she shared the challenges she faced raising her daughters alone and admitted it was difficult to manage work, school, and family. During the time span of this study, Kay completed her GED and enrolled in a local community college with the hope of becoming a teacher. She worked as a nanny and part-time clerk in the mall to support her two young daughters, Alexandria and Abby, who were enrolled in daycare approximately ten hours a day. They often spent the night with their elderly great-grandmother while Kay worked and attended school. Facing these challenges was not easy as she related in one of our informal visits: "It is tough to leave your babies, but sometimes you have to. I was lucky to have Alexandria's preschool and teacher, and my Memaw."

Kay was eager to participate in the study and was aware of the relationship among school, reading, and success, yet expressed difficulty finding the extra time to read to her children. When asked about their home literacy practices, Kay primarily referenced the reading backpacks sent home by Alexandria's teacher. These backpacks included various books and a reading bear buddy, a stuffed animal for the children to share books and post-reading activities with. There were a few books and other reading materials in the home, but she mainly relied on what the school sent home.

Alexandria, age 4, was a precocious child and often interrupted her mother during the interviews. Kay was especially patient with her children and would stop the interviews to address their needs. Alexandria was especially interested in her mother's tablet and played games with her three-year-old sister, Abby, during most of our initial visit. As the eldest child, Alexandria often mothered her quiet and more reserved younger sister.

Even though Alexandria and her mother were the participants chosen for the study, the shared reading recordings revealed an engaging literacy event shared by all members of the family. Abby can be heard giggling and chiming in with her sister during several shared reading events. During a shared reading of *Lady with the Alligator Purse* by Nadine Westcott (1999), Alexandria makes a personal connection to Tim, the main character by saying, “Tim was a baby-not like me!” Abby can be heard in the background making an additional connection to the character’s actions stating, “dat is not good...he is naughty”. They all begin to laugh and Kay asks them if they want to start again. They both scream, “YES!” In another shared reading, this time using *No David!* by David Shannon, Kay questions the actions of David pulling the cat’s tail: “Do you think that kitty cat likes it?” Abby responds, “De cat likes me pulling dat tail!” and Alexandria screams, “No, he doesn’t!” They all burst into laughter. There are many instances of Kay questioning the girls and elaborating on story events during the shared reading events while reading *No David!*

BRENDA AND LILY

Brenda, a Caucasian mother of three young children, was the sole provider for her family. She had three young children, including one four-year old daughter named Lily. Although married, Brenda’s husband had been unemployed for the past five years. Brenda supported the family by working long hours at a major retail chain. The family of five lived in government-subsidized housing that was a considerable distance from their children’s school. Because the family shared one car, Brenda stated it was difficult to keep in contact with Lily’s school and teachers.

Brenda shared very little about her home literacy practices during the initial interview. She reported, “I read bedtime stories when I can and make sure the older children do their reading homework.” It was apparent during the interview that the house had a wide variety of children’s literature. Lily was excited to receive the new books from the interviewer and quickly grabbed them from her mother’s hands and added them to her collection. Many times during the interview, Lily could be seen digging through a basket of books located in the living room. Often Lily would approach her mother and ask her to read one of the new books. Brenda would quickly send Lily away and call on the older siblings for help.

The shared reading events between Brenda and Lily revealed rich conversations, elaborate questioning, and direction to task by the mother. A shared reading of *Five Ugly Monsters* by Tedd Arnold illustrated many instances of Brenda directing Lily to important vocabulary and information. For example Brenda asks, “Do you know what these two words say? Guess what it says.” Lily replies, “What?” The mother pauses and only states the first word, “The.” Lily yells “End!” Brenda validates Lily by saying, “Yes, the end ...that means the story is over!” She then asks a follow up question: “What do you think he’s doing now?” Another example includes Brenda directing Lily to the counting pattern in the book. Brenda provides scaffolding by asking questions and directing Lily to the illustrations instead of giving her the answer. Brenda takes Lily’s hand and points to the illustrations and asks, “Now how many monsters are there? How do you know?” Lily excitedly counts the monsters and screams, “One fell off and bumped his head! OUCH!” On occasion, Lily and Brenda would read eBooks from a tablet. Brenda used the same questioning techniques during the eBook readings. Although Lily enjoyed the eBooks, she was particularly interested in the interactive

features (e.g. music, games) integrated throughout the book. Lily was a persistent child who was never satisfied with just one book.

DELIA AND JENNY

Delia, a Hispanic mother of two young children, provided most of the financial support for her family. Her husband was unable to maintain stable employment and worked odd jobs to help support the family. Like Brenda, Delia also worked for a major retail chain.

During the interviews, Delia reported many home literacy practices including bedtime stories, eBook reading, conversations, and playing games with her children. Brenda's oldest daughter, Jenny was selected for the study; however, Brenda's youngest daughter, Israel, also participated in several shared reading events. Although Jenny was not present during the interview, the transcripts revealed a high-energy four-year old who often challenged her mother and three-year old sister. During a reading of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr., Jenny can be heard correcting her younger sister when she incorrectly labels the cat. Jenny responds, "No, **red bird**, not purple cat!" The mother responds, "Yes Dear, red bird, but that was the animal we saw on the other page." Jenny quickly responds, "See, I told you!" Throughout the reading, the mother affirms and redirects the siblings throughout the reading. Like the other mothers in the study, the shared readings reveal an enjoyable event in which she assists with her children's understanding of the text by asking questions about word meanings and pictures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview and shared reading transcripts revealed several practices that promote literacy development. Through an analysis of the codes that were utilized, several themes emerged. Sophisticated reading behaviors (e.g. labeling, schema activation, questioning) were apparent in the shared reading interactions between parent and child. Adult modeling, correcting/repeating, questioning, elaboration, encouragement and praise were just a few of the interactions that were evident in the shared reading events. Most valuable, however, was an examination of the cases as a whole and listening to the exchanges of the children and their mothers.

Conversations did not include formal literacy strategies such as synthesizing and inferencing; however, mothers modeled and engaged in, perhaps intuitively, behaviors that promote developing literacy for their children. Mothers asked their children questions about pictures, characters, and events in the stories and helped them with word pronunciations and meanings. For example, during another of Kay and Alexandra's shared readings, Kay discusses the character's motive for constantly causing trouble in the book *No David!* by David Shannon (1998). Alexandra blurts out, "But it was an accident, David didn't mean to do it!" Kay then asks, "What is an accident? Did David do it on purpose?" While these types of conversations do not mimic the way teachers might model and teach strategic reading in the classroom, they do serve to support understanding of the text in a less formal way. For instance, asking children about pictures in a text can help them make predictions. Impromptu questions about the meanings of words helps children learn vocabulary by developing context clue awareness. Adult questioning helps foster children's participation and

engagement in the shared reading event. As noted in our observations, these interactions were often enhanced by humor or dramatic intonation. Perhaps even most importantly, the mothers modeled positive attitudes about reading in general by reading with their children for enjoyment and not solely skill acquisition.

While the differences in digital texts and traditional texts was not a focus of this study, digital media/technology was an integral part of the daily literacy routines for each family. Each family in the study owned at least two devices (e.g. iPad, tablet). In the interviews, families indicated that they believe reading is important, and some of the family routines included reading bedtime stories from their book collections, which were comprised of both eBooks and print books. Two families reported playing educational games on the iPads as part of their nightly routines. Each family reported that the iPads were used as rewards for good behavior, and their favorite apps included selections from the Nick JR collection such as Team Umi Zoomi, Dora Reading, and Moose Letter Hunt. As indicated in the videotapes, each child easily navigated the apps and books on the iPads. One family reported using educational apps on the iPad to meet school requirements (e.g. homework, reading, spelling word review, sight word practice). Digital media, particularly eBooks and educational apps, were used to reinforce early literacy skills (e.g. phonological awareness, concepts of books, other preschool concepts). It should be noted that digital technology was also reported as a hindrance. Although digital media/technology played an important role in the homes, print was still an important part of family literacy routines. Children would often ask to read a book after the digital shared readings. Lily in particular complained if they did not read at least one book from her bookshelf by saying, "We haven't read a book yet!"

Prensky (2001) refers to children born into this age of pervasive technology use as "digital natives." Early language and literacy learning are rapidly changing due to an increasing dependence on digital technologies. With this increasing reliance on technology, digital stories, the Internet, educational apps, and other digital technologies, opportunities arise to provide different avenues in which children can develop emergent literacy skills. The term *new literacies* is used to describe the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to navigate and comprehend the ever-changing information and communications technology (ICT) (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Allington (2012) explained that higher order literacy strategies are necessary to comprehend the constant influx of unfettered information available in the digital world. Digital technologies provide a context by which families and teachers can assist children in literacy development through careful interactions with texts and other ICT; however, more research is needed on the impact of digital technologies on emergent literacy skills (Blanchard & Moore, 2010).

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

School and family play an integral role in providing optimal settings and opportunities that facilitate literacy development. Children acquire knowledge from literacy events practiced in their homes, and these practices may vary greatly across each culture. These literacy practices are often different from the literacy activities practiced in formal school settings. Intervention programs that take a deficit model approach and attempt to remediate or "fix" perceived deficits identified in the

home can send the wrong message, as the deficit model assumes that some home literacy practices are unable to promote the literacy development of children.

Findings from this study emphasize the importance of family in the literacy development of young children. Schools should strive to supplement the home literacy practices of their students, specifically, the influence of home literacy practices that strengthen formal reading and writing practices that occur in school. Sophisticated reading behaviors such as labeling and schema activation were present in the shared reading events as discussed in the findings; however, the way they are presented in the home and school may vary greatly. In order to facilitate transfer of skills, awareness of the differences is key. Teachers should capitalize on opportunities to expand the family literacy practices of their students. For example, it is important to provide a wide variety of reading material to create a print rich environment. Although digital media opens up many avenues for literacy development, print books are invaluable resources that classroom teachers can provide through book programs and the library. As well, creating space in the classroom that allows students to read for enjoyment, and not only for skill acquisition, can support the home literacy experience. Students should be excited to share what they read at school and at home. Although more difficult in a classroom of thirty students, allowing for student choice of what to read, as well as impromptu interactions and outbursts of enthusiasm during reading, encourages and motivates students to read. Rather than the “gentle inquisition” format in which teachers probe for specific answers, teachers can facilitate conversations about characters and stories that may lead to “grand conversations” or unscripted, authentic discussions about books that develop comprehension (Eeds & Wells, 1989). These grand conversations may align more closely with home literacy experiences.

Each mother’s praise, attitude, modeling, and interaction affected her child’s level of engagement and participation in each case study. To support shared reading experiences, more research is needed on the specific skills and experiences children receive at home that may lead to more sophisticated reading behaviors (e.g. making inferences) typically emphasized in school. Knowledge of the home literacy practices of their students allows teachers to make home to school connections so that the shared experiences at home are supported by school experiences. It is important for educators to recognize and embrace the positive impact that families have on the literacy development of their children. With more investigation into the literacy practices of diverse families, schools and teachers will develop students’ literacy skills by building upon their rich and varied traditions.

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